The Truth Belongs to No One
by FayeKNaime, gul

Summary

A girl completes her training to become a faceless one. On the other side of the Narrow Sea, a man struggles not to fall in love with a memory. The two will meet again, this time as comrades-in-arms on a deadly mission. Other reunions are also inevitable, for Arya Stark has found a way to serve the Many-Faced God without surrendering her identity. How will the last of the Starks react to one of their own being an assassin? Meanwhile, Daenerys Targaryen moves on Westeros, a new King rises in the North, and everyone is still playing a Game no one can win...

This story picks up where the Arya/Faceless storyline left off in tWoW, then diverges into the universe of the TV Show as we move past the last plot-points in the books. One chapter will be posted every week until the finish.

Another March Update: the battle unfolds...perhaps not as anyone would have wished. Minor character deaths.
"Though the cult of the Blind God withered and died out more than a thousand years ago, certain of these habits of speech endure even now in Lorath, where men and women of the noble classes regards as unutterably vulgar to speak of one's self directly."

-George R. R. Martin, A World of Ice and Fire
Names you blurt out deep in your cups...

Chapter by FayeKNaime

ARYA

She delivers her last lines with a sense of melancholy that is not her own, and walks off-stage. Hands grab her; she thrashes.

There is a sharp pinprick of pain at the small of her back, and she feels lassitude begin to creep over her muscles. Her thrashing slows. A hood of scratchy sackcloth is lowered over her head forcefully, cutting off her light and the last of the command she has over her limbs.

Her will to fight, to burn, it transforms into something more akin to idle curiosity: the hood feels like sackcloth, but it is devoid of any of the bad smells that mark this part of Braavos. Instead, a dimly forgotten whiff of cinnamon, of lavender, plays about her nostrils.

Despite her best efforts, Arya Stark dissolves into sleep.

Arya comes to wakefulness in a familiar stone cell. The confusion that marks a normal awakening for her is missing; she knows exactly how, and why, she is here. She scrambles to a sitting position, and realizes the poison has not yet left her veins, for her legs and arms feel inordinately heavy and the persistent pin pricks in her feet--like the bits of a thousand little ants--tell of a slowly returning circulation.

Jaqen H’ghar is sitting cross-legged in front of the closed door.

She blinks at him and scoots backwards till her back is resting against the cold stone wall farthest from her captor. Jaqen H’ghar is dead. She wonders who this is. The Kindly Man? The Handsome Man?

She takes in the three little, unassuming cups sitting in a straight line in front of him, and something tells her it is the Kindly Man. Her executioner, then.

Unbidden, tears form at the corner of her eyes, and she is not sure whether they come from frustration, or fear, or from the sorrow of disappointing the faceless men, and in that moment Arya realizes that despite all of her deceit, despite the secrets she kept close to her breast, despite her defiance, a very large part of her had truly wanted to please him.

“Who are you?” asks that familiar, oft-recalled voice.

“I am Arya Stark.”

“Only a life can pay for a death, Arya Stark.”

The panic is rising in her, like a storm, and she finds herself on her knees before the man that wears Jaqen H’ghar’s face.

“Please, please, I’ll drink it, I’ll drink everything,” she hiccups, she doesn’t know what she is
saying and after so long holding herself to the discipline of the faceless men, she finds the words tumbling out of her one after the other with a gracelessness that would have dismayed her just yesterday. “I have people to kill. Please, I’m begging you, kill these people for me, take my life, I’ll pay, I’ll drink anything you want me to, I’ll willingly give you my life, but you have to kill these people for me.”

The faceless man waits, impassive, as she finally runs out of breath.

“You have been at the temple of the Many-Faced God for two years, Arya Stark. Why did you simply not ask this before?”

Is that a trace of exasperation that she detects in his voice? Arya takes a deep breath, brushes aside the distraction, and searches for the true answer to his question. Why didn’t she ask the Faceless Men their price for ridding the world of the names on her list? Because she knew what it was they would ask in return? Because she didn’t want to die? No, that wasn’t right—she wouldn’t mind dying if the filth died with her. So why didn’t she just ask?

An answer comes to her and she rocks back on her heels, lifts her eyes to meet the unblinking storm-grey ones that have been watching her all this while. “Because Eddard Stark taught me that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

The faceless man smiles, and it is not Jaqen H’ghar’s half-mischievous, teasing smirk but something altogether too kind. “A lie. Arya Stark wants to kill these men herself because she wants to wear the mantle of justice? Tell me, Arya Stark, is Death just?”

Arya inhales. Exhales. “No. Death is not right. Death is not just.”

“What is Death?”

Death is mercy. Her shoulders sag and she lowers her head, two parts ashamed, one part defiant. “I was Mercedene because you wanted to teach me, but I learned it already and I don’t want it. I won’t give it!” She shouts out the last, and when she is done there is nothing but a ringing silence in the room.

“What does want have to do with it?” Had it been Jaqen H’ghar that spoke those words, they would have driven Arya to screaming. But though it is Jaqen H’ghar’s lips that speak them, the words belong to the Kindly Man and so they stop far shy of mockery. “Only a life can pay for a death.”

Arya’s lips thin, her hands curl into fists she holds at her side.

“How many lives will my death buy?” she demands.

The faceless man is silent. There is something wrong with her question. Arya closes her eyes for a moment, tries to think, to rephrase it.

She opens her eyes. “How many deaths will my life buy?”

The faceless man gives her a single, approving nod. “The Many-Faced God seems to be unusually fond of Arya Stark. Arya Stark’s life will buy many deaths, if she offers them to the God, one by one.”

The words release something in her, and the tears threaten to fall. “Do you promise?” Her voice is small; it belongs to the child she had been four years ago.

“The gift will be given,” says the faceless man. “This the God’s servant swears to you.”
“Meryn Trant,” she says. The speaking of the secret is too much for her for a moment and she struggles to master herself. Not that it matters--she is going to die either way, but she is a Stark of Winterfell, and a Stark will not die without dignity.

The faceless man pushes a cup towards her. She keeps her gaze trained on his eyes, those familiar eyes she dreams about sometimes, and lifts the cup to her lips. The liquid is sweet, and fiery, honeyed cinnamon overlaid on something astringent and bitter. She drains the cup, and says, “Ilyn Payne.”

Her head swims, and the faceless man pushes another cup towards her. She lifts it to her mouth and drains it.

She finds herself on her side, her cheek pressed against the stone floor. Her gaze refuses to focus anywhere further than a few finger-lengths away. How did I never see how irregular this floor is? She had always thought it to be smooth, but there are a thousand little craters pockmarking the cold surface.

The third cup is pushed into her field-of-view. “The last name, Arya Stark.”

“Cersei Lannister,” she whispers.

Suddenly, faster than she can follow, the cup is pulled away. Arya finds the will to raise her head, and sees the faceless man looking down at her with something akin to fear in his face. “That one’s death has been written in a long time ago at the hands of another. Choose a different name, Arya Stark.”

She rises further, something like triumph tingling along her veins, though she knows it is just another manifestation of the Many-Faced God’s poison.

“No.”

“Unsay that name, Arya Stark.”

She lunges for the cup and it seems that she surprises the faceless man because her hand closes around it and she has downed the last dose of poison before he can react properly.

“Cersei Lannister.” The words are soft, whispered, but clear for all the weakness in the breath that utters them. “The name a girl says will not be unsaid. Not today.” A smile flutters at the edge of her too-blue lips.

The world grows furry, and somewhere outside her cell, somewhere far away, a wolf is howling its desolation into the darkness.
“The first of us answered prayers of slaves who wished for death. The gift was given only to those who yearned for it, in the beginning ... but one day, the first of us heard a slave praying not for his own death but for his master's. So fervently did he desire this that he offered all he had, that his prayer might be answered. And it seemed to our first brother that this sacrifice would be pleasing to Him of Many Faces, so that night he granted the prayer. Then he went to the slave and said, 'you offered all you had for this man's death, but slaves have nothing but their lives. that is what the god desires of you. For the rest of your days on earth, you will serve him.' And from that moment, we were two.”

- George R. R. Martin, A Song of Ice and Fire

NO-ONE

A wolf is howling, somewhere far away. A man pauses in his task, his brows furrowed. The pail of water he holds is forgotten as he looks out, across the crenellations of the West Tower marked with black birdshit.

“Be safe, lovely girl,” the man whispers into the darkness. “Be safe. The God has plans for you yet.”

ARYA

An insistent throbbing in her shoulder draws her from unconsciousness. No dreams, not even wolf-dreams, but she has managed to curl up into a twisted ball on her pallet, trapped her arm under her at an awkward angle.

She uncurls with a groan, sits up. She is rolling her shoulders to relieve the cramp when the events of the past day catch up to her.

Why am I alive?

Waves of panic crest, then recede, leaving behind a bitter taste in her mouth. The taste of failure.

The God did not take her. For all of the Kindly Man’s promises, the God did not want her.

A sudden flash of heat; she is angry, so angry her fingers are tingling with it. It adds to, builds upon, the same banked fury that makes her recite a litany of names like a prayer before sleep. But
something has tempered rage, something that is folding it upon itself, layer upon layer; iron folded into steel.

*I don’t care if the God doesn’t want me; I’m going to make Him take me.*

She stands, brushes off her sleep-crumpled acolyte’s robe. She is fully prepared to hammer on the door till they let her out, and is surprised to find that she is not locked in.

Mid-morning at the House of Black and White is not an entirely quiet time. Priests and servants are walking around, attending to their duties. Once, she catches a glimpse of a Faceless Man she recognizes.

None bar her path. She is looking neither left nor right as she crosses the sanctum, and she misses the gazes—some fearful, some considering, one or two amused, that follow her as she heaves open the heavy doors of the temple.

Needle is where she left it, wedged under a loose rock in the courtyard. She pries out the stone, tucks the sword under her arm, and looks up to find the Handsome Man standing a few meters away.

“What?” she demands.

The faceless man just shakes his head, defensively almost, and lets her pass.

Her return to the temple is marked by more looks, a fascinated sort of interest that disturbs the tranquil air. One or two priests are called upon to restore the solemnity of the sanctum as she kneels beside the pool.

She knows the God supposedly wears many faces, that any of the statues looking down upon her will do, but for her, Him of the Many Faces exists in the clearest manifestation of His will—the pool of gift-giving.

She kneels.

She wonders if the God didn’t take her because the god didn’t want Arya Stark, but she doesn’t know how to give up being Arya Stark. Her thoughts are chasing each other in circles; logic matters less than anger.

Time passes, and brings with it an old woman dressed in faded widow’s weeds. The widow sighs, dips a cup into the pool, and drinks.

Arya Stark kneels, glaring into the pool, angry and accusatory. A cloth-wrapped sword is clutched in her arms.

Some time later, an acolyte comes and takes the old woman’s body away.

When night falls outside and more and more of the candles around the sanctum gutter and go out and are not replaced, she finds in herself enough weariness to give voice to a small part of her would normally, ruthlessly, quash.

*Help me understand, please. Help me become no-one. Help me give you Arya Stark.*

She spends the first night begging for help.
The candles are lit again; the Kindly Man brings out a plate of food and leaves it on the floor beside her.

*I will give you three things if you give me vengeance.*

None come to the pool that day.

*I will give you Needle. Needle for Meryn Trant.*

*I will give you my face--I'll cut it out myself and give it to you if you give me Ilyn Payne.*

*Nymeria--she’s the biggest, most lethal, best direwolf the world has ever seen. I will give you a direwolf if you give me Cersei Lannister.*

She spends the second night trying to bargain with the God.

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The Waif comes, with a man cradling a howling baby. The man weeps as he helps the baby swallow a cupful of poisoned water, then goes away, leaving a small still corpse behind. The Waif takes away the plate of uneaten food and leaves behind a bowl of something that smells like fish stew.

*I am so tired.*

“Meryn Trant,” she whispers.

“Ilyn Payne.”

“Cersei Lannister.”

Her eyes, unfocused, gritty with lack of sleep, focus on something shimmering in the depths of the pool. No, not shimmering. *Burning.*

*A boy is burning with desire, a girl is burning with frustration, a boy is on his knees, his face buried between a girl’s legs, and he is telling her how much he loves her.*

*A city is burning, and a man’s hands are wrapped around a woman’s swan-pale neck as he chokes the life out of her.*

*A king is screaming, and a woman is screaming, and the Valonqar has shown his face.*

Arya closes her eyes.

A priest with his hood drawn up tight around his face comes to her, picks up the bowl. Fast as lightning, her hand darts out, closes around the Priest’s wrist. “Tell him the last name is unsaid.”

Vengeance will not be visited upon Cersei Lannister by a Stark’s hands. She does not think a Stark could be this cruel, no matter what.

Hands, clenched around the cloth-wrapped bundle, hands relax. The bundle opens, slowly, slowly the cloth unravels, but it is still half-tangled in the blade as it slips into the pool. The oilcloth bobs for a moment, then the weight of the sword drags it down into the dark depths.
The third night, Arya Stark begins talking to the God in earnest. She tells him all her stories, one by one.
“I hate dresses…”
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“Fat Robert thought I looked like aunt Lyanna…”
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“Jon and Theon…”
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“Stupid Sansa lied.”
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.
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“He didn’t let me look. Father knew I was there.”
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.
The priest comes again and kneels beside her for a time. Nobody brings out any food. The priest leaves.

The still waters stir. A few bubbles rise to the surface. Then something else rises to the surface. Compelled, almost unconscious, Arya leans forward, out over the pool, and grabs the cloth. A slender piece of metal is all tangled up in it. Needle’s dangling tip cuts a small wake into the liquid surface as she draws it out by the hilt.

On the fourth day, a god talks back to Arya Stark.
“Death is not the worst thing. It is His gift to us, and end to want and pain. On the day that we are born the Many-Faced God sends each of us a dark angel to walk through life beside us. When our sins and our sufferings grow to great to be borne, the angel takes us.”

-George R. R. Martin, A Feast For Crows

ARYA

She dreams. She is at Harrenhal again, but there is something different about the keep. Banners are flapping in the wind--each banner shows a three-headed dragon rampant on a field of red. She hears the scream of an injured horse and turns around just in time to see a knight unhorsed. It seems Selmy will not be taking the purse after all.

She shifts surreptitiously on the bench; the laces of her dress are digging into the rapidly purpling bruise at her side. She hides her grin behind a demurely raised hand.

The Prince holds the crown and he’s riding for her. Panic suddenly rises, choking her throat. Does he know?

A wreath of blue roses is dropped into her lap from the tip of a lance, and the blacksmith boy she is supposed to marry is glaring daggers at the young Prince. Before she has a chance to refuse the blue-rose crown and start politics or accept it and start a war, someone snags the crown from her lap and tosses it into the air. The crown sails up and away, higher and higher, and suddenly a dragon, its black-and-white scales glimmering in the afternoon sun, swoops in from above and eats the damn thing.

She whirls, and finds a cupbearer standing beside her, three unassuming, empty cups sitting on his tray. She recognizes this man.

She leans over and whispers, “Who is your target?”

Jaqen H’ghar grins. “A man is not in the habit of killing and telling.”

She grins back at him. “I have missed you.” It is him and not another of the order wearing his face. “I have missed you so much.”

“A man has plans for a girl. You must come with me.”

The direwolf sitting at her feet whuffs.

“Nymeria is always with me,” she says. “Or I suppose I am with her.”
Jaqen H’ghar looks down at the pony-sized predator. He has a very strange look in his eyes. “A girl would give a man a direwolf?”

She nods.

He quirks an eyebrow, but then his amused expression returns, and he holds out his hand. She stands, but her leg tangles in her skirt.

“M’Lady!” exclaims the blacksmith-boy.

“Go ring your own bell, Gendry,” she spits, and detangles herself from the mess of fabric.

She steps away from the bench, and a thought strikes her. She gives Jaqen H’ghar a mischievous grin. “I will come with you, but I have a condition.”

“What does a lovely girl desire?”

“A girl has no desires,” the words are rote, “but I want a kiss.”

She has surprised him. He actually looks a little disturbed. “Lovely girl, this man does not think anyone has ever asked him for a kiss before. Wouldn’t you rather have a gift?”

She snorts indelicately. “The last person who gave me a gift was a Targaryen Prince. Are you a Targaryen Prince?” Blue roses are erupting out of the ground all around them, their stems made of needle-thin steel.

“Hardly.” There is a trace of disdain in his voice, as if being a prince is beneath his dignity.

“Just so,” she says.

There is a commotion behind them, and out of the corner of her eye she sees the dragon bearing down on the handsome Targaryen.

“Good riddance,” she mutters.

The air is filled with the sound of screaming, the thunder of hooves, the clash of swords against shield, but it is as if the two of them stand in some bubble, suspended out of time.

“My kiss, Jaqen H’ghar.”

“As my lovely girl commands.” A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He bends down, closer and closer, his face is mere inches from hers, and she can feel the warmth of his gaze on her skin.

She closes her eyes, and feels a pressure, a breath, ghost over her upturned face. She parts her lips under the pressure of his, and he pulls away. As kisses go, it is as chaste as any her brothers have given her on her name-days.

She sighs.

“Is a girl disappointed?” he asks softly.

She opens her eyes and sees something on his face...as if he has suddenly realized he is lost. She has been taught to press her advantage when her opponent is off-balance; she lowers her gaze, then looks up at him through her dark lashes, mock-coquettish. “It may have been my first kiss, but I have seen kissing before. I want a proper one!”
“Lovely girl,” he pleads, “this is not the time for the types of kisses you want--the types of kisses you make a man want to give you.”

She smirks, and casts one last look over her shoulder. There are more dragons in the sky now, three, twenty, a hundred. They are laying waste to the tourney field; the ground itself is burning. The glitter in her eyes reflects the flame. “I will collect eventually, Jaqen H’ghar.”

“A man wonders if he has bitten off more than he can chew,” he mutters under his breath. Louder, “It will be very dark, where a man takes the lovely girl,” he warns. “She must hold on.”

She places her right hand in Jaqen’s outstretched palm. His hand is warm, almost too-warm, as if a fire burns under the surface of his skin. Her fingers close around his.

“A girl has a strong grip,” he says, surprised again.

“This girl is not in the habit of letting go,” she replies.

He smirks. “Just so.”

And he is right. There is nothing but darkness where he takes her.

NO ONE

“Pate! Pate!”

Rosey is shaking his shoulder.

He passes from dream-drunk stupor to alert wakefulness between one breath and the next.

“What time is it?”

“Before the cock crows, darling. You were talking in your sleep...did you have a nightmare?”

He grows preternaturally still. His kind never talk in their sleep--those with such a predilection have it trained out of them early on. “What did I say?” his voice is deceptively soft. His fingers are reaching, reaching ever so slowly for the blade he keeps wedged between the bed-frame and the wall.

“I don’t know.” Rosey is unconcerned. “I don’t even know what language it was. You really are dedicating yourself to your studies, if you’re even dreaming in another tongue.” Happiness wars with irritation in her tone--he has been spending more and more nights away from her bed lately.

“I have been studying High Valyrian,” he informs her in a lofty tone. Pate’s tone, Pate’s pride.

“Well, whatever it was, it gave you a nightmare. See, you’re crying!”

He blinks. His fingers ghost over his face, find trails of moisture.

He remembers wisps of a dream, cloudy images witnessed through a pane of frosted glass. He remembers watching a tournament. Blue roses.

Darkness.
He has done something.

No.

The *God* has done something. Something that has shattered the symmetry of the world into little pieces.

*The God has worn a man's face while doing it.*

Chapter End Notes

And this is what I mean, "complete but not edited". Switched around chapters, makes more sense this way externally, internally it made more sense to me the other way...*sigh*
The masks we must wear...

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

She does not quite understand what it means for Arya Stark to be dead, for she feels well, she feels alive. She has heard the Kindly Man’s footsteps coming towards her, and she is awake and stretching when he reaches her side. She stands and receives a piece of bread and cheese which she proceeds to wolf down hungrily.

They leave the pool together and walk down, down and down, the steps leading to the Hall of Faces. The days that have passed before feel like a dream to her.

“Did...did that really happen?”

The Kindly Man, walking beside her, doesn’t answer. That she has Needle banging into her thigh with every step downwards is answer enough. She knows there was more, she remembers something, something equal parts thrilling and terrifying; joyous and disappointing.

“What did I do?” she says aloud.

“You offered up names to the God,” replies the Kindly Man, though the question had been half-rhetorical.

“So what happens next?” She is mercurial, this girl, and now she is almost bouncing down the steps beside him.

“You become a faceless one.”

“I thought I was already allowed to use the faces!”

The Kindly Man smiles. “The death-masks, yes, with a little blood magic, and we suffer the nightmares for it. But the faces each of us was born with...the God takes them. Then, should he choose it, he grants them to all of us, along with the memories of who we were before we became no-one.”

Death is mercy. Him of Many Faces takes suffering, divides it up into little pieces and scatters it to the wind.

Her secret litany of names, the spreading of her memories through the House of Black and White, it would have panicked Arya Stark. It would have shattered her, along with the mask of strength and indifference and hate and rage she had fashioned for herself. But she has offered up Arya Stark to the God, and if the Kindly Man is to be believed, she will have the use of many, many more masks, masks that belong to people that have suffered far more than her; she will have a portion of their fortitude. The thought sobers her. Jaqen H’ghar. She would know. A slow fire, born of curiosity and anticipation, begins to smolder deep in the pit of her stomach, but the question she asks is very indirect.

“So I could wear your face?”
The Kindly man smiles again. “We shall see.”

It turns out that she cannot.

It takes a prayer and a gesture, but more than that, it takes the ability to hold onto the memories that come with the face, and the Kindly Man’s memories--of a language so far removed from anything she has learned, of a father, a master that in his perversion has not even a shred of the things that once moved within Eddard Stark’s breast--are too alien for her to hold on to for long, and the Kindly Man’s face slips off her own even as the memories escape through her fingers like smoke.

“It comes with time,” says the Kindly Man. “Experience. You are too young.”

She looks at her own face...Arya Horseface...in the mirror, and cannot wait any longer.

“Jaqen H’ghar,” she whispers, the name entwined about a prayer, and sees her visage waver, her hair lighten and become strange. The memories pool, insistent, somewhere in the space between thoughts, and she must close her eyes.

She sees...a dark place. The stink of sickness and mold, the miasma of urine and shit permanently plastered into floors. She is walking towards a man lying in a corner. The man is praying. The man is begging. The man receives the gift by her hand.

Eventually, she opens her eyes and looks into mischievous, sly blue eyes framed by red and white hair.

It seems Jaqen H’ghar’s face is one she can hold on to.

“Interesting,” says the Kindly Man. She glances up at him, and his brow is furrowed. “You are very young.”

She shrugs, a smirk tugging up one side of Jaqen H’ghar’s mouth in the mirror. “Valar Dohaeris.”

Chapter End Notes

Editing and posting faster than I calculated, though I expect the pace will slow as I get to Chapter 6 and beyond and whatever poor weaving holds my words together unravels...

Um, I wouldn't ask, but I haven't had a lot of feedback, and I was wondering if someone would be up to beta for me?
Despite everything, there is a thread of anxiety still wound around her spine as the Kindly Man leads her back to the upper corridors of the House of Black and White.

A group of faceless men--masters, all--are sitting in a loose circle, talking idly amongst themselves as if they are just passing the time till something happens. She recognizes some of the waiting faces.

She stands before the loose circle, and holds out her hand, the sword glimmering in the dim candlelight.

“This is Needle,” she says.

She sorts through all the stories she has told the god, and picks and chooses the ones that feel important.

They let her speak.

“I have a wolf. A direwolf. Her name is Nymeria. I dream about her...I dream her…”

“I didn’t pass my test. Not really. There was a cat in the alley…”

She speaks for a long time.

When she is done, “Who are you?,” asks her teacher, and his voice is kind.

“I am Arya Stark,” she says, and the words she utters are true, and yet...not enough. “And,” she hesitates, “Arya Stark belongs to the Many-Faced God.”

Some of the masters exchange looks with each other. The Kindly Man does not break eye-contact with her, but loosely cups his hands before him and lifts them to his face. To her it looks like a prayer, and then his face is covered for a moment and when he drops his hands the face he wears is that of a young girl on the cusp of a bitter womanhood: grey eyes that blaze out of a gaunt, heart-shaped face. A ragged mess of cropped, dark hair.

The Waif mimics the Kindly Man’s gesture, and a moment later there is another Arya in the room. And then she is surrounded by faceless ones wearing Arya Stark’s face. Each mask displays something distinctly different from the blank, emotionless mien she has learned to adopt. But hatred and anger and defiance--there is no trace of these things.

She realizes the faceless men are weeping the tears Arya Stark could not weep for herself.

After some time, a soft whisper begins somewhere to her left; a susurration that slowly moves from one side of the room to another.

“Merryn Trant.” Valar Morghulis.

“Ilyn Payne.” Valar Dohaeris.
“Merryn Trant.”

The girl is silent and each Arya Stark around her takes up her secret prayer as if it is a holy thing.

NO ONE

A man wakes in his over-warm, stuffy cell within the Citadel. Pate is a valued servant, a man with his fingers in many pies. Pate’s favoured status leads to his cell sharing a wall with the Maesters’ kitchens and though the cell is stiflingly hot in the bread-baking hours, warmth will be scarce when winter comes. The men at the Citadel are smart men, and there has been a definite air of approval about some of them as Pate finally gains the second link of his Maester’s chain and calls in petty favours to move into the room next to the kitchens.

The man turns his thoughts to the reason for his waking: the god’s fingers resting in the hollow of his throat, tapping, tapping in rhythm with the man’s slow and even pulse.

There is a new Faceless One in the world.

There had been no candidate on the cusp of facelessness when he left Braavos but a handful of years ago. It takes many years for a candidate to surrender his identity, to surrender himself to the god. Not since a man’s own coming to the Many-Faced-One--and a man’s dedication is exceptional for many reasons--has a candidate been made faceless is so little a time. The man remembers a formless dream, the sense of something shattering, someone dying though he knows not who. What has the God done?

A memory rises unbidden--unbidden save for the tap-tapping of the God’s finger on a man’s pulse. A lovely face twisted with hate and with need, dark eyes that were bottomless pools of bewildered rage.

Arya Stark.

Jaqen H’Gar died a very long time ago, and in dying, Jaqen H’Gar became a blank slate for the God to write upon. The Many-Faced-One’s will is made manifest in the subtle movements of a man’s thoughts, in the stirring of a man’s passions. A man notices a person’s horse is exceptionally fine, and the God says to a man, “Look carefully, that is the horse you will ride out of this keep,” and so it happens. A man feels hate stirring in his breast when he looks upon a woman’s face, and the God says to a man, “Listen carefully to that one’s name,” and not a ten-day later, the missive from the House of Black and White is sitting in his hand, and the name on the paper is matched to the face that has prompted hatred in one that has no hate of his own. So when a man’s thoughts, words, deeds are wretched out of his own grasp and put to serving the needs of a little girl, a man sits up and takes notice. The girl awakens in him a storm of emotions that a man thought died with Jaqen H’Gar--protectiveness, care, warmth. Amusement. A seed of something more, as if it is a memory of an event that has not yet happened. Arya Stark breeds discord in him, and confusion, and being confused is certainly not one of the Many-Faced One’s attributes.

When it comes to Arya Stark, a man cannot tell where a man’s own emotions end and the God’s begin.

A man has served the One for far too long not to know that that too is the Many-Faced-One’s will.
Sitting in Pate’s overwarm cell, a man should wipe away Pate’s face and pray to receive the memories of his new brother—or sister. But the same uncertainty, the irresistible pulling he has learned to call Arya Stark churns beneath his breast, and for only the second time in his life, he denies the God.

Not today.

The God seems to be amused.

A scant ten-day later, a white raven brings a missive to the man, and he cannot help but swear profusely at the names written on the paper; a smile he is unable to suppress tugs at his lips.

Meryn Trant.

Ilyn Payne.
Cabbage Stew
Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NO ONE

The Red Keep is eerily quiet. The clammy air sends tendrils of fog to creep along the outer walls even as a weak sun rises in the east. A small hooded figure slips into a knot of servants making their way through the postern gate. The figure carries a basket and two wineskins slung over the shoulder. The basket is discarded in the first empty corridor the figure crosses.

This part of the keep smells moldy, the hour is early and the goldcloaks that have drawn last-watch duties are dreaming of their beds. The tower is not the bustling, bureaucratic hub it used to be--the clerks congregate upon the other side of the keep now.

“Hey, girl! Is that wine?” All the men perk up at their fellow-guard’s question.

The figure trembles, gives a silent nod.

“Ah, give it here then!”

The figure shakes its head. “Called for by m’Lord,” the figure whispers.

“Not both of them! Come on little girl, leave us one!”

The figure darts forward, places one of the wineskins on the table, then whirs around and runs up the stairs, bare feet making not even a whisper upon the cold stone floors.

MERYN TRANT

“One skin,” mutters the Commander of the Guard, his head bowed in shame--or the pretense of shame. He resents being ordered, ordered to the Tower of the Hand at this hour. He resents the gold he had to part with because the brothel-keeper demanded his due, and no matter that the Commander had barely started. He resents the impotent man in front of him.


“I understand, my Lord. I swear to you, this will not happen again.”

Meryn Trant burns with shame, for he knows everyone can hear the shouting, and servants are gossiping even as Trant feels the rough side of the Hand’s tongue.
The audience ends.

Ser Meryn’s face is mottled with rage and frustration. He strides across a small, covered stone terrace, his thoughts focused on what he is going to do to the numbskulls under his command. A shadow flickers at the corner of his eye, and the next thing Meryn Trant knows is pain.

He can’t see clearly; he is on his knees. A hooded figure is standing above him, holding a slim sword—its tip is embedded in Meryn Trant’s liver. His lungs are burning, his fingers are burning, he can’t get enough breath to speak. The pain laps against his throat in waves.

Poisoned!

The pain turns to agony. The figure standing over him raises a hand and pulls back its hood. Even in his death throes, Meryn Trant finds a reserve of fear unknown to him till this moment: there is a ghost standing in front of him.


NO ONE

It seems the Citadel’s kitchens are experiencing a shortage of meat, for this is the third time in a week that cabbage has been served. The man surveys his bowlful of boiled mush, then seems to settle on tearing a piece off his loaf of bread instead.

“Pate!”

“Tarly,” replies Pate. “There was a raven for you from up north—I sent a boy with the message.”

“Yes, I know,” says Samwell Tarly as he drops his own bowl and trencher of bread onto the table and seats himself across from Pate. “I was expecting the raven a week ago! I went looking for you, too...where were you?”

Pate looks down. “I had to spend some time with a wineskin.”

Concern marks Samwell’s face. “Is everything alright?”

Pate sighs. “I had a fight with Rosey. She’s going to get married to a pork merchant, of all things.”

Samwell’s lips are pressed together tightly; he shakes his head sympathetically. “I’m sorry to hear that, Pate, I know you liked her.”

“All this time doing whatever I could to get a link...” he fingers the chain around his neck. “A pork merchant. Can you believe it? The man's just as disgusting as his pigs—she'll probably sicken and die before they've been married a year.”

“I'm sure she's making a mistake,” says Tarly.

Pate shrugs. In the silence, Samwell pauses to chew. Pate’s thoughts appear to be somewhere far away, his gaze unfocused. The small smile that slowly blooms on his face in response to his
thoughts, whatever they are, is soft.

“Why are you smiling?” asks Samwell.

Pate turns to look at his fellow Maester-in-training. “I’m smiling?”

“Yeah,” says Sam. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’d fallen in love with someone new!”

Pate tears off another mouthful of bread, considers Sam’s words. “I think I have,” he says finally. “At least, the idea of someone new.” Suddenly, he changes tack. “You’ve been in the North, you know the nobles up there…”

Samwell waves his hand in disagreement.

“Now, Tarly, false modesty is very unbecoming. You served on the Wall with Eddard Stark’s natural-born son!”

Samwell nods, cautious.

“How old does a northern girl have to be before she takes a man to her bed?”

Samwell Tarly’s brows furrow with confusion. “I don’t know!” It is his turn to become thoughtful. “Lady Sansa was twelve when she was promised to Prince Joffery, she’d have been what, fourteen, if they’d had a wedding? But my sisters,” and now his voice grows strident. “If it was in my power, they wouldn’t wed before they were thirty!”

Pate has asked about bedding, not wedding; Samwell Tarly’s preconceptions are showing. Still, it’s more information on the topic than Pate has ever had before. “So thirty would be a good age for a girl to contemplate such matters,” Pate murmurs, almost to himself.

Nineteen year old Samwell Tarly tilts his head to one side. “Well…sixteen might be all right. I suppose.”

“But thirty is better.”

“For my sisters, at least. But why are you asking all this?”

His words are met with a smile--a sly smile, quite different from Pate’s habitually obsequious expression. “A man must inform his fantasies... if a man is going to have them, they might as well be optimized.”

Samwell Tarly flushes. “Who optimizes their girl fantasies?”

Pate shrugs.

Samwell loses some of his embarrassment to ask, “You’re thinking you want a northern lass?”

“Well,” says Pate. “I have this whole story. Would you like to hear it?”

Fascinated despite himself, Samwell nods.

“So...say there is a noble house with a daughter. The principles of the house are murdered, an usurper has taken control of the family seat…”

“Classic,” says Samwell. “She is the sole survivor, of course, and all her thoughts are turned to vengeance.”
“Precisely,” says Pate. “But she needs help.”

“Help that only you,” Samwell stabs towards his companion with a spoon, “can provide. For some reason.”

Pate nods.

“And then what?” asks Sam. “She marries you out of gratitude and you become a great lord?”

Pate purses his lips. “No. The lady has grown strange in her years away from the station of her birth. After she claims her vengeance, she finds herself too restless, too wild to be bound to the strictures of nobility. And so one day she slips away into the darkness, taking nothing with her except her sword, her loyal hound, and her...friend.”

Something strange is happening to Tarly, and Pate realizes his companion’s pudge is shaking as he tries to suppress his giggles.

“That,” gasps Sam, “is much better than Rosey and her pork merchant.”

“I suppose,” says Pate, a strange light in his eyes.

Sam suddenly soberes. “And that’s why you were asking about the North--the war has decimated the houses up there, lords have been murdered...but Pate, I don’t think there’s too many great ladies missing, per se.”

Pate looks up. “I thought your Lord Commander’s sisters were.”

Sam chokes. “You want to marry Jon’s sisters?”

Pate’s mouth twitches. “Only one of them, for preference.”

Sam shakes his head. “Only one fits your story--Lady Arya has married the Bolton’s bastard, what’s-his-name, Randy, Ressly? Something like that. But Lady Sansa is still missing.”

“Ramsay,” says Pate. “Ramsay Snow.”

Sam acknowledges the correction with a wave of his hand. “Jon wouldn’t approve of you marrying Lady Sansa, no offence. But I guess if you found her and got her safely to the wall, and she really, really liked you...I guess it might happen. But from what Jon says, she’s a real little lady, you know, not the type to slip off into the night with a sword...”

“Well,” says Pate, his tone quite reasonable. “It is my fantasy, so I don’t see why Arya Stark has to be married in it. Maybe Arya Stark fled across the Narrow Sea to Braavos, and is even now training to become a deadly assassin in order to avenge her family; the Boltons married an imposter to cement their hold on the North.”

Sam’s eyebrows rise. “And in your fantasy, Arya Stark will return to Westeros soon. She’ll have to pass by Oldtown...for some reason...on her way North.”

Pate’s face is blank. “I like your thinking, my friend. Yes, she must pass near Oldtown. And then she will meet a man on the road.”

“And what exactly is this man doing on the road?”

“Well,” Pate thinks for a while. “Perhaps a man has a friend--a friend that must go North and become the Maester of the Night’s Watch. But the man’s friend finds that he is...bound to the
Citadel.”

Sam’s eyes narrow. “Why would the friend be *bound*?”

Pate’s mouth twitches. “A girl? A book? *Dragons*?” He knows the book that Tarly has been deciphering for the past two months.


“The man’s friend is a dutiful person, he knows the Night’s Watch needs a Maester, so he begs his friend to take his place on the Wall. The friend agrees…meets a lone girl on the road.”

“The girl is, of course, the lady-turned-assassin Arya Stark. Who agrees to travel with a Maester because…?”

“There’s safety in numbers,” says Pate calmly. “And she can tell he is not a threat to *her*.”

Sam snorts. “Only her virtue.”

Pate tilts his head to the side, considering the statement. “Not until she is thirty.”

Sam’s pudge shakes and shakes, and Pate finally joins in the laughter.

The two leave the table together and Pate does not spare a single glance for his untouched, now-congealed cabbage stew.

Samwell Tarly’s bowl has been licked clean.

Chapter End Notes

A long one…had to split it in two.

So, since he will not appear in the story again—should I kill Sam? Or let him live?
ARYA

One morning, the Kindly Man greets her during a meal with an instruction to report for “Advanced Training”. She tries very hard to contain her joy; the Kindly Man disapproves of the haste with which she shovels her porridge in her mouth.

She walks into the training room with an armload of weapons--staff, broadsword, her ever present companion Needle, two dirks.

The room is occupied. A man she does not know, it could be anyone, but she knows somehow that she has never met him before. He is sitting on a small stool, his fingers steepled before him, eyes half-closed.

“Put them down,” he says, startling her. “You will not have a needing of them.”

That accent, that inflection... Syrio . But Syrio is dead, and she refuses to cry. She clears her throat instead. “I came for advanced training.”

“Yes, a girl did. But those are not the weapons I will have the teaching of.”

She has learned better than to ask questions. She keeps her face impassive as she carefully places the weapons in a corner. Then she walks to the center of the room, clasps her hands together and waits. Patiently. At least, as patiently as she can.

“What makes a fine warrior the finest , Arya Stark?”

His words invoke the ghost of the First Sword of Braavos. “The seeing,” she says confidently. “The true seeing.”

“Just so,” he says, and gestures for her to sit upon the ground. He waits for her to grow still again before he speaks.

“It is a mistake they are making, the ones of Lorath, to teach you. There are fundamental...lacunae...in your understanding, and their way will not address these.”

“What lacunae?” She asks, stung. “The Kindly Man was a very good teacher! I am no one !”

“Kindly Man, is it? This naming habit of yours...” He shakes his head. “Still, there are being ways to serve Him of the Many Faces. The ways of the Lorathi require an abnegation of the self, an emptying, so that Death may find a home.”

She nods through her flash of panic. “I am empty!”

“Little girl,” he says, “the Lorathi way is not for you.” She looks up, finds him considering her. “From today, I will be your teacher, and for me you will go down to the city, and you will do some things.”
The panic grows, *they’re sending me away?* But...she knows better; the strange breath that breathes in time with her pulse on some nights, that breath returns and fills her with a reassurance whose source she does not wish to probe too deeply. “I don’t understand,” she whispers.

The faceless man nods. “The followers of the Lorathi way speak in riddles and cryptic utterances. They are forever reflecting on the self to understand it. In understanding, they are annihilating it.” Is that a note of *disapproval* she detects in him?

*You’re not un-cryptic yourself, new teacher.* “You do not follow this way,” she says aloud.

“No, I do not, and neither will you.”

“So what way *will* I follow?*

A smile finally blooms on his face. “You, Arya Stark, will be trained in the Braavosi Way.”

Apparently the Braavosi Way involves carrying buckets. Buckets of water, buckets of fish-guts, buckets of whatever-the-hell it is the Temple needs carrying to and from the market.

“You’re *slow* , girl,” says her Braavosi master as she pants up the steep pathway to the midden, two large buckets destined for the compost pile balanced over her shoulder. “Your intellect will not unravel death. You want too many things. You have no focus.”

“Focused enough to *kill* ,” she mutters under her breath. He hears her anyway, and chuckles.

“When you are too exhausted to fight yourself, too exhausted to hold on to your emotions, you will be too exhausted to fight Death. Then you will learn.”

*But of course,* she thinks to herself, *once I’m dead of old age, having spent my life as an unpaid bucket-carrier to the House of Black and White, the answers to all mysteries will be revealed!*

A ten-day passes, then another, filled with errands punctuated by bouts of bucket-carrying. One night she collapses onto the stone bed in her cell, too tired to change the rushes, too tired to recite any names or bid the God good-night as she has taken to doing in the months since the pool. Her muscles ache, her feet ache, her hands are blistered.

“Kill me now,” she mutters, her own voice startling her in the silence.

*Oh.*

She lies motionless, quiet as a mouse, as if the realization is a fragile one and movement will scare it away.

Eventually, she chuckles to herself. *Buckets of fish-guts.*

*Valar Morghulis.* She had been stating it as a sentence, a threat, a promise to the names on her list— all of them *would* die. At Arya Stark’s hand. In the absence of that threat, *Valar Morghulis...*it became something different. All suffering will end, eventually. All thoughts will be still, and aching muscles and torn ligaments will no longer matter.
Valar Morghulis.

She dashes away her tears angrily, trying to hold on to the sense of purpose, the sense of vengeance that has gotten her so far. But it withers and floats away, as if even the most fragile of understandings is more powerful than the passionate hatred. Justice, right, honor--what did any of the mean? A person can slow or hasten the journey, but Death waits at the end of it always. Arya Stark will have her revenge on her enemies, and they will have their revenge on her; in the end, everyone is food for the worms.

She is not the hand of justice. She is not vengeance. She is not the ghost of Harrenhal. The God is everything, and everywhere, and she is just one more wayfarer with the power to help or hinder another one’s journey.

Valar Morghulis.

In the wake of the thoughts, there comes another, more urgent. So why does the God want me?

She wears Jaqen H’ghar’s face. She’s doing that more and more now, at least in the public corridors. She’s seen others doing the same, and she wonders why that particular face. Vanity, perhaps? It is one of the most handsome of the faces she’s seen around. But the face is also one of the more reassuring visages, and perhaps the others wear it because those that come seeking the gift beside the pool benefit from such reassurance. Perhaps the Lorathi faceless see the wearing of his face as some sort of symbol of self-negation.

She sees in it a pleasant anonymity, a belonging-yet-not. She feels comfortable in his skin, and that is all to it. Perhaps that is all to it for some of the others as well.

She seeks out her Braavosi teacher; he is showing two men the right way to hold a staff. The younger of the two is spindly, clearly just back from the sickbed--or on his way to it. The other, a scarred, ebony-skinned man of middle years, grips his staff with such passionate intensity it interferes with the the weapon’s freedom of movement. Neither wear the black-and-white. Not acolytes, then.

“Valar Morghulis,” she says by way of greeting.

“Valar Dohaeris,” return three voices, two synchronized, one a heartbeat too late.

“Hold that stance,” orders the faceless man in Low Valyrian. “Now,” he turns to her. “What is it that you are wanting?”

“I have a question,” she says.

The faceless man gestures for her to continue.

She is not sure if the two newcomers to the temple understand High Valyrian, but clearly they do speak the Low. So her question is couched in Westerosi. “Why does Death want a girl? A man? Why does He need any of us? Valar Morghulis, right?”

Her Braavosi teacher’s eyes crinkle, and a smile--a smug smile--blooms on his face.

“What’s so funny?” she demands.
The smile is broader now. “The Lorathi have been trying to get you to understand, to ask, for what, two years now?” He chuckles. “With all their testing and blindings, and ‘I am no one’...Pah!” He gestures. “All you needed was some healthy exercise, like that all young people need! And now you come to a Braavosi, asking the right questions, while you wear his face! This is magnificent!”

“They taught me a lot!” she says, quick to take offense.

“They taught you a lot,” he agrees, “but not the things they were trying to teach you! And now you learn.” There is a great deal of self-congratulation in his voice.

“I didn’t come to you so you could lord it over my old teachers,” she grumbles.

“Three things,” he says with a wide grin. “Wits, weapons, and winning. It is the Braavosi way!”

She cannot help it, his humor is infectious. She grins, and remembers all the times she said she was “no one” and didn’t lie well enough to avoid the back of a hand. Focus. I have a question that needs answering. She tries again. “He has no use for the whole guild-and-gold aspect of it. So why?”

Instead of an answer, the Braavosi tosses her the staff. “Show them how it is done,” he says, and walks out of the training room.

“That’s not an answer!” she shouts at his back. “You said no riddles!”

“Valar Dohaeris!” he calls back over his shoulder. “I need a drink.”

With a sigh, she turns back to the students. The two valiantly hold their staves horizontal at shoulder height, their arms extended out from their bodies. The spindly one’s muscles are trembling.

“This is bull shit,” says the scarred man. His voice is a deep, deep baritone. “I have been fighting for years, I do not need to be trained.”

“So show me,” says Arya, and picks up one of the clean sweat-rags from its basket. She ties a blindfold over her eyes. “Both of you. Together.”

Within a hundred heartbeats, the spindly one has sagged against a wall, gasping for breath. A staff clatters away. The large one is on his backside on the ground in front of her.

She takes off her blindfold and sees an expression of terror on the man’s face.

She relaxes her stance, plants her staff butt-first in the ground. “Don’t be afraid,” she says, gently. “I hastened your fall--but you would have fallen no matter what. Better at my hand, who bears you no ill will, than someone else who just wants to hurt you.”

She blinks.

Ah.

Yet again, the fragile understanding is accompanied by sorrow; a sorrow born of the necessity to bid farewell to a familiar desire. My enemies will not die by my hand. And yet on the heels of that thought comes another, a thought that calms her regret.

The God is taking care of them for me.
I'm finding more and more mistakes every time I read this, and I'm exhausted from work and other things...anyone out there willing to beta chapters? Please?

Still undecided about Sam's fate. Realized it could have implications for a couple of later chapters...have to think on it.
Compulsion and Amplification

Chapter Notes

The gift is cold sleep in a cup, swift and painless. A man does not need to wear the face of Arya Stark this time, but he does anyway. The dead man sent many to the God, but his name was spoken. Ilyn Payne is given peace, but he is not its primary recipient--the God’s peace is for a little girl lost these past few years, a little girl who burned for this death. And so it is done.

A man slips away into the shadowed corridors of the barracks at King’s Landing. It holds Lannister men now, for the most part. Two of them, sent back from the riverlands to nurse their injuries, play cards on a dimly-lit table, against a third--the king’s old groundskeeper, who has never bestirred himself to travel farther than than Royal Preserves.

The man is walking past them, avoiding their line-of-sight, when the thread of a conversation reaches his ears.

“...wolf’s head…”

He slows, then changes direction and positions himself in a dark alcove. He listens. There is talk of a wedding, and a young man--a boy, really--murdered, his corpse paraded through the streets.

The man closes his eyes and takes deep breaths to still his shaking hands. The memory is vivid, lit by torchlight and agony: his lovely girl witnessed this thing these men speak of, this thing these men boast of to an old servant who is over-awed by treachery.

The man listens, hidden in his alcove, and the bewildered panic--not his own, but no less keenly felt--drains out of him. His rage--his rage--is a calculated thing, and it rises as inexorably as the tides of the drowned god.

The man learns many new names.

Frey and Lannister, Lannister and Frey...he picks and chooses from the names. Walder Frey. It will make a good third for the girl’s choosing.

The man moves, a whisper of steel sliding between one boast and the next, and the three slump over the table even as gouts of blood spurt make the playing cards unplayable.

The man contemplates the corpses. Some men offer bouquets of flowers and honeyed words to lovely girls... some gods give home and hearth and children. But she wouldn’t have asked Him of the Many Faces for a kiss if it was home and hearth and children she wanted.

And a certain coin used for passage across the Narrow Sea puts to rest any question of non-poisonous flowers.

So.

The man grabs each of the Lannister heads by the hair and quickly saws through the bone and tissue connecting them to their bodies. He leaves a drip-trail of blood behind him, the heads dangling at his side, till he reaches a storeroom. There, he unfolds a crimson Lannister cloak--an officer’s cloak--and wraps up the heads, tying off the bundle with a rather decorative bow.
A bouquet of dead Lannisters it shall be.

The inn he stays at has a back door and asks no questions, not of a blood-covered Pentoshi sailor at this time of night. The room contains a mirror and a basin—an almost unheard-of luxury in Flea Bottom, but the objects are more useful to a man than coin.

He is scrubbing the now-dried blood from his fingernails when he catches his own gaze in the mirror. Blood droplets spot his face, and the smile he wears...the man’s head droops, and he must needs breathe again.

What have I done?

His gaze is compelled to the corner of the room where the rough plank floor is already being discolored by the bloody cloak that sits on it.

The man staggers to the center of the room and kneels. Prayer is not a thing that is done by the Lorathi in a manner recognized by any of the world’s other religions. For the Lorathi, prayer is...a state of mind.

The man breathes. In. Out. With each breath, he draws his awareness into himself, curls it up tighter and tighter.

In. Out.

Life swarms all around him, inside him. His body is alive with a thousand pinpricks of life, and the God’s miracle is carried out a thousand times with each breath as life is extinguished.

Jaqen H’ghar is as still as death.

In. Out.

Jaqen H’ghar is dead.

In. Out.

Jaqen H’ghar is death.

Meaning is a trick of perception. Words can be repeated till the lose their meaning. Faces can be made to do the same. Without opening his eyes, he slips into the face of a brother in the House, then into hers, then into the face of another, then into hers.

He breathes.

Eventually there comes a time that he can shift into her face without the clawing want, without the thoughts that circle each other like wolves chase their tails. A man has no desires. A man has no wants. A man is no one.

And then he looks inwards.
Why does a man pause before sleep, and fantasize that a lovely girl wishes him a good night on the other side of the world? Why did a man fall to a state where he took trophies, like a madman, before he realized there was a problem?

Most of the emotions that came to a man after his death are sourced in the God’s will. The direwolf-dreams he has been experiencing the past year come from the God. But the God is not one to sit in a garden and pick petals off a daisy, chanting “she loves me, she loves me not.” Blaming the God for Jaqen H’ghar’s newfound notions is an error Jaqen H’ghar has systematically made over the past few months.

So where does the God end and Jaqen H’ghar begin?

He casts his mind back to their first meeting. She was a puzzle, then—responsive to courtesy of all things, a girl in a boy’s garb, savage and wild and yet cultured to the marrow of her bones. She was a lovely puzzle, and he had been sitting in a cage for weeks. As an amusement he offered her his true name. Identity for identity, it was a fair trade. This one is called Jaqen H’ghar.

He had observed her manner of speaking, the sword, the way she paid more attention to some words in conversations. She was a highborn girl on the run, his lovely boy.

Arya Stark.

The name had come to him in the night. And that was when the God took notice of her. Curiosity and amusement had turned to something more intense...a watching. An obsession, even then?

The God told him to test her; what would a noble girl do if she saw a man burning to death? Act nobly, of course.

But there was so much courage in her. If Jaqen H’ghar had a heart it would have broken at the perfection of her courage.

Then, later, he saw her eroded, suppressed, a wolf compressed to the size of a mouse. And a man felt anger. Not the God’s anger. Jaqen H’ghar’s. But the God’s anger kept lockstep with the man’s for all that a man hid his own by playing a silly game.

The force of the realization is such that he finds himself shaking: the God chose Arya Stark the moment she gave a man his own name.

So where does the god end and Jaqen H’ghar begin?

The God is not interested in the things that happen between men and women. So why Jaqen H’ghar’s sudden surge of such interest in the girl, a child? She is six-and-ten now, but his memories of her end with the girl-child dying beside a pool.

The memories of her.

A man looks at himself in her memories.

Heart-wrenching awe, and faith, and blind, blind trust.

A man does not deserve the pedestal his lovely girl has put him on. Would she have forgotten the names on her list if she did not hold Jaqen H’ghar in such high esteem? If Jaqen H’ghar had not taught her Valar Morghulis? Would she even how have hearth and home and children? A man does not have a heart but it is breaking nonetheless.
He stills himself. Breathes.

In. Out.

No. The God has claimed her now. *Valar Morghulis* --she would have come to Him one way or another. It was not *her* response he has to untangle, a man reminds himself, but Jaqen H’ghar’s.

*Response.*

Kindred to kindred, question to answer. The girl-child had no understanding of what she wanted at their last meeting, and how could she? But an errant thought, a momentary almost-subconscious comparison between Jaqen H’ghar and someone else, and *Jaqen H’ghar* snagged on the thorns of her need for vengeance. *Jaqen H’ghar* became a seed.

A man did not start obsessing about a lovely girl till he received her memories. But once he received them, that seed of thought was informed by the experiences of an adult that knows how things lie between men and women; it was the closest approximation he had to her proto-thought. And now this tiny spark, this *seed* flares into a conflagration.

Others have brought infatuation, and love and loss to the House of Black and White before; a man has experienced *all* of this through his brothers and sisters. And yet no passion, however intense, has ever drawn him in and flayed his reason from him. No desire has ever been amplified and focused back upon its author.

*How can you amplify a thing if you are not in resonance with it?*

No. Jaqen H’ghar has *never* wanted anyone that way since Jaqen H’ghar died. The girl is compelling, more compelling than anyone he had ever met before. But no matter how beautiful or lethal or brilliant the woman she is to become, it is her *memories* that have unbalanced him.

Yes, that is it. His equilibrium has simply been disturbed; it is fairly trivial to restore it. All he has to do is to stop focusing on her. The man shifts in place as a twang of dissonance plucks at his spine: self-deceit.

A bubble of amusement rises in the wake of the twinge. One who is no one has no reason to be amused. The God *mocks* him.

The man grinds his teeth. *If my Lord wishes to fuck her and marry her and have little Many-Faced-Stark babies with her, a man prays his God will leave a man out of it.*

Jaqen H’ghar refuses to release his death-trance. He opens his eyes, looks around the room lit by guttering candlelight, and sighs deeply.

*A man thinks he needs to arrange for the disposal of some “Lannister Bouquets”.*

Chapter End Notes

Much much thanks to my Beta, gul, for the sharp eyes, the insight and the encouragement :)
All the faces we must wear...

Chapter Notes

All thanks to my fantastic beta gul, whose feedback made me add almost two thousand words to this chapter...and remove a few thousand more, to be added to later chapters. Which makes them all too long, with too many viewpoints, and so the chapter count increases.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She finds that the pace of her learning has accelerated with access to the memories of the other faceless. Her body doesn’t have the muscle memory to replicate their feats, but she has access to the theory. She cannot remember the finer details of what it takes to rig a sail or time the luxury-goods market in Qarth, but she has access to the theory.

She cannot know what it feels to be in love, but she knows the mechanics of how one makes love to men, to women, to eunuchs.

The combat-and-espionage portion of her theoretical knowledge is applied to practical lessons with her Braavosi Master.

Today he has her balancing a tall, thin reed on her nose. It looks ridiculous, but Arya knows the worth of such exercises. She is not allowed to use another’s face, or she would have picked that of a man she’s seen taking off faces in the Hall a few times--he has a very broad nose.

She’s getting better, hasn’t let the thing fall in almost a quarter-watch, when her master starts throwing distractions at her. First, it’s a couple of throwing knives, then a wisp of sweat-cloth, and finally, words.

“The greatest of our order, they are following the Lorathi way,” he says, not looking at her.

The reed does not fall.

Her teacher is speaking thoughtfully, as if to himself. “The first faceless one, and the second. They are both born of Lorath.”

_They are both born of Lorath._ That “are” almost makes the reed wobble, but that is just her teacher’s way of speaking.

“So I can see why they would choose you--you have potential to match theirs.”

The reed falls.

“But I am training in the Braavosi way,” she offers, hesitant.

“And so it is unlikely you will become the greatest of our order,” he observes.

Surprisingly, she feels no regret. The God is happy with her the way she is. Whether it was that strange hallucination a few moons ago or something else, He has given her a wolf dream. Or rather, He has shared it with her somehow. Nymeria had been sick, but now she is well, and eats to restore
her strength.

She smiles. “Valar dohaeris.”

“Had you not been born Arya Stark, perhaps you would have become no one. But it is hard indeed to abnegate Arya Stark.”

There is a minute change in his tone. She looks up and her stomach lurches; he wears her face. It is disconcerting, supremely disconcerting, like the air has turned to water and she is swimming for breath. She gulps, and falls into the familiarity of Jaqen H’ghar.

A frown mars the Braavosi’s features. “You should be adding more faces to your repertoire.”

She smiles and suddenly she is a man from Braavos with hollow cheeks and tightly braided hair. The Arya Stark in front of her dissolves, as if into a mirror, a mirror of the new face she wears.

“Better!” says her teacher. “Much more handsome!”

She growls at him.

“Up!” he commands, and tosses her a wickedly curved blade from the rack. “Today you will be learning the use of a Dothraki scimitar.”

She has not forgiven him for the Much more handsome! “I’ll trade you three,” she challenges.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Three vulgar words in Dothraki for three strikes,” and she is moving before the sentence is out of her mouth. She is fast, faster than she has ever been before, but she cannot surprise him--he blocks her strike. It is a close thing, though.

The Braavosi smiles tightly. “I am to be giving you one for free-- vikeesi!” He moves to counter-attack.

She grunts with the force of turning his assault. “What does it mean?”

“It is like your Westerosi word ‘bitch’.”

That earns him forgiveness as she laughs and laughs and gets a painful bruise on her arm in return, delivered with the flat side of his scimitar.

She lies on her stone bed that night, her muscles feeling like water, and the encroachment of soft vagueness in her mind heralds slumber. She drowsily turns to the vague silhouette of the man in her imagination she has termed “The God”, ready to bid Him good night. But the figure solidifies somehow, becomes a three-dimensional shadow. Features form on the shadow-face. Familiar features.

The figure steps closer, a mere handbreadth away from her bed.
Suspended in the indeterminable space between waking and sleeping, Arya Stark opens her mouth and mumbles, “Stay, Jaqen.”

Shadow-Jaqen bends down, his mouth hovering over her ear and she knows he’s about to whisper something utterly stupid to her, something like “A man has duties, lovely girl”. And so she turns her head towards him abruptly and mashes her lips against his.

That jolts her into full wakefulness; she’s clamped a hand over her mouth before her eyes are fully open.

She is alone in the room.

What the fuck was that?

“Fatigue hallucination”, her reason replies. Such things happen sometimes to men that push themselves too far. Her uncle Benjen had said that, and he would have known, having constant patrol of the lands north of the Wall.

“Stupid, stupid Braavosi way,” she mutters. If she hadn’t been so tired, she wouldn’t have kissed Jaqen H’ghar, even as a hallucination. Arya is not Sansa after all; Arya does not want to kiss any man.

What about Gendry? asks an annoying voice in the back of her mind.

I never wanted to kiss Gendry. I just wanted him to ignore that stupid tavern whore!

A memory flutters through her consciousness... blue roses and needles ...Gendry had been there... go ring your own bell, Gendry.

A dream.

She tries in vain to pull together the strands of scattered imagery, but fails, which frustrates her because she knows there had been something wonderful at the end of it. Either way, comparing Gendry to Jaqen is like...like comparing one of the vale sheepdogs to a direwolf!

She backs away from that uncomfortable thought: Jaqen is not to be associated with any word that means “pet”. He’s much older than her, and her superior in the House of Black and White, and why would he want to kiss a girl who can’t even wield a broadsword for a single day without hallucinating?

“Pah!” she utters, in conscious imitation of her Braavosi teacher. She hopes she doesn’t dream of anything stupid again.

She needs a new dress, something that speaks of wealth, before she goes to the spice market. She has grown in the past year, vertically and in...other areas. It is difficult for her to pass herself off as a message-runner, not without taking a face, and the errand is far too minor to justify blood-magic induced nightmares.

She’s surveying the selection available in one of the House’s store-rooms when she hears the sound of a giggle, followed by something falling to the floor.
Curiosity aroused, she pads on bare feet towards the origin of the sounds. Deeper in the storeroom, the clothing is not nearly as fragile as the things in the front. Here, dresses and shirts and bolts of cloth lie in tall piles, higher than her head in some places, while off-cuts of worn cloth spill out of haphazardly stacked baskets. She rounds a corner, and freezes.

An acolyte—the spindly one—kneels with his back to Arya. He is shirtless, and his face is buried between the bare thighs of one of the priestesses-in-training. The woman has her head thrown back, her chest heaving in time with some internal rhythm.

It takes but a moment for Arya to realize what is going on as sudden heat suffuses her face. The heat spreads through her body, embarrassment mingling with fascination. She knows what he is doing to her, but she has never actually seen it in person outside of a brothel. And in a brothel the woman is paid to make the sounds the priestess is making now of her own volition.

*I should not be watching this.*

Somehow, she does not want to force herself to stop. The heat pools in her lower belly, and becomes something else.

Arya recognizes the feeling—she has worn enough of her brothers’ and sisters’ memories to know what it is, but it still discomfits her. A daughter of Eddard Stark is not supposed to feel this way.

*Why not?*

Memory answers the question for her. *Nan says a woman who feels lust is no better than she needs to be.* Meaning whores and women that “give their favor” to someone before marriage.

She almost snorts. *I am a professional murderer. I am a Handmaiden of Death.* The ephemeral quality of “virtue”, so lauded by all of Westeros, has no relevance to who Arya Stark is now.

Something unfurls in her, as if it had been compressed too long. She bows her head and retreats, as silently as she had arrived.

*A girl has many things to think about.*

She imagines that a conversation about sex with the Kindly Man will be as awkward as a conversation about sex with Jon. So instead she volunteers for face-dusting duty alongside the Waif.

The Hall of Faces, redolent as it is with the coppery scent of blood-magic, still gathers dust. Once every month or so, a handful of faceless—*never* acolytes—use tall ladders and dampened cloth and dusters made of rags to restore the Hall to its pristine condition.

“What is the House protocol on sex?” asks Arya abruptly, then slides to the far side of the pillar to continue her dusting so she doesn’t have to see the look on the Waif’s face as the older woman contemplates the question.

Arya realizes she needn't have bothered—the Waif’s tone is utterly normal, matter-of-fact, as she
answers.

“People sharing a single goal and a single god often end up sharing a single bed. Why do you ask?”

“Um. I saw an acolyte…” she trails off, still too Westerosi to detail, out loud, what she saw.

“Ah, with the priestess?”

Arya comes around the pillar, her surprised look answered with lowered brows.

“They were caught in the temple-side stairwell last week. You see them again, you tell them to cut it out. Acolytes are strictly forbidden.”

Arya nods.

“Um.”

The Waif looks up at her, and Arya senses some sort of understanding dawn on the woman, for her mostly-blank expression softens a smidgen.

“You should lose your virginity.”

“What?” Arya squeaks, all her newfound wisdom and urge to “grow beyond the strictures of Westeros” dissolving into pure mortification.

The Waif gestures to Arya and they walk a ways from the pillars, finding a short step to sit on near the center of the cavernous space.

The Waif sighs. “The others,” she says, “will not necessarily think to talk to you of this. Most come to the temple in full adulthood, and their lessons focus more on control than understanding. Apart from myself, I know of no woman that has come to us before she has had children--and lost them.”

Arya nods, for the last faceless sister’s face she had borrowed had echoed with the keen of a devastating, hollow sorrow that Arya couldn’t hold on to for long.

“I came as a child,” continues the Waif. “This thing…” she gestures vaguely in the direction of her mid-section, “it can keep a woman hostage to it if it is not understood.”

“We can control our lust just like men can,” says Arya, immediately on the offensive.

The Waif shakes her head. “It is not lust I am meaning. It is womb, and child, and virginity. I cannot conceive. You can. It is leverage--supposing you are captured, and your captor threatens to rip out your womb?”

Arya’s eyes go round as she clutches at her midsection.

“More than the pain, the idea of losing a core of your motherhood can be used to control you. Like a man can be controlled by threatening to cut off his cock.”

“So I must become like you,” states Arya.

“The risks are too high--my barrenness was a gradual thing, chronic exposure to poisons, a drop at a time. To do it all at once, after your body has already developed…” The woman shakes her head. “No, what you must do is understand this thing, and be prepared to let it go if the situation ever arises.”
Arya nods dubiously. Oh, she sees the wisdom in what the Waif is saying, but she is not sure how to go about “letting it go”.

“Then,” says the Waif, “child.”

“Moon tea,” answers Arya promptly.

The Waif’s lips twist in a smile that is half grimace. “I do not speak of preventing an unwanted child, Arya Stark. I speak of the wanting of a child.”


The Waif tilts her head to a side. “Have you ever demanded a kiss from someone?”

The words trigger a cascade of memory.

*The God kissed me. And he wore Jaqen H’ghar’s face to do it.*

That certainly explains the source of her “hallucination”. She is a bit relieved–somehow it feels less embarrassing to have wanted to kiss Him of the Many Faces than to have wanted to kiss Jaqen.

The Waif mistakes the source of Arya’s blush. “So. First it is a kiss, then it is a bedding, and then it is a child.”

“I’m not sure that is possible,” says Arya, her blush turning to amusement, amusement that confuses the Waif for a moment.

Then the Waif’s expression clears. “Ah, you have the liking of other women. That is safer.”

Arya blinks. “Um.” *Better not try to explain this one, “other women” sounds more sane than “the God of Death”.*

“The last--virginity--it is something peculiar to some cultures, cultures that value a woman only for what can go in, or come out of, between a woman’s legs.”

Both women’s lips curl: a look of mirrored disdain.

“It is so in Westeros,” observes Arya.

“And you are of the nobility,” says the Waif. “Which means your upbringing has been even more hypocritical than that of the common folk.”

Arya cannot help but agree.

“No,” says the Waif. “You think you understand, but you do not. These ideas, these *protocols*, they get into you, layer upon layer, from the time of earliest childhood. ‘A woman’s honor is her virginity; she should guard it with her life’. It burrows deep.”

Arya thinks of Nan’s admonitions. “But it’s all so *pointless*.”

“Yes, but it is ingrained in you. We live a dangerous life. You may be raped; there will most definitely be violence done to you. And because of your preconceptions, the taking of your virginity may damage you more than the beatings.”

Arya exhales. A part of her cannot deny that she feels a definite twinge when thinking about losing her “virtue”. To lose it to a rapist...she shudders, and then thinks again of how she terms it a
“losing” of a thing. The Waif is right.

But the Waif is not finished yet. “Do you know how many women have come seeking the gift after just such a violation?” The Waif’s voice rises in volume. “Do you know how many nightmares I have shared, born from just such a fear?” She relents. “I tell you of these things from experience that even the sisters in our order may not share if they have never taken these particular faces.”

Arya looks up, taking in the thousands upon thousands of masks watching her with hollowed-out gazes.

“The last thing I can deal with immediately,” she says finally, and turns back to the Waif. “How do I do it?” Arya is thinking of implements--the hilt of a rapier, perhaps?

The Waif shrugs. “I asked a brother.”

“Oh.”

“Or,” says the Waif, “there is a custom amongst the well-born of Braavos. A sensible one.” The Waif grins.

Arya, in relief at the conversation taking a turn for the lighter, grins back at her. “Tell me!”

“Many Braavosi do not believe a girl should go to her marriage bed afraid, expected to learn about pleasure and pleasing at the same time as she learns how to live her life beside a man. And the Braavosi men, it should be said, do not on the whole glorify things like ‘breaking in a virgin’.”

Arya has not considered how such subtle differences in culture can change everything.

“So when a girl reaches a certain age, it may be arranged--sometimes it is the mother doing the arranging--for a girl to visit a select brothel. The girl is given a gold coin, and led to a room of men, chosen especially for their skill and gentleness. The girl may look around, make her pick, then kiss the gold coin and give it to the man of her choice. Sometime later, a meeting is arranged, and the girl learns of the arts of the bedroom for the first time, without panic or undue pain, or the burden of expectation.”

Arya smiles with wry amusement, imagining Catelyn Stark arranging something like that for Sansa. It really would have changed everything.

“That sounds like a very sensible custom.” She quite likes the ritualistic aspect of it as well: the coin, the mystery.

The Waif grins. “Some of the whores hold on to the coin, spending them upon a wedding gift for the girl. Sentimental, but they’re paid very well, they can afford to lose a coin or two.”

Arya doesn’t have any money.

“Um,” she says. “How does a faceless one get spending money?”

“We don’t,” says the Waif gently. “What you have need of, the God provides.”

At Arya’s downcast look, the Waif adds, “If this is a thing you want to be doing, you can ask the Lorathi you call the ‘Kindly Man’--I ask him often for coin for herbs and potions. Tell him I said it is needful for you to visit a good brothel.”

Arya feels even more downcast than before, if such a thing is possible.
She stands in a courtyard, broadsword in hand, her gaze fixed on the sky. A lone white raven is flapping against the cloudless blue expanse, circling, as if it has forgotten its destination.

The raven does not need to land to deliver its message.

*Winter has come.*

In between thoughts of worry that her training is not going fast enough, and worry for what is left of her family (Sansa most of all for some reason), Arya worries about her virginity. In the absence of readily available coin--she will not steal, not for this thing, and she will certainly not ask for coin for whores from the Kindly Man--asking a brother is her only option. And none of the faceless men at the House of Black and White are...right.

Jaqen H’ghar has not returned from Westeros.

“Arrgh!” Arya swings her blade over her head in a furious circle. *Do not think. Do!*

She has taken to practicing with larger and larger weapons, with weights strapped to her wrists. The bucket-carrying has done remarkable things to her arms, but she still has trouble wielding the largest of the blades for more than a quarter-watch at a time. The ability is essential, if she ever masquerades as someone who uses such a weapon. The God’s favor, or the blood-magic of the masks, gives her the illusion of another’s face but the strength must be all her own.

Winter has come. Her thoughts cut lazy circles through her head, like vultures. She has been thinking far too much about Jaqen H’ghar lately, constructing more and more elaborate palaces in her head.

*What is he to me?*

She flows from one cut to the next, transitioning into an advance that would catch an opponent’s blade on her guard, twist it out of the opponent’s hand.

*A mentor?*

She drops to a knee, blade raised in an overhead block.

*A recruiter?*

She mimes a shallow slash to a throat of a much taller man.

*A girl could make a friend.*

*That* thought she attempts to exorcise for the better part of the afternoon, but like a stubborn family ghost, it refuses to budge. Finally she sinks to the ground, sweat stinging in her eyes.

“A friend,” she murmurs. Possibly, she can live with that. Then she practices her swordwork till she is stumbling around the courtyard and it has become too dark too see.
Three months after the white ravens, the harbour is all abuzz with the news that a fishing boat has encountered a flotilla of ice-sheets, drifting down in the currents from the north. She fills her bucket with choice tubers, and overhears a familiar accent—a Westerosi sailor who believes the Knights of the Vale are marching on Winterfell and not the riverlands to bolster the Lannister forces.

She seeks out the Kindly Man.

He is watering a small patch of herbs unfamiliar to Arya on the southeast slope beyond the House’s main gardens. His back is turned to her, and she is being Jaqen again, but “Valar morghulis, Arya Stark,” he says before he faces her.

“Valar dohaeris, master,” she says respectfully, though her eyes are narrowed and suspicious. How does he always know it’s me?

The Kindly Man’s mouth twitches. “Partly because the man whose face you wear is in Westeros. But mostly because a faceless one always knows his brothers—or his sister, as the case may be.”

Under the Braavosi training, she has become very quick at sifting through information and focusing on the morsel she must seize.

“What is Jaqen H’ghar doing in Westeros?” she asks. Her friend may be “Jaqen” in her thoughts, but he is “Jaqen H’ghar” out loud because a girl must preserve some dignity.

The Kindly Man turns back to his plants. She notices the water he pours on their roots is black, black like the water from the pool. “The man is working his way up to fulfilling a contract.”

“Whose contract?” The House of Black and White has learned that Arya Stark is as relentless in stalking the information she needs as her house’s direwolf is when it comes to prey.

The Kindly Man sighs. “A contract made centuries ago, when dragons were many. A man that has died, but has to be killed again. Without destroying the world, if it can be helped.”

Arya blinks. After all that she has seen and done, Nan’s childhood stories, of wights and the Others and the Night King who had once been a Stark are no so far-fetched. And hearing the Kindly Man’s words, there is a feeling in her gut that those stories are about to become terrifyingly real. Terrifying, that is, if one is not a faceless assassin in service to the God of Death.

Winter is here.

Her spine straightens. “Arya Stark’s brother is on the Wall,” she offers. “Her half-brother.”

The Kindly Man does not turn around. “Our brother expected to venture north of the Wall....”

That’s why Jaqen tolerated the cage, like the worst of criminals, she thinks. They don’t assign patrols beyond the Wall to normal recruits, just the really bad ones. Or Starks.

“Just so,” says the Kindly Man, and he gives her a sly smile over his shoulder. “Does a girl worry for the safety of her brother?”

She looks at him, then away, schooling her face to nonchalance. She shrugs.
“So,” says the Kindly Man, putting his watering-can carefully on the ground before he faces her once again. “Show me what the Braavosi has taught you. Make a good showing of it, and you will be allowed to wear a face and seek for more--better--news on the harbor.” A faraway look comes over the Kindly Man’s visage. “Or I may allow you to send a raven to the one whose face you wear.” He looks closely at her, considering. “Though I am not sure he will thank me for it.”

No more hiding, no more secretive forays to the harbor for dribbles of rumor. If there is any news at all of Jon or Bran or Rickon or Sansa, Arya will come to hear of it. She struggles to show no emotion, but she is close to throwing her arms around the Kindly Man.

She may also be permitted to write to Jaqen. In her many thought-games of “what if”, letters have often been exchanged, full of longing disguised as jokes, promises disguised as philosophy...

“Girl,” says the Kindly Man, his tone harbouring a warning, “your thoughts dance all over you.”

She looks up at him guiltily, then firms her thoughts and relaxes the muscles on her face.

_**Right. I am a faceless man. I am going to write to Jaqen H’ghar, who is simply a senior member of my order.**_ She suppresses her twitchiness, even as a torrent of thought cascades through her. _**How senior is he? He doesn’t look too old; maybe a couple of years older than Jon?**_ It is hard to tell by looks alone...

She considers the Kindly Man and his wrinkles. _**Does a body age if it is given to the God?**_

It is time for another indirect question. “How old are you, master?”

“Hmm?” The Kindly Man smiles at her. “I was old when doom came to Valyria.”

She exhales slowly, soundlessly, her eyes round. “You were the first of the faceless men?”

Her old teacher looks into her eyes with pity and in that moment she knows, she **_knows_** the thing she has been avoiding thinking about for a while--why _**Jaqen**_ had been allowed to recruit a girl-child when any novice must be twenty before they can join, why the Lorathi brothers wear Jaqen’s face so often, why there is no House of Black and White in her Jaqen-memories, no training with the corpses, no pool of gift-giving as there are in the memories of every other face she’s been able to hold on to.

“**You were the first!**” she insists.

He shakes his head kindly--how else? “The second.”

“Graddakh,” she mutters under her breath.

The Kindly Man gives her an approving look. “Dothraki, eh? Good, then you will show me your mastery of the whip.”

Another blush threatens to make itself known; she’s heard enough whores discussing their clients’ peccadilloes _**not**_ to have some of that kind of thing leak into her thought-games--but she breathes, and the moment passes, and then a girl is nothing but a focused, trained warrior ready to meet another’s attack.

Chapter End Notes
I was asked a question about reunions, thought I'd provide some updated data: Jaqen + Arya happens in Chapter 12, Jaqen/Arya + Gendry in Chapter 16, Jaqen/Arya + the Freys in Chapter 17, Jaqen/Arya + LSH in Chapter 18, Jaqen/Arya + the rest of the Starks in Chapter 21.

Some of this seems a long way off, and there's a lot of plot to get through, I know, but there will be fluffy treats along the way, I promise: three chapters just for some J/A romance and sexual tension, another for some banter with Sam, incl. Jaqen spouting limericks (for all those that asked me to keep Sam alive), lots of Stark goodness, a SanSan chapter where the Hound and Jaqen spar shirtless and compare notes on "these northern lasses"...

Really looking forward to getting all of this out there :)

Thank you all so much for reading, and for the kudos and comments and bookmarks.
A man, having honed his patience for almost five hundred years, must dig deep for the fortitude required to open yet another dusty tome full of nothing but lists of names.

The answer is here, and he cannot find it. Three years in this place, another four before that searching fruitlessly in the great keeps of Westeros.

The last known Targaryen of that all-important generation died an old man on the Wall.

For a doubly and trebly prophesied hero, the target is too well-hidden.

Not for the first time, he wonders if the sorcerers have set the faceless men on a wild goose chase, leaving them free to foment some secret mischief. All sorcerers foment secret mischief, even his own brother in the House of Black and White, but an archmaester sends ravens to Asshai while red priests walk around openly in Westeros, sacrificing people to the Red God…

The man sighs. A man had been bold, and young, when he assured the sorcerers “The Prince that was Promised” was sufficient a name to carry out the task.

And so here he sits, the oldest of the God’s servants, looking through yet another list of “begats”.

A tremor in the bench under him tells him the scholar who has thumped himself down at the other end of the table is Samwell Tarly.

The man looks up at his “friend” as Samwell slides over.

“Pate,” he whispers, “how did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That the ‘Arya’ the Boltons married wasn’t Arya at all!”

The man quirks an eyebrow. “You have news?” His voice is low, matching Tarly’s for conspiratorial tone.

“Jon has been declared a King.”

“Another King in the North,” muses the man. “And Arya is not found, still?”

Tarly shakes his head. “It was Sansa the Boltons married; rumor says she fed her husband to his own hunting dogs.”

Now that is interesting. The Sansa he knows through a girl’s memories does not fit into this story. “Another imposter?”

“No, the letter is in Jon’s own hand.” Samwell smacks the flat of his hand against the table in an uncharacteristic show of frustration. “I should be with him!”
“You’ve got your links. Why don’t you go?” asks the man. “The girl and child would benefit from returning to a land that holds more familiarity for them.”

“Pate,” says Sam, his voice suddenly deadly serious, and the man is reminded that this large scholar before him has been north of the Wall, killed things north of the Wall. “How did you know about Gilly?”

Pate sighs. “My friend, do you know what kind of person you have to become in order to be allowed to stay at the Citadel year after year without earning a single link in your chain?”

“Not a nice person,” says Samwell.

Pate gives the other man a look. “Knowing secrets, keeping secrets, somehow makes me a bad person?”

Tarly has the grace to look ashamed for his hypocrisy. “You didn’t tell anyone about her,” he says finally.

“I wouldn’t,” says Pate. “Did you tell anyone about Rosey?”

“I didn’t have to. Everyone knew you wanted Rosey for years,” says Samwell.

Pate wanted Rosey for years, and so a man had to take up with her the moment she showed an interest, or tongues would wag. The things a man does for Death...

“Still, I wouldn’t have told,” states Sam.

“Because we are friends.” And friends don’t murder their friends and take their face. Well, only for necessity, not for convenience. It is just Not Done, and a man knows this even though it has been some time since he has made a new friend (and the lovely girl, in his dreams that he cannot reason away, the girl is a thousand things to him, and ‘friend’ is uncertain).

“Soooo,” wheedles Tarly, his earlier hostility evaporating like early-morning fog under the noonday sun, “Arya is still missing...she could be out there somewhere, just waiting to be found!”

Pate raises an eyebrow.

“Sure, why not? I’m your friend, I want to see you happy! I’ll put in a good word for you with her brother.” He states this as if it is settled, a job well done.

“Yes, thank you, that’s exactly what I need,” says the man dryly, returning to the papers in front of him. “A real, flesh-and-blood king angry at me because I kissed his sister in a dream.”

Samwell sidles closer. “How many times did you kiss her, eh?” The man finds an elbow being poked repeatedly into his side. “Eh?”

Friends don’t murder their friends by throwing them off a tower. It is Not Done, and the ravens will not appreciate it.

“A few,” he mutters.

“ There you go,” and Sam is his fully exuberant, encouraging self again. “It could become a reality!”

Friends do not contemplate shoving a quill into their friend’s eye-socket, thinks the man. It is Not Done, and a man will lose his library privileges.
Pate rolls his eyes.

There is blessed silence for a few minutes, then Sam leans over again. “What are you working on?”

The man sighs. “My copper and electrum.” Any amount of strange inquiries or semi-treacherous insinuations are ignored, encouraged even (the Citadel has given him a budget to hire informants, which is saving the House of Black and White a substantial amount of coin) the moment he utters the phrase “for my dissertation on the topic of…”

For the work that hopefully culminates in finding a target for a five-hundred-year old contract of assassination (though, of course, the Citadel is not aware of this fact), Pate has secured assurances that he will receive two links: the copper of history and electrum for astrology, because he’s been the first one to cast the horoscopes of the dead scions of certain minor houses nobody has ever bothered with.

He already holds the black iron, iron and lead. The copper and electrum make five, so one more and he will have a collar. His neck is not as thick as Tarly’s.

“What topic did you finally settle on?” asks Sam.

Pate throws down his pen. “Another stillborn one, it looks like,” he mutters. “Normative methods by which a prophecy may be disproved: The Prince that was Promised and the statistical outliers in the survival rate of the line of Jaehaerys the Second.”

Tarly whistles. “For or against?”

“Haven’t decided yet.” Pate smiles, grim. “And a chart consisting of one lone survivor does not lend itself to statistical analysis. I also need a bleeding star and a resurrection somewhere in there, or it doesn’t fit.”

Tarly shifts, his body radiating nervous energy.

The man’s eyes narrow. “You know something.”

“Um…” Tarly trails off, looking conflicted and guilty. “Um. The Red God…there may have been…someone said there have been resurrections.” The last words tumble out in a rush, tripping over themselves in their haste.

The man is amused. Tarly’s appeasement of the no-room-for-magic faction at the Citadel must be more than just for show if he gets squirrelly about mentioning even rumors of miracles.

“I know about those,” says Pate, “Beric Dondarrion, the Brotherhood Without Banners.” He waves his hand, dismissing them. “Dondarrion is not a Targaryen.” Neither is Catlyn Stark.

Tarly relaxes, as if up to now he was expecting Pate to skewer him for his unpopular views. “He could be,” he says. “I mean, think about it. Even Eddard Stark strayed, and he wasn’t forced to marry his sister! So chin up, chin up, your thesis could be quite viable. There’s got to be quite a bit of dragon blood lying about the countryside, proliferating without anyone being the wiser. You just have to find them!”

The man tilts his head to a side. A new avenue of inquiry suggests itself. “Thank you, Samwell Tarly,” he says. “You have been very helpful.”
The faceless one has been travelling for four years. The end of the mission had seemed no closer last year than it had at the start.

But then, and on a ship halfway to the Jade Sea, Him of the Many Faces had given an answer.

A dark smudge on the horizon announces the nearness of Asshai. *It will be over soon.* Overhead, three white ravens take off from their perch on the mainmast; they have flown a long way, and quickly. Some Maester in the Citadel on Westeros, extending courtesies to sorcerers...the world has grown strange this past summer.

*Winter has come.*

The ravens must have found other ships as hospitable as this one if they are as healthy as they appear; the ship’s master fed them last dusk. Unfortunately, the message they carry is bound for Asshai, and he knows of no animal that does not sicken and die in the shadow city.

*Except for humans.*

The faceless one wears a new face with a reverence befitting an answered prayer, and practices how to move like a young girl. He must, as always, disguise the telltale limp that doesn’t go away regardless of whose body he wears. Sometimes, rarely, when his foot throbs with pain late into the night and there is no surcease in either wine or herb, he hates his teacher. But those times are few and far between; the old man loves a man as a son, and has this one’s regard in turn.

The man is now a girl and though the giving of the gift is now *possible*, it will still be hard.

Asshai has always been warded against a very specific use of blood-magic: the trademark of the God’s servants. After all, even sorcerers and shadow-binders must die. But there is nothing a sorcerer can do about a faceless one’s wearing of a brother’s mien, for *that* uses neither blood nor magic but is instead created out of a God’s favor.

But the one the gift must be given to is himself a faceless one who has traded in the secrets of the House of Black and White to become *someone* in Asshai under-the-shadow.

The betrayer has been sundered from the God’s grace; he no longer has the ability to sense the brothers and sisters of his former order. The target must rely on his memory of the faces he has seen at the House of Black and White. And then if a new faceless one is drawn into the fold...well.

Arya Stark’s lips curve upwards into a grim smile.

Chapter End Notes

This was a short one, in comparison to the ones that will come after...
11 and 12 are in final edits, coming up to more than 8,000 words combined...I need to get a life, and stop killing my beta...
And just like that, the world changes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

She has allowed herself snippets of his memories—his life in Lorath as a very young child, his pleasure in learning the sword and the staff. She has mostly steered clear of the pain, and there is one place she has never dared look, though glimpses always intrude when she least expects them.

The truth can only be avoided for so long.

Using a degree of reverence and ritual she has not used since her first few days as a faceless one, she wears his face.

She experiences Jaqen H’ghar’s last memories.

JAQEN H’GHAR

His grandfather tries to mold him into a proper Valyrian. The young man dyes half his hair red, the color of his Lorathi mother’s hair when she first met his father.

The young man does not measure up, it is said. He is quiet, like a woman, and his face is too sly. He does not respond to provocation, he swallows insults and does not defend his honor. If he is attacked, he always wins the fight but only because he is vicious and cunning. He talks like a Lorathi, like his stupid half-breed mother. Clearly, the beatings have not helped.

Worst of all, he treats slaves as his equals.

He must be made into a man.

Jaqen H’ghar is dragged to a slave woman’s quarters and the door is locked behind him.

The woman knows more than he does, she says, “please my Lord, we must do this thing. They will check, and then I will be beaten.”

He sits on the bed beside her. “This is rape,” he says.

“You are not raping me,” she replies. “They are raping the both of us.”

Their coupling is quiet, and soft, and it is over soon. The woman finds herself weeping, for he is the one who is calm. He touches her with tenderness, and tells her everything will be all right in the end.

They drag her out of her room and give her to the soldiers. His grandfather makes him watch.

It takes him some time, but he sneaks down to the whore-pits. The walls are covered with scrawled messages, written in blood, in excrement. Many of them are curses (and prayers disguised as
curses) directed at gods the young man has never even heard of.

He finds her, but she is already dead. Open sores cover her skin, and she kneels in a corner, begging the Red God for something. The slave, just like the young man, knows there is no cure once the sores open, there is nothing but agony and a long, lingering end.

The young man strides forward and slices open her throat, ear to ear.

He hears the measured tread of soldiers. They are looking for him. He steps into one of the many shadows in this place--light is not often wasted in any of the slave pits, especially not the whore-pits where soldiers believe it is better not to see what they are fucking.

The woman’s are not the only pleas he can hear. The walls, the floor, the smell --prayers for death reverberate, over and over around him, turning this cesspool into a sacred temple.

The young man stands in the shadows, and a dark and terrible purpose rises in him.

His grandfather's guards, his lapdogs, they are everywhere; he will not leave here as himself. He has no fear of dying, but there is work that must be done. He is no sorcerer, no user of blood-magic. But the darkness in him is compulsive, instructive.

He turns over the woman he has killed, and swiftly slices the skin of her face off her head. He makes a shallow slice in his own cheek, lets the blood mark a line down his face, then places her skin over his.

Blood mingles with blood.

Darkness rises.

ARYA

She cannot describe, even to herself, where Jaqen H’ghar goes after that. She has no words for it, but when he gets there the hand of the God is on her shoulders; the God is standing right behind her, if she turns around she will see him.

She dares not look.

Three candles burn in her room, and she can see the flame of each, but nothing else.

“He hurt so much when he killed her,” she says aloud. “But he didn’t say anything!”

“Should a man have wept, shouted, wailed?” whispers a voice in her ear. “Apologized?”

“There was no rage in him! He had the power--I can see it! Why didn’t he see it?” she is sobbing now. “He should have burnt down the whole place to bedrock. You gave him everything.”

Arms encircle her, hold her close. “And he gave me everything as well. His fury, his sorrow, his fear.”

She is shuddering with sobs. She leans back and the strong arms draw her close. The room is pitch black, and she is leaning against an open flame, an inferno that does not burn her. Slowly, she calms, and the sobs become silent tears.
“I gave you nothing,” she says.

“Three things,” replies the voice. “Needle. The face of Arya Stark. A direwolf. It is a handsome dowry.”

“And what is that in comparison to the man that gave you everything that he was? Three things are not enough.”

She feels the God’s amusement. “You wish to compete with Jaqen H’ghar?”

“Don’t mock me,” she snarls.

“It is not to be dared, Beloved.”

The endearment penetrates her fog of misery. Dowry. Beloved. “I don’t need to compete with him?”

The answering chuckle both frustrates and reassures her, full as it is of things on the edge of understanding. And then the darkness retreats and she can see again. Jaqen H’ghar’s face has slipped from her, she knows not when; his memories are no longer vivid whip-weals upon her soul, but scars that promise to fade, albeit slowly.

She rises off her knees, dips a corner of her robe in the glass of drinking-water beside her bed, and wipes away all evidence of her deplorable loss of control.

“I will do better,” she promises.

The candles burn down to stubs, then gutter out, one by one.

Her Braavosi teacher comes to her in the Hall of Faces as she is in the process of adding another face to the wall.

He speaks without preamble. “You are doubling and redoubling your service to the House: you wash corpses, you work with the Waif, you carry buckets from the market. What is the thinking in your head?”

Arya shrugs. “I am making up for my stubbornness, for wasting the time that I had when I was an acolyte.”

The Braavosi snorts. “It is being a phase. It will pass. Come. There is a meeting, and you are to attend.”

Obediently, she gives the death-mask one last tiny adjustment, then backs away and follows her teacher to the middle-level of the Temple’s catacombs.

She really is required to attend the meeting, she realizes--all the faceless currently resident in the temple are present.

They are to discuss the finances of the House, not as a temple but as a Guild of Braavos. Within the first half-watch of the discussion, she realizes she understands nothing, and she turns a pleading look on her teacher.

The Braavosi leans over. “The brother you should be wearing is called Varro Massag. Before he
came to us he was a mathematician for the Iron Bank.”

Grateful for the advice, she cups her hands over her face; Varro Massag is not a name she has worn before, and his memories are commonplace regarding most experiences but utterly incomprehensible when it comes to the details relevant to his meeting.

*There are many things a girl must learn.*

---

She sleeps but four hours each night. She wakes, goes down to the well to fill the water buckets and hunt for news to bring to the Kindly Man.

She spends a quarter of each day practicing her weapon-work; another quarter she spends under the Waif’s eye, experimenting with poisons.

What is left of the day she spends in absorbing the knowledge she has gleaned through memory, trying to make sense of it, asking questions when she cannot.

She only wears Jaqen’s face when she feels the tendrils of despair and of worry start to work their way up into her mind again, and she absolutely needs to borrow from his serenity.

After a few days, the Kindly Man seeks her out.

“How is a girl’s command of Low Valyrian?”

“Passable. A girl has practiced.”

He gives her a nod, noting, no doubt, the improved accent.

“A girl will go and find a Braavosi mask in the Hall of Faces,” he says. “Something commonplace to wear, something that fits in. There is a meeting of the Guilds and the Sealord’s court. A girl will accompany a man as a representative of the House of Black and White.”

Her eyes widen.

“A girl is not ready!”

“If a girl has never lifted a sword but she has the memory of what a sword is, does that make a girl ready to fight?”

Ashamed, Arya looks down. “No.”

They wear the robes of Black and White, hoods drawn low over their faces. They walk openly down the stone path from the House, stand at the bow of a small gondola as it wends its way through the canals to the shining dome of the Sealord’s palace, beautiful and commanding and yet somehow dwarfed by the megalithic structure beside it: the Iron Bank.

There is a very large room--an amphitheater, almost--set aside for city meetings, but they do not stop in this room. Instead, they pass through a heavy oaken doorway behind the throne of the Sealord of Braavos, and into a smaller chamber.

The chamber is dominated by a round table of polished stone. Stone chairs are arranged around in groups of two. A large cameo is inset into the cresting rail of each: theirs is a familiar half black, half white symbol.
The room fills, and Arya memorizes each face. These are the men that run this city, and a great deal of the world beyond. The Iron Bank. The Sealord and his First Sword... Syrio, old teacher, you should see where I am now... The Guild of Mercers, The First Admiral...

There are pleasantries; there always are. Goblets of wine are placed before each delegate--no one is stupid enough to drink from them.

The head of the Guild of Mercers has brought his own flask, filled with some eye-wateringly strong spirit. The old man waves his hand in the air. “For my health, you know.” Nobody has asked. His voice is quavery, but Arya recognizes that his little eyes positively glitter with cunning.

“My Lords, Guild Masters, Guild Representatives,” begins the Sealord of Braavos, Tormo Fregar, who has been elected to the throne after the death of the last Sealord. “The Queen of Meereen is moving on Westeros. Time is short--we must decide whether we back her or not, and we must decide now.”

Predictably, the Bank speaks first. “We are owed a great deal of gold by the crown of Westeros. She is marching with the youngest son of the House of Lannister. If the Dragon Queen’s invasion succeeds, she will give Casterly Rock to the dwarf. The Mad Queen will no longer have access to Lannister gold. The capability to repay us will then exist. We must make sure the inclination to pay us also exists.”

“And how does the Bank propose to incline her to us?” asks the First Sword. “She has no need of money--all the confiscated wealth of the Masters of Slaver’s Bay is hers to command.”

“She has spent most of it,” says the younger representative of the Guild of Mercers, a trifle smugly. “All the things one needs in outfitting armies. Much of that she buys from the Pentoshi due to some old loyalties she has, but the Pentoshi buy from us. So she has the goods, and the weapons and the men and the boats--”

“Ships,” corrects the Lord Admiral.

“Just so. She has them. But her liquidity margin is...small.”

The Guild of Artificers is headed by an iron-haired woman with bronzed skin, her accent more Myr than Braavos. “She will not need gold until she actually reaches Westeros, maybe not until she marches on King’s Landing and a siege is inevitable.”

The Bank’s representative smiles. “We have an idea--”

“Forgive the interruption,” says the First Sword, “but we must first confirm our assumption, that Braavos is allied with Daenerys Targaryen.”

The Sealord nods. “I call for a vote.”

“Seconded,” says the old mercer.

“Who supports a Targaryen bid for the throne of Westeros?” asks the Sealord.

Hands go up, one by one, and the First Sword takes a tally. “Bank, yea, Artificers, yea...Admiralty, yea.” He looks around. “And the House of Black and White abstains, as always.”

Everyone nods; unanimity is always appreciated, and it would be more disturbing if the House had actually voted, overturning centuries of tradition.
And, just like that, the world changes.

“So,” continues the Bank representative, “we have an idea.” He reaches under his chair, and puts a small wooden chest on the table. Using a key held on a chain around his throat, he unlocks the chest and throws upon the lid.

The box is filled with gold sovereigns--each coin is about the size of a small egg in diameter.

*I could lose my virginity a hundred times over with that,* thinks Arya, and is immediately abashed at the turn of her thought. She is glad the hood covers most of her (his Braavosi) face.

The banker picks up a handful of coins, and passes them around the table. When a coin reaches Arya, she sees that it is stamped with the face of a beautiful young woman. On the reverse, a three-headed dragon curls up upon itself.

“A goodwill chest, to begin with,” he says. “A hundred thousand coins should do, stressing that while we are begging her to consider assuming the debts of the Westerosi Crown, she is not obliged to do so, and that she has our support.”

“She cannot be bought with gold,” sneers the Artificer.

“And so we come to the second part,” says the Bank representative that has been silent for all this time. “We start buying up all coins in circulation in Westeros, replacing them with the Targaryen strike.” He throws a pouch on the table, and coins of all denominations, gold and copper and silver, spill out. Each is marked with the head of Daenerys Targaryen. “Read what they say.”

*Daenerys I, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lady Regnant of the Seven Kingdoms.*

“If she sails now, this moment, it will still take her armada two months to reach Westeros,” he says. “We can replace a third of the coins in circulation in Westeros in *half* that time.”

The Sealord leans back in his chair, absently stroking his chin. “Ask a man in Westeros who his ruler is, and he will reach for a coin in his pocket. He recognizes his ruler because the head of the ruler looks like the head on the coins. Replace the Baratheon-Lannister heads, and in the minds of the common folk and the merchants, Daenerys Stormborn will be the ruler of Westeros long before she fights a single skirmish. She will be the Queen in every pocket and every merchant’s strongbox, and what can the Mad Queen do, try to confiscate *money*?”

The Kindly Man speaks. “*Mad Queen,*” he says softly, and everyone listens. “She might.”

The First Sword snorts. “Then Daenerys Targaryen has won the war without ever fighting a battle—and we have won it for her.”

The Artificer finally nods. “It is a great gift. It is doubtful if she refuses.”

“And since we are simply exchanging coins and not devaluing them, all we lose is the initial chest of a hundred thousand and the striking costs.”

The First Sword clears his throat. “It is still outside our budget at this time.”

The negotiations begin in earnest.

After a watch, it is settled that Daenerys Targaryen will receive ten thousand gold sovereigns, ten thousand silver, and ten thousand copper, paid for by the treasury of the City of Braavos. The Iron
Bank will swallow the loss from the strike-cost of the coins, and yet half of that shall be deducted from their annual tithe to the City at the end of the year.

Everyone seems satisfied, even Arya, despite the fact that she has had to hand back her sample coin. For she finds that she can follow the discussion with far greater ease now than she would have a week ago.

“Speaking of tithes,” says the Sealord, “I have a request for the House of Black and White.”

Everyone stills, as if ice-cold water has been poured over their heads.

The Kindly Man gestures for the Sealord to continue.

“The First Sword of Braavos before ours,” says the Sealord, “one Syrio Forel.”

Arya stiffens.

“I was a boy when he was at the court. He was always kind to me. He taught others the water dancing after he retired--I was his first student. He was butchered, unarmed, by a Lannister thug named Meryn Trant.”

The petrified looks on the faces around the table evaporate, replaced by understanding, and by righteous indignation on a few. Other students of Syrio’s? A part of Arya longs to compare notes.

Tormo Fregar continues. “The Sealord’s purse will pay your operating costs, but since Syrio Forel was a son of Braavos, the First Sword of Braavos, I request that the price for Meryn Trant's naming you give as your tithe this year.”

At that moment, Arya decides that politics is as much an art of war as swordplay is. Just as there exist many possible avenues to skewering a man with steel, there may also be many ways to orchestrate that skewering.

She also decides that she likes this Tormo Fregar.

There are a few nods of agreement. The Bank’s representatives look more neutral than anything else, and Arya thinks that Meryn Trant must have embezzled quite a bit of gold from King’s Landing and stored it…in safe hands.

The Kindly Man finally speaks. “A man is afraid this cannot be done, Sealord, council.”

A hubbub of voices.

The Kindly Man raises his hand, and all noise stops.

“Meryn Trant has already been named; Meryn Trant has been given the gift.”

There is shocked silence.

“Who bought his death?” asks the Sealord, and his voice is choked with emotion.

The Kindly Man actually glances at her. Is he asking my permission? He nods at her, yes.

She clears her throat. “A Stark,” she says, and her voice echoes in the chamber.

“The King in the North?” asks the First Sword.
Robb is dead, how could he have Meryn Trant killed?

She shakes her head. “His youngest sister. Arya Stark. She was Syrio Forel’s last student.”

The Sealord’s eyebrows rise. “You are in contact with this girl? Can you reach her?”

“Perhaps,” answers the Kindly Man, before Arya can speak.

Tormo Fregar rises half from his seat, his face lit by some inner passion. “Then tell her the Sealord of Braavos will marry her! Right here, right now!”

The First Sword rolls his eyes. But some of the younger men around the table look rather impressed by his declaration.

Romantics. Bah!

“We are messengers of Death, Sealord, not of marriage proposals,” admonishes the Kindly Man.

The Sealord sits down, abashed. “Of course.”

“Though,” says the old Mercer, leaning forward, the quaver in his voice entirely gone, “If the House of Black and White supports the Starks...we can out-maneuver Cersei Lannister faster than anyone thinks is possible.”

“Cripple her,” murmurs the Bank representative. “Humiliate her.”

Arya leans over the Kindly Man, whispers in a language that has been dead for three hundred years. I am liking this meeting.

The Kindly Man gives her a look.

“Can a marriage be brokered?” asks the Mercer. “Three ways--this Arya Stark with our Sealord. The King in the North with the Queen who will land in the South. A sharp, short war with the Mad Queen, the middle harassed from both sides, then peace. Profitable peace. And Braavos at the heart of it, with the King’s sister made a Braavosi.”

Arya wants to giggle. If only they knew!

She leans over to the Kindly Man. “Robb is dead,” she says. “It must be Bran, in the North. He cannot father children, not after his fall. Daenerys will want an heir to continue the Targaryen line.”

The Kindly Man nods, then turns to the council.

“How is the health of the King in the North?”

At that, both Bank representatives sneer a little--not too much, just a twitch of the lips and then it’s gone. “The Starks are your customers, surely you must know,” say the older one, tone deceptively mild.

Arya wants to punch his perfect white teeth into his stomach.

“No games,” warns the Sealord. “If we play games with each other at this juncture, we lose everything. Honoured representative of the House, the King in the North is young, and a gifted warrior; he was Commander of the Night’s Watch before his duty called him to Winterfell.”

A slight hitch of breath; that is all Arya allows herself before she clamps down on all outward signs
of her emotional response.

*Later. There will be time enough for this later.*

For now she must concentrate on salvaging the situation—the change in her breath has been noticed, and it must be ameliorated, not just for the sake of politics, but for the esteem that she has surely lost in the eyes of the Kindly Man.

“We find ourselves surprised,” she says. Display humility, admit a mistake, and the House’s political rivals look petty if they act on it. “Arya Stark was confident that a bastard of the house could not be acknowledged while trueborn children yet live. Brandon Stark must be the next Lord of Winterfell.”

“Brandon Stark is dead.”

Arya shakes her head “no” and realizes she’s made yet another mistake.

“You have already admitted that your confidence in your source was misplaced,” sneers the Bank representative.

*Petty, petty fool.*

“The House of Black and White does not play politics—we can be mistaken in matters of succession and populist opinion,” her tone is mild, agreeable. “But when it comes to keeping tally of those that are dead…,” she looks up, meets the eyes of the bankers, the mercers, the Sealord, others.

She smiles.

She notes who recoils, who cannot hold her gaze, who is appreciative of this subtle reminder of the source of the House’s power.

“Brandon Stark lives.” Her voice cannot but echo her confidence in the fact. “This does not come from the mouth of Arya Stark.”

The subtext in that last is meant for the sole understanding of the Kindly Man. Arya Stark is speaking, but the knowledge does not come from her hopeful imagination. She makes mistakes, she shows too much emotion, she is still too tangled up in being Arya Stark. She does not lie well.

And yet. And yet, the God speaks to her.

There is silence as the men and women around the table digest her words.

Slowly, conversation re-establishes itself as the First Sword moves to the next item on the meeting’s agenda.

Arya allows herself to drift a bit.

*Jon is well. Jon is back in Winterfell, where he belongs. There is a King in the North, and he is a son of Eddard Stark.*

Everything that her brother deserved, everything that her brother was denied, it shall be denied no longer. She mourns Robb, bitterly, regrets that he had to die for Jon to receive his due, and yet triumph tempers her regret.

*The Starks will rise again.*
KINDLY MAN

The girl walks beside him in the herb-garden.

“"A girl is thoughtful," he says.

“"There are things that I will do," she replies, her voice quiet but firm. "I will see Jon again. I will pray in the godswood."

The man sighs. It is true that she can say this openly now, there will be no more tests of loyalty; the God has taken her. Still.

“A girl has far too much of Arya Stark in her.”

She looks at him with her dark eyes, and gives nothing away.

He tempers his earlier statement. "But a girl has learned, far more than this one thought she would."

“A girl has a hundred teachers,” she says. "She has extracted some truth from her brothers’ experiences. Would the Kindly Man like to hear what she thinks of his disapproval of Arya Stark?"

“A girl may continue.” His tone is neutral.

“The Lorathi make of themselves an empty vessel for the God to inhabit,” she says.

He nods.

“The Braavosi, too, seek emptiness on their own terms and what core of them remains after they can be emptied no further, they make of it an offering upon the altar of Death.”

“There are many ways to serve Him,” the man agrees. He may disapprove, but she is not wrong.

There is a quiet, mysterious smile on her face. In that moment the man knows she can play any role that she cares to, man or woman or eunuch, plumb the depths of human experience should she wish it.

His earlier thoughts may have been far too harsh--but she is not done.

“Some do not empty themselves at all.” Her voice grows stronger. “These few wed themselves, everything they are, to the God. These few, I think the God treats as delicately as a bridegroom treats his best-beloved.”

The Kindly Man has heard similar words before; a gnawing fear blooms in his chest, like a wound. Not fear of her. Fear for her.

“Three others, who may have served as you do,” he says and is heedless now that his voice is ragged with emotion. “Two died, in unimaginable agony. A waste.” He is not beyond anger, not for this.

“Valar morghulis.”

He snorts. “The God didn’t will their deaths, girl. He mourned the receiving of them as much as we mourned their departure.”
She looks appalled. “What power can challenge the will of the Many-Faced God?”

He gives her a pained smile. “If we knew…”

They walk along the path in silence for some time.

“A girl will join them if she continues like this,” he says near the clove bushes. “Leave Arya Stark in the past, child. Become no-one before it is too late.”

“Ask a fish to breathe fire; it will have more luck meeting your demand.”

He turns his whole body to face her, forcing her to stop, to confront him face to face. “The last of the three-- this man’s student.” He stabs his finger into his own chest. “I beat him.” The pronouns have changed, the words are laden with bitter self-hatred. “Not to learn fighting or to learn how to lie; he used to lie well. I beat him like a drunk father beats his son, to make him give up the name he clung to, till I smashed his bones and his blood coated the flagstones, and then I held his broken body to me and wept myself into insensibility. Then he recovered, and I did it again. And again, and again.”

“And did that succeed in making him no-one?” she demands.

The old man exhales. “He has no name. And he is still alive.”

She looks down and away. “A girl tried to be empty,” she says in a small voice. “Her teacher knows that.”

He places a hand on her head, then sighs. “A man knows, and he is far too weary to beat her. Or castigate her if grows too attached to the lover she wishes to take from within the order.”

The girl’s gaze snaps up, guilt and embarrassment and defiance warring with each other until a controlled blankness gains ascendancy.

“Did your student take a lover?” she asks, and the man thinks her real question is “is that why you beat him?”

He gives her a small half-chuckle. “No. He wanted Jaqen H’ghar for a time, though.” The man gives the girl a sly smile. “The girl knows she wears her expressions too openly.”

She knows, for she looks at him and bursts into laughter. “He really attracts the strange ones, doesn’t he?” she asks, self-depreciating.

The old man shakes his head. “It’s that face.”

The mood has lightened; the sun shines a little bit brighter. The girl straightens her shoulders.

“A girl did not seek out her old teacher to discuss Jaqen H’ghar’s admirers,” she says. “The Bank has a better spy network than we do. We need to improve ours.”

So that is how she wishes to spin her desire to return to Westeros. This should be interesting.

“People, information, they are all bought with gold,” he says, utterly neutral. “And the Iron Bank has had hundreds of years to build its network of informants. We cannot compete, Arya Stark--locals will cooperate with coin-counters but never death-dealers. Do you think we should plant our own people as locals on Westeros? We are not nearly enough…”

He expects her to say, “a single one with sufficient influence could do the work of many” but her
eyes say this is not what she means.

“I agree with you that we cannot improve our own network to the standard that is required. That would be inefficient. The Iron Bank already has a network.”

“We do not kill employees of an allied guild, or take their faces, unless a name is spoken.”

She smirks. “It is not killing that I propose. A very long-term assignment for a brother, though a sister would be better.”

The man raises an eyebrow.

“The world of great houses and marital alliances is not for me now, if ever it was. But ‘Arya Stark’ was born to these things--her name, her face, they can be of use to us.”

“And so…”

“And so an Arya Stark can return to the world. She can be the wife to the Sealord of Braavos. Why try to control a network if you can simply have them report to you? The Bank does not share everything with the Sealord, but almost everything. We, the faceless ones, have always been in the shadow, outsiders. We will not abandon the shadows, but we will use Arya Stark’s face to the fullest that it can be used, and this time we will be on the inside.”

The man is reminded that he has played guild politics for centuries, and made one ruthless decision after another. But he was born a slave, and what he knows of buying and selling people is confined to the utility of the person’s body or skills to the Master; human property has no power.

This girl has been exposed to cutthroat politics since she was in the cradle; she comes from a world where parents--who are not just freemen but lords and kings--buy and sell children precisely because one day the children will be the most powerful in the land.

Who sells their child if they have the power to not do so?

“This role you propose, it goes far beyond a disguise worn for gift-giving,” he says.

“A disguise wrapped in a truth,” she replies. “Give the Sealord exactly as much of the truth as he can take: ‘Arya Stark became a faceless man in return for vengeance for Syrio Forel. We give you Arya Stark, but her facelessness must remain hidden’. Can you imagine what that will do to a man’s ego, to know that he is the only one in the world with a House-sanctioned marriage to a faceless assassin, an assassin who is also the sister to a King? The Sealord is pragmatic and cynical but even he is not immune to the power of becoming a hero in the sort of story legends are made of. Tormo Fregar will lap it up.”

A man would say the girl thinks in a manner that is too grandiose, but as she says, she is sister to a King. What is ‘too grandiose’ for one like that?

“Audacious,” he says out loud, tapping a finger against his lips, “he will suspect.”

From her sharp hand motion, the girl disagrees. “He knows about the taking of faces from the dead. He will have a sorcerer check for blood magic, he will probe and pry at ‘Arya Stark’s’ memories and knowledge, of Winterfell and King’s Landing, he will have it corroborated. But he knows nothing of the God’s favor, the taking of the faces of other faceless men.”

The old man nods, it is a risk, but not an entirely unreasonable one. “He already wants this marriage,” he muses. “The House of Black and White has always abstained from taking sides, for
this maintains the balance in the city. If we tip the balance in the Sealord’s favor, he will be complicit in keeping the secret, even if he does suspect something. Nobody but him must know of his wife’s facelessness. And so in public Tormo Fregar will side with the Bank and the council, and show no partiality to us.”

“In private...,” she smiles. “He will serve the God, whether he knows it or not. And if he suspects, just on principle, the pragmatist in him will say, ‘what does it matter that I do not get the girl who was born Arya Stark?’ For all intents and purposes, our brother or sister who marries Tormo Fregar will be Arya Stark.”

“A girl has thought this through.”

“A girl serves the interests of all her Houses,” and there is that smirk again. “The Starks will benefit, the first of the Westerosi nobility to successfully ally themselves to Braavos by marriage--the Targaryens tried many times, you know. Braavos will benefit--the Sealord will have the ability to call upon the wisdom of a hundred assassins, without leaving his marriage bed, though he may never call upon their knives-- that will have to be stipulated, no gift-giving unless our price is met. And the House of Black and White will be the one pulling the strings in the end.”

“And which one of our brothers--or sisters--should become Arya Stark? Why should a girl not assume this role herself?”

“It must be a follower of the Lorathi way. One of yours. One who will never develop into a loving wife in truth, or ever forget her true loyalties.”

The old man smiles in approval. The girl has understood the importance of being no one.

“Preferably someone,” she continues, “who would relish the role, exult in a lifetime of dealing with spies and lies.”

The Braavosi influence is clear as well.

“Also, someone who can endear themselves on their own merits to the populace and the council, for it is doubtful if the union can-- should-- produce a child; the Stark features always breed true.”

In the end she is still, always, Arya Stark.

“As for me taking the role,” she says, and smiles the smile new lovers wear when they think of their beloved, “The God will not permit it.”

How is a man supposed to argue with that?

“I will think on it.”

They walk. He thinks. Not long. It is a good plan; the opportunity has presented itself, and in one stroke the House of Black and White can stand to gain more influence than it has had since the founding of the Iron Bank.

“It will be done,” he says. “But we must be very careful--The King in the North must agree to marriage with the Mother of Dragons, otherwise the Sealord aligning himself so firmly with Jon Snow will put Braavos in the path of dragonfire.”

And then, and only then, does the old man see the trap this girl has laid for him. She warned him, right at the start of this conversation! He chuckles; she has earned his respect. “We will need a trusted representative to take the missive across the Narrow Sea...someone that has the pull
required to convince Jon Snow.”

Arya Stark smiles. “A girl’s teacher follows the direction of her thoughts.”

But the girl should learn it is not quite so easy to out-maneuver her teacher. “Another Lorathi, I think, to wear Arya Stark’s face in Winterfell.”

“Do we have another warg in the brotherhood I do not know about?” she asks mildly. “Even if Jon is fooled, Jon’s direwolf will not be.”

The man sighs, and admits defeat. “Do as you will, Arya Stark.” Also, since the opportunity has presented itself, “Once you are in Westeros, you can also help the one whose face you wear--his quarry is proving more elusive than expected.”

He watches her carefully. She controls herself--she would look impassive to others. But not to him, not wearing a face he has known since before the Doom.

Determination ghosts across her features, and joy. Gratitude. But there is no smugness, or triumph at getting her way.

The Kindly Man purses his lips, and nods. A girl has grown.

Chapter End Notes

So this is the last building block we need before Jaqen and Arya meet. Next chapter...

And thank you for the comments! Comments make us happy and productive!
ARYA

She travels light—a pack that is mostly full of coin and faces, a few clothes to go with the faces, a bandolier with vials of poison hidden under her dress, various daggers strapped to her legs.

Needle has been entrusted to the Kindly Man, to give to the Sealord’s Arya Stark when the time comes. Instead, she carries a relatively heavy cavalry saber; her reach is still not long, and a rapier is no good against mailed knights unless one can reach their soft, unprotected bits, and a girl can, of course, but why allow mischance more opportunity than it deserves?

Her hair has been allowed to grow long—a story that involves a brother returning from Yi Ti, with gifts of long, tapered wooden hairpins, hollow-tipped and filled with poison.

The girl also carries a small leather bag, and it is in her arms at all times.

The bag was entrusted to her but a moment before she walked out of the great black and white doors of the House.

“What is this?” she had asked, staring down at the bag’s contents: a silver oval, the size of a baby’s head. She knew what it was. And yet…

“Dragon egg,” the Kindly Man had confirmed. “We acquired one very recently…the price for killing a king.”

I hope it was for Joffrey. “And you’re just going to give it away?”

“It is good symbolism.”

As betrothal gifts went, she couldn’t have agreed more. And she told herself: stop arguing! This is for Jon!

“And,” said the Kindly Man, “it will be deducted against our end-of-year tithe.”

She rolls her eyes. A dragon egg, and the City of Braavos was going to balance it alongside silver coins and chickens and pig-iron in their ledgers.

And if Jon was getting this, then…

“What is Daenerys getting?” she had asked.

“The Bank is taking care of it—a direwolf pup was located in a menagerie in Leng.”

Arya scratched at her head. “A menagerie? Not a direwolf then.”

“Not purebred, no,” the Kindly Man had replied. “Far more wolf than ‘dire’. But then,” and he had pointed to the egg, “that’s never going to hatch into a dragon either.”
She had wondered how the principals of the alliance would react once they realized what Braavos had given away to the other on their behalf.

Her last-minute meeting with the Kindly Man is not her only strange encounter before she departs.

A brother who has never spoken to her before accompanies her all the way to the dock without speaking. His skin is the chalky-dark she is learning to associate with Asshai.

“I have had a dream,” he whispers, just as she is about to board. His is voice high and soft. “My name is Ambraysis Alayain.”

Almost hypnotized by the cadence of his voice, she repeats after him. “Ambraysis Alayain.”

“Do not wear my face until you have need of it.”

*What need will I have for the memories of a full-blown sorcerer in Westeros?* For that is what he means, she thinks. This brother of hers--she does not know him but she does trust him, and yet the whole interaction makes her very, very uneasy.

The ship is small, and there is not much room onboard to escape from her concerns. Neither is there much room to practice her swordwork. But she does practice throwing knives, careful not to show her skill too fully or too often. A “lucky throw” and a sailor’s irresponsible bet wins her a large blue hat, decorated with the plumes of some exotic bird from Southros.

She wears it on deck for the rest of the journey.

**JAQEN H’GHAR**

The riverboat ties up at the dock, its passengers waiting to disembark. The man stands a fair distance to the right of the gangplank, Pate’s Maester-chain looped loosely around Pate’s soft neck, the hood of his robe drawn over Pate’s head.

The man scans the faces on the boat, but not all are visible--many face the dock head-on, and can only be seen in partial profile. But of all the figures on the deck of the boat, there is one that calls to him, the sixth-sense that comes with serving Him of the Many Faces telling him this is a brother, though he will not know *which* of his brothers it is until he sees the eyes. Truthfully, the ridiculous plumed hat has given him pause.

The passengers begin to disembark, and the figure in the hat steps onto the gangplank. Then, like a lodestone snapping north, a man’s brother looks up and to his left.

Their gazes lock.

The face is older. It has lost all the softness of childhood, hair long now, not the boy-short of his imagination, held in place by long pins. An expression of pure joy lights up those eyes, and it is an
expression the man has never seen in them before, not in life nor in his dreams.

_They have sent a man Arya Stark._

She has recognized him, despite the face he wears.

And then she is darting through the crowd, hat falling to the ground somewhere and he almost loses her for a moment. His heart is thumping so loudly, he is surprised the people next to him do not hear it. There is a break in the crowd and there she is, running towards him, and he lifts his arms.

She crashes into his embrace with the force of a small battering ram; he doesn’t even shift.

“Jaqen, Jaqen, Jaqen,” she is chanting.

His arms have tightened around her, on some level he knows he is crushing the breath from her. Slowly, he relaxes his hold, kisses the top of her head.

“Arya;” he exhaled, and her name is a prayer in his mouth.

She looks up at him. She is taller now, and the top of her head reaches his chin.

“A man was afraid he would never see his lovely girl again,” he whispers.

“A girl missed her friend, Jaqen H’ghar.”

Their faces inch closer. Some seed of caution in him makes him lean forward, so that it is his forehead that rests on hers. Such a touch can still be salvaged; lips to lips cannot.

He shifts his hand till he is cupping her cheek. The silence is punctuated by breathing; their breaths mingle in the space between them, and her breath is sweet even after the long voyage, anise and something else, something that calls upon a man to surrender, though he knows not to what.

Her fingers rise to mirror his touch upon her cheek, and he feels the warmth of her hand grazing over the stubble he has cultivated on Pate’s face.

“Jaqen,” she whispers. “People are watching.”

“A man is always aware.” His low voice is laced with amusement.

Neither of them move.

People _are_ staring, but all they see is a young couple parted for too long--some of the onlookers wear fond expressions, others are wistful and envious by turns. Of course, they do not see what a man sees: two assassins that are also friends simply greeting each other.

_Yes, because that’s how a man greets Arya’s “Kindly Man” after missions, yes? Forehead-to-forehead, body pressed against his, almost kissing on a public dock._

The business of Oldtown flows around them, leaving them in an island of stillness.

Eventually: “Is a lovely girl hungry?” he whispers.

His words break the spell. Her hand drops to his waist, her face pulls back a bit, and he must needs do the same.
“A girl is *thirsty* ,” she says, “for news, and a good Westerosi ale if any can be found in this library town.”

The man smirks. “A girl does not know scholars very well if she thinks they do not appreciate a good ale.” He considers his words. “Perhaps some of them appreciate it a bit *too* much.”

She chuckles, and they shift position, bodies falling into rhythm without prompting.

Their arms encircle each other’s waists as they slowly make their way towards the center of town and the ale-houses dotting the boulevards leading to the Citadel.

They speak of the reason she has crossed the Narrow Sea, the entirety of her machinations laid bare in coded words and innocuous phrases.

“So that is the second time there will be rumors that the girl is found, and married,” says the man thoughtfully.

And he is both impressed and a little disturbed by the thoroughness with which she has tied up the interests of a city, and the customarily *impartial* House of Black and White into a scheme that, in the end, gives her what she wants--to come to Westeros and be reunited with her family.

*Is that all a girl wants?*

He does not ask; there are a thousand things they have yet to speak of, and this *thing* that resonates between them, it is the least pressing of their concerns. Still, she looks at him and as with every time she has done that this evening, the hairs rise on the back of his neck; his senses are inflamed, and he must, he *must* look away.

“Second time?” she asks.

“Some rumors I heard,” he explains, Pate’s Westerosi speech-patterns firmly in place, “First a rumor that a Bolton bastard had gotten his hands on her, then he’d killed her...but just rumors. They’d actually found her sister.”

“Is the sister well?” she asks.

“Yes. Now.” He waves his hand, *later*, when she is about to ask him to explain the ‘now’. “Their oldest brother is with her.”

“Those two never got along, before,” she says, and now it is her turn to be thoughtful.

Again, their gazes encounter each other’s and this time he cannot look away. The serving woman comes, drops a trencher of bread, takes up their empty tankards.

Their eyes are locked on the other.

She clears her throat, and the laden silence between them lessens. He sighs, whether from relief or regret he cannot tell; that will be a question to pose to himself during his meditations later. The death-trance is long shattered, of course, its shards left behind somewhere on a public dock. Along with the hat; the man thanks the God for small mercies.

“Pate,” she hesitates. “We...you and I--”
“No,” he interrupts. He knows the path she will wend with her words. “We are not going to talk about it.” Already, in the first moments of their meeting they discarded all protocol, called each other by names no one should know.

“Why?”

“I need to think.”

She snorts, an unladylike action that is somehow very her. “Lorathi think too much,” she says. “My Braavosi teacher--”

“So why does he not teach you? Why drag a bravo into it?"

There is a look of disbelief on her face. “You’re angry?”

“How did a girl learn that? But it is another thing the man refuses to discuss at this moment; two names he does wish to mourn for all over again, two names that must be mentioned if the story is to be told to a lovely girl.

“There must see something untoward in him, because she quirks an eyebrow. “And how is that going for you?”

He smiles in reply, a sarcastic, humorless pulling of the lips.

There is silence between them again, but it is not the peaceful one from before.

“I want news,” she says eventually, and he knows she wants to talk of things they cannot in this tavern, no matter how loud the background noise is. Words like “Braavos” and “Lorathi” do not attract undue attention, those places are too far away. “Stark” and “The King in the North”, these are Westerosi concerns.

“And news you shall have,” he promises. “After you have slept.”

“I will sleep with you?” she asks.

He knows she means whether it is his chambers she will be sharing, but that phrasing...is she doing it deliberately?

“I arranged for your lodging at a good inn.” He lies, of course--no such lodging has been arranged because he did not know they would send a man his lovely girl. He would have found rooms for
her, otherwise.

Maybe.

In either case, sneaking a temporary guest in and out of the citadel’s living quarters—especially sneaking in a woman—is common practice with Maesters. “Had to call in a few favors, the good inns near the Citadel are almost always very full.”

She tilts her head to a side. “A girl is very sorry your calling in of favors will be wasted.”

Her usage of Lorath-idiom seems to ignore his brain, making a direct conduit from his ears to his groin. She knows what she is doing. That strange, tenuous bond they had forged when she was a child—*a girl could use a friend*—it has changed into something else entirely. Dreams and half-baked fantasies are one thing, the reality of the awareness humming between them is something else entirely.

He reaches out very deliberately, his fingers caressing the air above her arm. Once, not touching. They both watch, fascinated, as the fine, dark hairs on her arm rise in the wake of his not-touch.

“This is not a good idea,” he warns.

She shrugs.

So. He is destined to lose every argument he ever has with Arya Stark, it seems.

He puts on a long-suffering expression, decorates it with a little sigh. “And here I brought you a gift.”

She ignores his mock pathos, sitting up with an excited glitter in her eyes. “A gift! What is it? Tell me!”

“A name,” he says and smiles, the first genuine smile since they entered the ale-house. The God has not forgotten a girl wanted Cersei Lannister dead, that a girl *unsaid* Cersei Lannister’s name simply because the God had other plans for the Mad Queen. The God owes the girl a name. “A third name for you to offer up.”

She sobers immediately, her face suddenly impassive enough to satisfy him, and yet Jaqen H’ghan cannot entirely negate the unease that crawls up his spine. *Has every emotion a man has seen from her thus far been a lie?* If so, a man should be proud. Instead, he is just...suddenly a bit more sympathetic to new acolytes at the House of Black and White.

In the next breath, he dismisses his errant thoughts and leans forward. His face hovers beside hers, his breath ghosting over the shell of her ear. “Walder Frey.” When he pulls back, he sees her pupils are mere pinpricks of black, floating against a storm-tossed sea.

The memories of torchlight and agony and the desecrated body of a young king dance between them. A girl had known “Frey” and a girl had known “Lannister”, but a house is not enough. A girl needed a *name*.

She smiles at him. “Thank you.” And *this* time he is proud of how even her voice is.

“Go on,” he says, “say it!” And lifts his tankard to his lips.

She closes her eyes. “Beloved,” she murmurs, and he almost chokes on his ale before he realizes she is addressing Him of the Many Faces.
This girl is a puzzle, she has not stopped being a puzzle. Jaqen himself has called the God by many names—Death, Lord of Endless Night, Mercy, Silence, Black One, Shadow….But Beloved?

*Be glad she didn’t settle on “Sweetie Pie”*.  

Again the man almost chokes. That thought belongs far more to Him than it does to Jaqen H’ghar. She finishes her quiet prayer, and silent lips form a name: Walder Frey. She opens her eyes.  

“What?” she asks, defensive.  

“Nothing,” he says, “but you could just have *said* the name to me as before and the gift would be given, what is the need for prayer?”  

“I pray a lot, ever since the pool,” she says quietly, then her gaze drops as she drags her fingertip through a puddle of ale on the table, drawing shapes. “I guess it’s more ‘talking’ than ‘praying.’”  

“That is neither a Lorathi habit, nor a Braavosi one,” he observes, then thinks. “Perhaps Asshai-under-the-shadow.” The thought brings a pang of disquiet.  

She shrugs again. That seems to be her answer to everything that disquiets him--shrugging.  

“So,” she says. “I’m curious as to how this works...does the God just tell our brother or sister that Walder Frey is a target? A dream?”  

Jaqen blinks. “Too much prayer has rotted your lovely brain,” he says. “We send a *raven*.”  

“Oh.”  

She looks surprised, as if a raven is somehow *less* likely than Death popping into a dream and handing someone a chit with a name on it. The man tries to quell it, but there is still satisfaction to be found in her surprise. *Girl: two. Man: one*. He is catching up.  

“You and I will have to do it,” he continues. “There are none closer.”  

“You killed the others.” Half-question, half-realization.  

“The names were spoken. The gift was given. That is all. *Do not* gaze at me as if I am a hero from a story,” he warns.  

She truly looks hurt at the sternness in a man’s tone.  

“Lovely girl,” he lowers his voice, switches languages, “a man didn’t mean to--”  

“A girl knows,” she says, her voice as low as his, the language yet another one. “She understands the Lorathi way, even if she does not follow it.”  

He looks down, humbled by her understanding. “Just so, lovely girl.”  

When she looks up, she has leaned back in her chair and is considering him with mischief in her eyes. “But I am not a girl anymore, so I would request you not use that endearment with me again.”  

“I will endeavor to abide by your request, but you must know you remind me of a lovely girl I once knew. Not as *lovely* as you, of course...” her eyes glitter as he pauses to take a sip of his ale, never letting go of her gaze, “as she was very young when I first knew her, but a lovely girl nonetheless. Lovely, lovely girl.”
Her eyes have narrowed. She leans forward, and under the table her knee brushes against the inside of his thigh. “A man will pay for that.”

The girl has come into her own. And it is terrifying.

Jaqen H’ghar smiles, showing her his canines.

Chapter End Notes

So, tell us, was it worth the waiting? Did it live up to your expectations?

Also, just FYI, 13 and 14 are 5k words each and I need to switch around some timing stuff (letting Sam live may have been a bad idea after all, but it's too late). They deal with Arya getting updated on the Starks while Jaqen is embroiled in the thick of the Grand Maester Conspiracy. All this this say that 13 will be out on Thursday at the earliest.
JAQEN H'GHAR

Night has followed on the heels of dusk and the dark sky overhead is pierced by a multitude of stars; the stars are never this sharp in summer. The man walks beside the girl, along the almost-deserted boulevard that leads to the Citadel.

He knows something is coming; the girl is too quiet. They pass a statue of some cowled and chained archmaester, indistinguishable from every other living archmaester the man has ever seen, and the girl finally speaks.

Her voice trembles, just a little bit. “Will you sleep with me?”

He panics.

“You are a very good friend to me,” he says, even as his mind is screaming at him to stop.

The quiet, soft “oh” she utters makes him feel like his lungs are being constricted.

Take it back!

Instead, he digs himself deeper. “A sister...” this lie he finds he cannot abide, and amends it: “...in the order.”

He carefully keeps his gaze trained on the path in front of him. This is not how he has pictured this particular conversation...it should be a slow, growing thing between them, an unspoken understanding that opens a door to a new world. This is like being kicked off a cliff into a new world.

“Did...,” she pauses. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her gather her dignity about her like a cloak, and when she speaks again there is trace of neither hurt nor entreaty in her voice. “We are friends.”

“Do you not feel that, between us? The games of shadows and faces that we play, they forge the closest bonds of friendship two people can ever have.”

Friendship? Now a man profanes two types of relationships.

“Is that what that is?” she asks.

“For me,” he says, “a friend is one you share your darkest thoughts with, someone you stand back-to-back with against an army. Is that not what we do?”

“We do,” she agrees. “But...I wanted more.” Her mouth twists. “You warned me, in the alehouse.”

A man did? He thinks back to their interactions, and realizes that everything could be interpreted as a man gently steering his friend away from an inappropriate attachment, and he almost groans.

Those warnings, if warnings they were, were meant for a man, beautiful girl. If she discovers the truth, she will never forgive him. His lovely girl is implacable that way.
“I was aware,” he says, trying not to grit his teeth. “But this confusion always comes with youth.”

_Hypocrite._

“So I can tell you that I wanted you, for months, I wanted the _idea_ of you, and it does not ruin our friendship?”

He stops breathing for a moment; he knows it is cruelty not to say _something_ in response to the courage of her confession, but he selfishly runs her words through his mind again. _I wanted you, for months._

When the seething, molten flow of desire her words evoke has been papered over by a thin veneer of control, he shakes his head. “A friendship like ours cannot be ruined, especially not by the truth.”

Her shoulders relax; the serenity in her deepens to something more than just a desperate mask. _A girl is...relieved?_ He realizes that while everything he speaks is a lie, it may not be _wrong_. Perhaps a girl kicked both of them off a cliff before _she_ was ready as well.

He does not know if the God is listening to him, but he thinks to try this prayer business of the girl’s, cannot formulate a proper beseeching, and temporises. _A man serves. Let a man serve_ her _interests, not his own desire._

She has wanted him for months, she says; her needs are a mirror to his. And _he_ has built entire universes in his mind populated by false variants of himself and her. This requires a period of calibration and correction. The lovely girl must know him for who he truly is, not the man from her childhood she has put on an undeserved pedestal.

She shrugs again. “I had no idea what I was doing,” she says, rueful. “But I said it and you said no and so it is done.”

He turns to her and chuckles. “Would it surprise you to know that I have no idea what I am doing either?”

She laughs, and there is disbelief in that laughter. “Yes, yes it would.”

“Then you should prepare yourself to be surprised.”

The silence between them settles into something simpler, despite the lie he holds to himself, despite the painful longing in him as he walks beside her as a _friend._

It is a sweet agony, and he allows himself to feel it; by the time he has reached the Citadel it has become something like the remembered agony of a limb lost in a battle--a ghost pain, a phantom, something that _can_ be lived with.

Companionably, they settle her packs into his rather sparse wardrobe; there is a small argument as he offers her the bed and she insists on taking the bedroll in the parlor. A compromise is reached: he will set up the bedroll and she will sleep in it, and he can keep his bed but all the pillows are hers.

His attention smoothly divides itself in three and focuses on separate tasks as he sets up the bedding. The first part is reserved for a conversation with her.

“...the curve gives me a longer swinging arc for the same length of blade,” she is saying, defending the saber she carries now.
“Still no use against full armor,” he counters. “And it shortens your already short reach.”

“I am not going to attack a fully armed knight head on,” she says, quite reasonably.

“I think,” he teases, “You really just prefer slicing things off instead of chopping at them.”

She snorts again.

The second part of his attention circles the conversation they have put off till the morrow. He will have to give her the truth of all that has happened to her family in the interim, what he knows, what he guesses. He hopes her response, once she is calm again—for agitation is inevitable—is something on the order of “We must work through this together, and see where the pieces fit.”

They switch rooms, but he cannot help hear her small movements out in the parlor—her drawing back the light blanket, pummeling her (his) pillow into submission, sliding in between the sheets.

The third part of his attention has been focused on another universe, one where he has responded to her proposition with the enthusiastic affirmation it deserves, and he thinks: I could have been undressing her right now.

He stops when his imagination takes him too far, to the untying of the laces at her throat, to the tracing of a collarbone with his tongue.

In this, at least, the Lorathi training is good for something—his imagination comes to heel like a well-trained dog, and turns instead upon the paths that can be traced to confirm his suspicions of a Targaryen other than Daenerys taking on a mantle of power.

And yet, fully capable of holding two opposing viewpoints in his head simultaneously, Jaqen H’ghar curses his Lorathi training, that it stopped his imagination where it did.

He realizes the God has taken pity on him; the next morning his pangs of longing have abated. It feels as if a fever has broken and he lies cold and sweat-soaked, but in control of his own faculties again. Oh, the want is still there, but it can be put aside.

He allows himself a sigh. Relief or regret, he has still not decided.

She sleeps still, and he chooses not to disturb her as he leaves to retrieve the records he was promised. Knowing the librarian, a man will have to cool his heels for a watch before the bureaucrat finally bothers to see to the request a man submitted, on all the correct forms, in triplicate, almost a week ago.

A man has worn “Pate” for so long that he is startled to come face-to-face with the features of Jaqen H’ghar when he returns to his rooms. The man is amused and saddened at the same time: she will have seen Valyria. His lovely girl holds too many horrors of her own, she should not have to hold his, too.

The girl has frozen mid-throw, a guilty expression on her face. His features slide off hers, and Arya Stark is revealed underneath. The man looks beyond her to discover that the girl has made a target of his supper table by tipping it on its side. He considers the grouping of marks, the shape and
depth of the gashes.

“Accuracy and precision,” he says, “and yet you flick your wrist--all of them go in too steep.”

“I stuck ninety-four out of a hundred,” she says indignantly.

“One day, it will be the ninety-fifth that counts.”

She takes the criticism with pursed lips, then gives him a tight nod.

Bereft of his table, the man spreads the papers in his hand on the bed, and sits Pate’s pale and soft body down at the foot of it.

There is silence for a long time, punctuated by the steady thud-thud-thud of knives being driven through soft wood, then longer pauses as she goes to the table to retrieve her blades.

Some time later, she misses a throw. He looks up. “One hundred and thirty,” he says. “Well done.”

She turns around and he is not prepared for the incandescence on her face. A moment later it is gone, wiped away by the typical blankness of a Faceless one.

Jaqen H’ghar finds himself wanting to say anything, do anything, to have that look directed at him again.

_A girl’s bladework is impeccable. A man is convinced a girl can give the gift to the entire council of Qarth with only a ribbon and a dinner fork. A man thinks a girl’s eyes hold in them all the moods of the sea._

He struggles, and finds his voice again. “You have been cooped up in these rooms all morning. Is there anything you would like to see in Oldtown?”

She flings herself diagonally across his bed, scattering his papers. “I don’t know. Is there anything I can do? Can I be useful, somehow?”

Is she avoiding the conversation that must come? She was eager for news yesterday, and yet she has not asked. A man cannot allow this to continue, and yet a man cannot force the issue...he settles on a segue.

“I will arrange for a library pass for you,” he says. “Pick a suitably old face, if you have it.” He knows she has brought death-masks, he can smell the magic on them from where he sits.

“I have an appropriate face.” She flips on her stomach, goes up on her elbows. “What do you need searched?” She utters the last word as if it is something sour.

_A girl does not like her books._ He looks at her for a moment.

“I need a timeline of Rhaegar Targaryen’s interactions with Lyanna Stark.”

She is confused.

“Specifically, where each of them was in relation to each other seven to nine months before the Battle of the Trident.”

Her eyes are clear, thoughtful, her lips form a silent count. “Between eight and nine months, then,” she says after a long pause. “Babies that are born too early....my father hired a midwife on his way north; the midwife says he was a very healthy one from the start. Pissed my mother off no end
apparently, since Robb was prone to catching chills.”

He puts down the missive he is transcribing and leans back against the footboard. “A girl is quick to believe her father lied.”

She snorts; it is a pathetic little sound. “Eddard Stark always chose his family over his reputation. Over his life. He held to the truth till they threatened Sansa, and then he lied and lost his head. Between besmirching his honor and saving his sister’s son from Robert Baratheon, it would have been no choice at all. Tywin Lannister would have…” she trails off.

“Baby Aegon,” she says, and now she’s excited, flipping over again then positioning herself in a sitting position, legs crossed. “Jaqen, maybe my aunt wasn’t raped by Rhaegar after all! What if—and Robb and Theon and Jon heard enough times why my father hated Tywin Lannister, and Gregor Clegane and the rest—what if my father saved baby Aegon?”

The man exhales. “I considered it,” he says. “Eddard Stark was that kind of man.” He pauses to note her glow of quiet pride. “But Jon Snow is a Stark. Every eyewitness account that I’ve seen describes him as I would describe you, if you were a man.” One end of his mouth quirks up, and his eyes are focused somewhere in the distance. “Midnight hair. A face that an onlooker would describe as almost too beautiful if the onlooker didn’t mind eating a fist. Bottomless, dark eyes—”

“Pate,” she interrupts, a strange, savage look on her face. “You will not succeed in making me jealous of my brother.”

He comes back to himself with a sudden awareness of what he was just about to say. Lips like the perfect arch of a bow… He has been tracing her features as he sees them in the secret heart of him; somewhere along the way, all descriptions of the northern king have fled his mind.

“You have nothing to be jealous of,” he says mildly. “You are a very pretty child in your own right.” A hint of patronization from him, a flare of annoyance in her eyes, quickly suppressed. A man is getting very good at pretending to play this “good-friend-and-mentor” role. “And, if I am right, he is not your brother.”

She shrugs. “My cousin, then. You and I both know blood means nothing when it comes to brotherhood. Theon is no blood-relation to me, and yet he is my brother.”

The man looks down, “Um. Theon Greyjoy is not...an ideal example,” he mutters into the papers strewn everywhere.

“What do you mean?”

He sighs, looks into those implacable eyes, and tells her.

The return to the Iron Islands. The capture of Winterfell.

Ramsay Bolton.

“No more half-truths,” she says. Her voice is as cold, as remote as his has become in the telling of the story. “No more threads of information I must unravel.” She is a wall of ice, his Stark princess.

“Ask,” he says. “A man will tell a girl everything he knows.”

Their postures mirror each other, cross-legged, backs stiff, him against the footboard, her against the head. He knows what she will ask for—not the minutiae, not the journeys. She wants the thing that hurts the most.
“I know Bran is alive. Where is he?”

“Missing. Perhaps north of the Wall.”

“Rickon.”

“Killed.” *Valar morghulis.*

He sees her lips move: *Valar morghulis.*

“How?” she asks.

“Ramsay Bolton.”

“Sansa?”

“Raped.”

She finally bends, and closes her eyes. “Joffrey?” Her voice is still without inflection, without any modulation whatsoever.

“Ramsay Bolton.”

She opens her eyes and he knows, he *knows* that look.

“What will you trade for that name?” he asks, masochistically, perversely, wanting to know what her vengeance still means to her. He prays it means less than her love for the order.

“The God is breathing in my ear, Jaqen.” Her voice holds a warning: *do not test me.*

He backs down immediately--the God is not speaking to him, even in His usual riddles of emotion, which means He is on *her* side.

“Sansa Stark fed Ramsay Bolton to his own hunting dogs.”

There is quiet, for a time after. But she is so...so very still, she could move at any moment and he must stay deceptively lazy, so as not to startle her in one direction or the other.

“You asked me if I wanted to go somewhere in Oldtown,” she said. “I want to go to a brothel. One that serves women.”

“A man does not follow a girl’s thoughts.”

Her mouth twists. “My sister was a gentle, pretty soul, Jaqen. Do you want to see what *I* can become if I meet a Ramsay Bolton?”

Fear, *terror,* jealousy, anger--these, at least, he knows how to negate in the moment. Protectiveness, concern--these things he allows himself to feel. Longing--this thing he has no idea what to do with, so he ignores it entirely.

“So you want to go to a brothel?” This desire of hers is not born of a need for experience, a wanting to give pleasure and receive pleasure in return. This request of hers is a dark thing, and he must understand it.

“The Waif has told me what to do.”
―And what is that?―

―Lose my virginity. Then, I may be raped, violence may be done to me, but this thing, this false thing that has been made precious to me by my upbringing, it is gone already and that is one less thing I have to deal with. And all the stupid things Sansa put in my head, I didn’t understand them them but I do now, and all these things—to love, to cherish, to give yourself to someone important—these things I want will be shredded to pieces the moment I lie with a whore. You know what they say,” she smirks, and it is a cruel thing, this smirk, turned inwards, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”


―No.―

―I have the money—I earned it, I carried a message from the House to the Sealord, pretending to be an errand boy and he gave me a gold Targaryen for it.―

―No. A girl does not have to do this thing to be safe.―

But there is such a rage in her, and it must be quenched before she hurts herself. Or him. Or the God, for who knows what Him of the Many Faces is thinking right now.

―Why does it matter so much?‖ she demands. “It means nothing so why is it so damn meaningful to you?‖

The man unfolds from his seated position, and his heart twists in him to see her flinch away from him. He knows it is not because of him, it is not him and yet it hurts.

These things I want will be shredded to pieces the moment I lie with a whore.

―A man will not let a girl hurt herself to no purpose.‖

She unfolds as well, a there is something—a trick of the light, the shadows gathering behind her as dusk lengthens but the man fears for her, fears for her so keenly for a moment that he wants to slit her throat to keep her safe.

―Oh, Jaqen,” she says, her mouth twisting, “You, of all people, should know I never do anything for just one purpose. This thing,” and she gestures sharply to her womanhood as if she is cutting it open, cutting it out of her, and it is all he can do not to seize her hand in his and erase the movement, “it enslaves us.”

He doesn’t know what to do.

He knows self-loathing, he knows guilt, and guilt by association, but this thing that she feels, this strange, twisted-up thing...who is this woman, and what has she done with his rational, vengeful, lovely girl?

Gambling holds no attraction for him; he feels like a farmer betting his entire farm on the chance that the farmer’s son will return home after the war.

―How disappointing,” he says, imbuing his words with just enough trace of scorn for her to look at him as he wipes away Pate’s face and becomes, for the first time that he has seen her since she was a child, Jaqen H’ghar.

He almost stops, takes her in his arms, when he sees the tears forming at the corners of his eyes.
Almost. “When they cut off her father’s head in front of her, the Arya Stark I know made a list of the people she thought responsible. Really, she should have seen Eddard Stark for what he was—a stupid man, who caused his own beheading. He should have drowned himself in the river before he got to King’s Landing, it would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.”

She backs up a step.

He follows, grabs her wrists, twists her arms away from herself.

She struggles.


“Just so.”

He releases her. He has left bruises on her wrists, he knows, and he takes one of her hands in both of his, gently, so gently this time, and runs his fingers over the marks that will show in the morning.

“Who was responsible for the rape of Sansa Stark?”

“Ramsay Bolton.”

“Who is to blame if a woman is violated?”

She looks down. “The violator.”

“So why does my rational, focused assassin Arya want to hurt herself preemptively as punishment for a rape that may never happen? By implication, why does Arya Stark want to hurt all women, everywhere, for what others do to them?”

“Because women are weak.”

“Physical strength is not a good measure of a person. But even if it is...being weak is a good reason for someone to hurt them, yes?”

She blinks at him.

He takes her other hand in his. “Not being able to lift a sword means someone deserves being cut down by one? Tell me, Arya Stark, who do you think is right? The man standing before you—one Jaqen H’ghar—or the Hound?”

It’s like he has punched her in the gut. All the breath leaves her, and she droops. Her forehead falls forward to rest on his shoulder. The dangerous rage is gone, he thinks. But this thing, it is not done yet.

He feels like he has fought a battle, and the outcome is not yet known, and all around him the jagged corpses of preconceptions litter the ground; any one of them could simply be pretending to be dead, ready to leap up and stab him. Stab her.

“Jaqen, I am weak. I told you some secrets yesterday, but you truly have no idea of the types of things that go through my mind sometimes, the things I want the—”

He forces himself to chuckle, to cut her off, to suppress his pointed curiosity about the types of
things she wants.

All tangled up, my sweet, lovely girl. She has the memories of her faceless brothers, but not the experience to interpret them in their right context. It is one of the reasons they have never before made one so young Faceless--to absorb so many identities, one needs to first know who one is, even if that is “no one”. For a child with a half-formed identity….

But that is a fallacy; age is no defense. He knows brothers in the prime of their adulthood that have drunk cup after cup after cup of water from the pool, weeping when it does not kill them, once they experience all of Valyria through Jaqen H‘ghar, through Arya’s Kindly Man, through the others.

This is nothing, the man thinks to himself. It could be much worse.

And Arya Stark is an extraordinary creature. She may bend, like her Needle, but she will not break.

“A man was six-and-ten once, he understands wanting. But rape is an act of violence; sex, a wanting to take, a wanting to be taken , that has nothing to do with rape.”

I never do anything for just one reason , she had said.

In a moment of sudden clarity--not a vision, but an extrapolation --the man sees where last night could have led. Love twisted into self-hate, desire used as a tool to inflict pain on everyone. He quietly, humbly, thanks the God for a man’s panic, because if they had become lovers yesterday it would eventually have destroyed the both of them.

She says nothing.

He sighs, lets go of her wrist. “Does a girl cut out her stomach because she feels hungry? Does a girl slice her throat because she thirsts?”

He knows why the God moved to claim her before she had achieved control--she was well on her way to becoming a soulless killer, a psychopath that reveled in murder before He took her in hand. But the Braavosi training afterwards was a grave mistake--she has learned how to conceal, not process; she chooses action over understanding.

“No riddles,” she says, and he can see the struggle in her. “No half-truths. No threads. Give me your truth, Jaqen, because the Waif gave me hers and I can feel it, in here .” She stabs her mid-section, then, as if it hurts, she draws her arms around herself.

“Desire is a thing of the body, like eating and drinking. Trying to cut it out of you will result in failure, and more time spent battling yourself than battling your enemies. Listen to your body, do what is needful so it does not distract you too much, then move on and focus on your work. Clear enough?”

Her eyes are glittering. Angry, again ? What did I say now?

“How many times have you been with women?” she asks.

“Sixteen.”

She goggles at him, the anger evaporates. “That’s what, one sexual encounter every thirty years, give or take? That’s how often it should be done to not make it distract me too much?”

His lips twitch. “It is not an even distribution, it comes in clusters. And you asked about women .”
Her eyes are round; her cheeks flush, and it is not anger this time.

“So what are we talking about, in total...a hundred? A thousand?”

He shrugs. “Something like once every twenty-four years or so. Twenty, sweet girl, twenty.”

And there is that uncanny, unspoken synchronizing of their bodies again, because they move to the bed, sit side by side, legs dangling.

“And how many of those were because you wanted to and not for the duty?”

He doesn’t have to think on it, but he pretends he does. “None,” he says.

“The great Jaqen H’ghar,” she says, half-bitter, half-longing. “How do I become like you?”

The man knows he’s going to lose her if he says “become no one”. And it’s not true, not really. He’s been manipulating quite a bit this conversation, and now that they are on safer ground, he feels that he should try honesty.

“I am not immune,” he breathes. “She is not included in the count. I never made love to her, never even kissed her—in dreams, many times, but never in reality. She brought me to my knees.” I am on my knees now, lovely girl, but let’s not frighten you off. He wonders if she will notice the shift in his speech, Lorathi and yet with the wrong pronouns.

She does; her sudden flare of jealousy he can feel even from where he sits. She’s going to maim him if she ever finds out. He waits for her counter strike.

“The God was my first kiss, you know,” she says.

Jaqen H’ghar holds himself very, very still.

“Not the first time he kissed me,” she corrects herself, “I don’t count that one, it was like a kiss from my brother.” Her mouth wrinkles in annoyance, then transitions to a half-smile. “The kisses that came later…”

The God has been kissing the lovely girl. And a God has worn a man’s face while doing it.

Doubt worms its way into his heart. Is it any surprise that she was attracted to Jaqen H’ghar? Maybe this thing is not meant to be after all. And yet, the God wears his face in her dreams. Some of a man’s dreams, it seems, are also born of the God’s habit of playing kissy-face with Arya Stark. It could almost be taken as a priming--of both a man and a girl--and the implications are...complex.

To be contemplated later, when his brave, lovely girl is not breaking down.

“Well,” he says, drawing humor around both of them like armor that will protect them from the world, from each other, from themselves. “I would still advise against the brothel. Having sex once or twice is not a distraction for a man, but from what I understand, women become voracious sex demons the moment they willingly take a cock inside of them.”

She turns to him, incredulous, and seeing the look on his face, bursts out laughing. There is more than a tinge of hysteria in the laugher, and she laughs and laughs and buries her face in his chest and then she is crying.

He lets her cry it out; one more shock is left. If this does not break her, nothing will.
“A man only knows so much, my lovely girl,” he says. “A girl should ask her mother these things.”

“A girl’s mother is dead,” she mumbles into his chest, her voice muffled and congested from the weeping.

“And why is that a problem?”

She pushes him away, almost violently. “Jaqen?”

“A girl knows Beric Dondarrion.”

She nods, eyes fearful.

“He gave up his resurrection for another. For a lady of a great house, killed by treachery, her corpse pulled from a river.”

“Where?”

“The Riverlands.”

She is on her feet and halfway to the door before he grabs her, wraps his arms around her waist from behind, leans down to her ear as she struggles.

“We will go together. Soon. But not now.”

She struggles harder, and she is stronger than he thinks, because she struggles out of his grasp and the choice is to hurt her or let her go, and so of course he lets her go.

“Walder Frey,” he calls, praying for the thing he prayed against earlier, that her need for vengeance would be stronger than love. “There is a gift we have to give, you and I. A girl has her duties.”

Their last parting hovers between them.

Stay, Jaqen, she had said.

She stays.

“You need to give me something to do,” she says through clenched teeth, still facing the door.

He thinks quickly. There are only so many challenges in this place that will keep his lovely, ravenous girl occupied long enough for him to finish his search. A distraction with teeth...

“Would a girl like to learn about one of the greatest conspiracies of our age?”

Her shoulder-blades have relaxed. “Is a library involved?”

He grins, and he knows she can hear the amusement in his voice. “A gambling den, actually, knee-deep in spies, thieves and dangerous murderers.”

——

ANOTHER ONE

The one under her mask of Arya Stark has hunted her quarry for a very long time, through Essos,
through Yi Ti, and finally, she has cornered him in Asshai. The river is lit with green phosphorescence, and shadow looms over it.

The boat pulls into the dock, and she sees a flutter of white--almost translucent--flutter in the sky and fall into the ash-choked river.

*Winter has come*. And now Asshai knows it.

She is led off the boat in chains, along with two others, one a pale girl from somewhere in Westeros, another a bronze warrior woman from some principality in the Jade Sea. The girl’s lips curl to see the silver palanquins, held aloft by more manacled slaves, undulating their way to the many auction stages.

In Asshai, sorcerers hear everything. Sorcerers know everything. She is not even a moment on the auction block before a red-sleeved hand gestures out of a curtained palanquin: the bid stands a thousand gold sovereigns. It is too high a price for the other bidders this early in the day; virgins from Westeros are common enough.

Her leg irons have been removed to allow her to walk beside the palanquin. There are two sitting inside, and she catches snippets of conversation.

“King’s blood.”

“How do we tell?”

“Girl!” a face--that face--leans out of the palanquin. “Who are you?”

The sorceress that has actually bid on the girl looks on, interested.

She summons up all the sullen defiance of Arya Stark’s childhood, and says nothing. There is a trace of satisfaction in the sorcerer-woman’s face. Suddenly, she throws a pinch of some glittering green dust in the girl’s face, and she must choke and splutter.

“Who are you?” asks the woman, and her voice is both coolly sibilant, like a caress of a snake.

The one who is no one thanks her master; every beating that eventually made this one give up the name she was born with, in this moment each one of those hurts have become justified. The sorcerer-woman’s spell drags a name out of her, and because she is no one there is only one name the spell can snag.

“I am Arya Stark.”

“And how can you prove you are Arya Stark?”

“I had a direwolf once. Her name was Nymeria. Sometimes I can see through her eyes; sometimes I dream of her.”

The sorceress leans back amidst her cushions. “A warg. Dragons and wargs. Magic is returning to those lands. My, my. And we have King’s Blood, through her brother and her lineage. Warg’s blood. Virgin’s blood. My dear,” she addresses the betrayer, “can I convince you to wait a little longer? Using this one for your task is like swatting a fly with a siege engine.”

“You made a bargain,” says the betrayer. “And I am not convinced this is a Stark.”

“My spell is not a lie,” the woman says, coldly. “And there are no animals in the city that we can
test her warg abilities, are there? She has the look. She has the speech. She knows what no random child from Westeros can know--that a warg must be awakened by the howl of a direwolf.”

“There is some taint of magic on her,” says the betrayer. “I don’t like it.”

“So you will wait a little longer, then.” The sorceress smiles.

The betrayer’s eyes narrow at his companions. “No,” he says roughly. “Let it be done now.”

The sorceress sighs. “Very well. But we must negotiate the price--the gold price--again.”

“I don’t know why you had to bid so high so fast, but I’ll pay it.”

The sorceress shakes her head. “Not just the cost of buying her. I want the opportunity cost of her blood--the cost of every spell I could have cast with it, and will not, because I must cast yours.”

The betrayer grimaces. “What do you want?”

“The sorcerer Mak’kiesh. Kill him for me.”

The betrayer smiles, relieved at not having to part with more gold. “Done.”

There are two stone slabs, side by side, ringed by green-tinged candles. The betrayer is strapped down to one, the girl to the other.

The sorceress stands above them.

“This will hurt,” she says to him. “But I will cut into your chest, draw away your ribs one by one, and then...it will be done.

They are going to cut off a girl’s breasts, drain her of her blood, and use it to reshape and resculpt the betrayer’s body into something entirely different--a different sex, a different race, a different everything. They think this will actually fool the God, fool the Faceless brotherhood.

The girl laughs, and they take it for hysteria.

After the betrayer’s changing, they will scoop out a girl’s brains and lungs and burn them on a brazier, along with her womb and her eyes. All organs must remain intact until they are burned. The girl thinks that if a sorcerer somehow loses their power, they can still become a very successful butcher.

The brains and eyes and womb they will burn to erase every memory of the betrayer’s existence from the world.

Slowly, accompanied by his screams, the betrayer is gutted from neck to across the cock. It’s nowhere near enough to kill him; his breathing is shallow, and the girl can almost feel him invoking the pain-dulling disciplines of the faceless.

The sorceress cuts a girl’s arm, collects blood into a shallow bowl, then tips it into the betrayer’s ribcage.

The sorceress frowns. “It’s not work--”
The girl has risen, and threaded the long ceremonial fire-lighter through the base of the sorcerer’s skull and out the bridge of her nose. The sorcerer is dead before she hits the slab and her head rebounds off the stone.

The betrayer is struggling. “Untie me, girl, I will let you live,” he gasps. The blood is pooling in his chest cavity.

She shakes her head, slowly.

“You are not Arya Stark,” he struggles for breath. “Who...who are you?”

The girl reaches across and wipes away Arya Stark’s face, for just a moment.

“I am no one.”

Arya Stark’s face returns to the fore, and she drives the sorcerer’s blade through the betrayer’s heart.

She closes his eyes, leaves two coins of the House of Black and White over his lids.

Something--perhaps an almost forgotten whisper of a memory, of a God’s fingers tapping against her pulse (not felt for decades by the one who wears Arya Stark’s face)--reminds her of what had once bound her to the dead man on the table.

“Valar morghulis,” she whispers over him. It is a benediction, this time. “Valar morghulis, brother.”

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**ARYA**

She has becoming very good at compartmentalizing. All the chaos inside of her is tied up into a knot and hidden under the needs of the moment. There is some glimmer of uneasy understanding that she would not have listened, she would not have obeyed, had it been any other to ask it of her, to wait, to allow herself to be distracted and not go and see her mother.

*My mother is alive.*

But Jaqen H’ghar has asked her to wait, and she cannot tell where in her mind where the God ends and Jaqen H’ghar begins.

After a quick change of faces--she plays a young bravo, half-Dornish, half-Braavosi--Jaqen leads her to an age-grimed building at the end of a twisted alleyway.

A man answers the door, and there is a quick exchange of coded phrases, and then they are led inside.

The interior of the building confounds all her assumptions--it is a very large, open space, with red plush carpet and gilded columns, and the rafters of the faraway roof obscured by soot-darkened bunting. Glass lanterns decorate each pillar and hang from chains overhead; the room is better-lit than any she has seen since King’s Landing.

Men--old men, for the most part--sit in groups around the various tables around the floor. They are playing games--card games, dice games, something played with counters and small statuettes of
naked women.

Upper-floor balconies jut out over the floor on each side, and some few lounge there, observing the games below. With another exchange of coded phrases, Jaqen leads her to just such a balcony, on a second floor.

“Not all watchers are watching from balconies,” she says, observing that there are a lot more players interested in the games other than their own, despite the rather hefty sums they have themselves wagered.

Jaqen gives a half-smile. “The one on the edge there, who folded despite holding all four queens? He’s watching Maester Simon Greywater for Maester Augustus Greywater.”

“And who watches Maester Augustus?” she asks.

“The whore Maester Simon paid to seduce Augustus,” says Jaqen.

By the time he’s done identifying each of the watchers for her, Arya finds that her estimation of Maester’s ethics has dropped by several orders of magnitude, and her estimation of their cunning has risen.

And the Jaqen gets to the players themselves.

“ That one,” he murmurs, indicating an old man wearing a too-tight doublet, “embezzles coins from the funds allocated to his students’ stipends, and spends them here.”

To her surprise, there are actually Maesters--two of them--that are here for Maester-work. Mathematicians both, they are compiling statistics on weighted dice. Nobody welcomes those two to their table, but the gambling house seems keen to see that their path is unimpeded.

“Well, you’ve shown me the spies,” she says finally, “and the thieves. But which ones are the dangerous murderers?”

He gives her a look.

Realization dawns, and she giggles. “Right.”

There is a newcomer to the floor. A man of middling height and drawn brows, he wears his simple grey robe with a sense of authority as yet unseen by Arya amongst the gamblers below.

The man looks up, scanning the balconies, and Pate raises a hand in greeting. A few minutes later, the man has made his way up to their little alcove, and Pate positions himself so that the newcomer is not seen from the floor, or indeed, any other balcony.

“You said you have news?” asks the man. A Maester, certainly.

Pate tilts his head to the side, speaks in broken Low Valyrian, from which Arya takes her (his) cues to who she should be.

“This is Dondo Valeesi,” Pate says, “he has brought us information for which we will pay well. Dondo, meet one of the respected men I told you about.”

“Dondo” gives a little bow, says “a pleasure to meet you” in flawless, Braavos-accented Low Valyrian.

The man nods, then replies in a Low Valyrian far better than Pate’s pathetic attempt. “Perhaps the
young bravo would like to try our gaming tables?"

“No,” says Pate, then switches to Westerosi. “The boy does not speak our tongue at all, he’ll be fleeced if I send him down there. Do you really want our funds to end up lining Maester Simon’s students?”

The dour-faced man grunts. “So what is this valuable news.”

Arya swaggers over to the railing, for a bravo of her age would fast be bored with two men babbling in a tongue she cannot understand. She pretends to be drawn to a dice game between six men--one that is also common on the docks and wharves of Braavos.

“The Dragon Queen marches,” says Pate.

“If that was the news you had to impart, I would have preferred to stay in bed; if it was my company you wanted, I would suggest you seek others of your kind, maybe in the pigsty below.”

She hears the clink of coins, and out of the corner of her eye she catches a glitter of silver arcing through the air.

Pate has tossed the Maester a coin.

“The Iron Bank has shown its hand,” says Pate quietly.

Arya marvels. In this moment, if she hadn’t known any better--even knowing better--she still doubts for a moment that Pate is Jaqen, that is not an ally of this dour-faced Maester.

She hears a sigh, a creak as the man settles his bulk into a chair.

“All for nothing,” he says. “Generations of weakening dragons, manipulating bloody Targaryens, all for nothing.”

Weakening dragons! Jaqen had said “the greatest conspiracy of our age”. The Maesters were behind the decline of dragons in Westeros? She had always been told it was because the Targaryens had chained and confined their beasts. Manipulating Targaryens...into chaining their dragons?

But the man continues. “All because Robert bankrupted the Crown with tourneys, and we could not pay the Faceless Men’s price, so we had to hire a sorrowful man to kill her and he failed.”

Arya feels a momentary spark of Guild pride. Well, you get what you pay for.

“All sorrowful men,” says Pate and his tone is dismissive.

Hah, so Pate has not entirely eaten my Jaqen. She turns around, as if bored of the floor below as well, and takes up a lackadaisical pose, leaning on the rail with an elbow. She wants to look for clues of this thing, that it is Jaqen playing Pate and not Jaqen being Pate, and to her disappointment, she finds none, not even that sardonic half-twitch that Jaqen’s mouth makes sometimes.

“The blood of the dragon will come to Westeros, and dragons with it,” says the old Maester heavily. He shakes his head. “And there are too many dragon tales, too many magic tales circulating in the Citadel. Even that friend of yours--Tarly. Dragonglass. Pah! ”

Pate had a friend. Does Jaqen? Irrational, but she realizes jealousy is, sometimes.
“All boys are enamoured of dragons,” says Pate. “He has grown out of it.”

**Jaqen’s friend.** This she knows, in her bones. Curiosity replaces jealousy. *Who is this Tarly person?*

The Maester’s mouth curls unpleasantly. “You should have killed him like I told you to.”

*You cannot meet the price for that, old man,* she thinks. *The House would have beggared you and my God would have emptied you, for asking for the death of a person a Faceless Man calls ‘friend’.*

“I judged it was not necessary,” Pate says.

“*You judged?***

“I judged.” Pate holds his ground.

The Maester raises an eyebrow. “My my, how the pig-boy has grown.”

Arya wants to punch the old man. Instead, she turns back to the floor.

“Cersei Lannister is mad,” says Pate softly. “She cannot stand against the Mother of Dragons. So who will?”

“The King in the North, is that what you suggest? That we throw our support behind him?”

“I suggest nothing. Only that it is a possibility, and if it is, he needs a Maester by his side. One of ours.”

“And Samwell Tarly is one of ours.” The Maester’s tone is acidic.

“I am sure of it,” says Pate and though she cannot see him, she imagines he smirks. “He has a child, as you know--I have arranged for...documents, of suitable parentage, to be drawn up. The child was conceived before Tarly took the black. A secret marriage ceremony--the girl is common-born, it angered Lord Tarly, et cetera. Little Samwell will inherit Horn Hill if my affidavit attesting to the fraud--twice-witnessed and sealed--never comes to light. Never fear, Archmaester, Samwell Tarly is ours.”

*What is Jaqen playing at? What kind of man have they sent to Jon?*

The *arch* maester huffs. “You should have killed him and taken his place.”

Arya cannot help but agree. Jon would be *safe* if Jaqen was around.

“I have no love of the Starks,” says Pate, and his voice is hard and cold, “and these Northern women are as frigid as their landscape.”

Despite all her training, for a moment she has a mad urge to turn around and slap the composure off Pate’s face. *He’s good. He’s so good. But dear God, I’m going to make him pay for that little jape.*

She pretends to observe the floor, imbuing some excitement into her shoulder muscles as a particularly large windfall comes to a young, floppy-haired gambler. Not a Maester. *The boy has made some enemies tonight.*

“You put your own needs before the Citadel’s.” The coldness in the Maester’s voice matches
“If I do,” says Pate, “I am not the only one. And I have more than one reason for tarrying in Oldtown for a while yet. The blood of the dragon crops up in the strangest places. Tell me, who is Jon Snow’s mother?”

He’s doing this! A Faceless man must use the truth as a lie, believe a lie as a truth, and calculate the most effective way to gain the information he needs. Jaqen is doing this now because it is the fastest way for him to finish the work he is doing here. He’s doing it for me, so he can get his answer and I can see my mother in the shortest time possible.

A question that has not truly bothered her until now re-surfaces. Why does he want to confirm that Jon is a Targaryen? What contract is he fulfilling? Who is his target? Jon’s long-lost mother?

The thought makes her sad.

“No, no,” says the Maester, “that can’t be.”

“Ned Stark fucked some whore on the march south, it is said,” says the Maester. “Why?”

“The rumors I heard say Ned Stark saved Elia Martell’s youngest son.”

“Impossible. We follow these things, you know--Jon Snow is a Stark by birth, and we know this as surely as we knew of Cersei Lannister’s incestuous habits the day Joffrey was born.”

Father was right.

“And what of the rumor,” Pate’s tone has grown softer, somehow commanding more attention than before, “that Ned Stark besmirched his honor to save his sister’s son?”

“We have heard no such rumor!”

“But it is possible?”

She strains without appearing to do so, deliberately inhaling and exhaling to stop herself from holding her breath.

“Hah. No. A Stark would never breed with a Targaryen.”

You wait and watch.

“How have you eliminated it? Rape produces children too.”

Sansa, my poor, beautiful, annoying sister, I pray you do not carry a child. No. Jaqen would have told me.

“I charted the boy’s horoscope,” explodes the Maester. “The moment he came to my attention. I assure you, the stars say the boy was conceived in love--lust, if you will--and his star would be ascendant in the North.”

A horoscope? Who is this man, Archmaester of Astrology? Beloved, these scholars are useless.  

“Well,” says the Maester, “if that’s all you have, I’m leaving.” He remembers his courtesy at the last minute and says, “Good to have met you, Dondo.”

Even though the words are in Westerosi, she whirls around at the sound of her own ‘name’.

“Next time you are in Oldtown, bring your news directly to me, so we can avoid all this cloak-and-
dagger nonsense.”

She smiles blankly.

“Kill this boy when you are done buggering him,” the Maester commands, again in Westerosi.

Arya’s blank smile does not shift. He is looking for a reaction to show she understands the language after all. Amateur, she thinks. She was passing tests like this for the Kindly Man before she’d turned twelve.

The old man turns to Pate. “And come up with a way of countering this move of the Iron Bank’s.”

Pate is ready. “A rumor, perhaps, that the coins are hollow and filled with just enough lead to make them true-weight; fear does strange things to merchants—they will cut them open to confirm it, and lo, the Dragon Queen loses her face.”

Arya is almost indignant. Pate’s plan will work. The coins were such a good idea! To be countered by a mere rumor...

The old man’s eyes glitter. “You are useful to us...but try not to be too useful, eh?”

And then he is gone, down the stairs to the floor. Arya follows his path all the way outside.

Pate moved too fast; now this Archmaester knows he is a threat. Like ‘Jaqen H’ghar’ had died for her, Pate would have to die too.

“Why does he think you’re buggering me?” she asks.

“The Maester likes to show that no secret is safe around him. So from time to time I give him something he can dig up—nothing too big, but something that feeds his sense of superiority. And he was curious as to what reason I could have for keeping you here during our meeting. For protecting you.”

I get that, her look says. “But how did he arrive at ‘buggering’?”

“Two glances,” says Pate. “Each time you turned away. Casual. But...targeted.”

She refuses to blush.

“His name is Archmaester Vaelyn—Vinegar Vaelyn, to his students and enemies, of which he has many.”

She raises an eyebrow at Pate. Are you giving me a name?

He nods in confirmation.

She starts for the stairs. “Meet you back in your rooms.”

He waves her on.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Chapter 14: A Gold Coin
*rubs hands gleefully together*

Can't wait for the comments! You guys keep us working on this!

Also, there's a very thorough analysis of the Grand Maester Conspiracy here: https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/11setm/spoilers_all_a_full_analysis_of_the_maesters_in

Well worth a read, I don't think it's tinfoil at all :)
A Gold Coin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

She returns to the Pate’s rooms wearing yet another face. It is cold outside, and the sudden warmth when she crosses the threshold into his chambers takes her aback. She closes the door behind her, and sees stacks of parchment and books sitting on the floor of the parlor.

Pate has uprighted his table, the now utterly destroyed surface covered with a cloth.

“Valar morghulis,” she says softly.

He finally looks up at her, notices the lack of blood anywhere on her person.

“Valar dohaeris,” he responds, just as softly. “Come, help me with this.”

Books. Great.

She slides into a chair next to his. “You took these from Vinegar’s quarters?”

He nods.

“Won’t they be missed?”

And there is Jaqen H’ghar’s sardonic smile. “The Citadel is most bureaucratic. That means slow, lovely girl.”

She wants him to stop calling her that. She prays he never does--it is likely the only endearment she will ever get from him. Despite everything that she has learned earlier, despite baby Rickon and Sansa and...she halts that train of thought.

One pain does not neutralize another.

So.

She hurts, that he does not think of her the way a man would think of a woman. But she will never show it to him, not ever again.

She bends her head obediently to the task of searching for mentions of ‘Targaryen’ or ‘dragon’.

A watch passes, and she finds herself drawn into a book despite herself. It is called “The True Nature of Gods”, written by a Jonathan Pryce.

“Have you read this?” she asks absently.

A pause. “No,” he answers.

“It’s very interesting.”

She hears Pate sigh. “Does it say anything about Targaryens?”

“No,” she snaps. “It says humans make the gods, not the other way around.”
“Theology…”

She finally looks up. “You are the foremost servant of the Many-Faced God and you are not interested in theology?”

“A girl is an assassin, and yet she is not interested in our next target,” he says evenly.

Her curiosity is a side-thread; at the moment she is fixated on what the book says.

“Listen to this,” she says, and she quotes: “The Seven-Pointed Star says the Seven need their worshippers as much as the worshipper needs the Seven. Why does a god need worshippers? Why does a god need true believers? The gods we name are gods of primal, untamable forces--the weather and the sea, procreation and death. These forces have no names of their own, no consciousness, no way to speak. Our worship teaches them how to be conscious, even as they embody the most pure essence of the primal qualities that make us human--compassion, mercy, justice. We teach these abstract forces to speak, so that they may share with us a portion of their holiness.”

Pate snorts. “Very pretty.”

“He makes some very good points,” she says.

“This, coming from a girl who addresses the Many-Faced God as ‘Beloved’ and plays kissy-face with Him all night?”

“Not all night,” she murmurs. “Sometimes we talk.”

Arya is quite comfortable with holding two opposing viewpoints simultaneously in her mind. She flips a few pages, continues quoting. “A god must be awakened. In the normal course of things, this humble author calculates, based on a quadratic model of increase in a god’s worshippers, that such an awakening would take more than five thousand years. But that assumes a minimal contribution of ‘personhood’ from each worshipper to the god. If, however, a god can be awakened in a single event--a catastrophically powerful personality merging itself with a primal, abstract force--”

“That explains some things,” says Pate. He has been listening, she realizes. “Your ‘humble author’, this Jonathan Pryce, later became the High Sparrow of the faith of the Seven.”

“The one that tortured Cersei?” she asks.

“The same.”

“No wonder I like him,” she muses, and turns flips to the end of the book. “...and so if we must look for evidence that the gods exist in this age, while human civilization is still so young, we must not turn to vile magic and sorcery, but instead look for the gods’ living avatars--the ones that awakened their god, became their god, and in so doing, became the living extensions of godhood in our world. And, if we do not find them, we must make them.”

Pate radiates disapproval. “Hubris. The trial of the Queen and her brother, the trial of Cersei Lannister...the Sparrow wanted to create a god of justice, a god of the common people. Well, he created something--the Mad Queen.”

Arya thinks on this. ‘Pate’ is not wrong, and yet...she feels there is some kernel of truth in the author’s words.

_A girl has some thinking to do. Perhaps the God will come to me tonight, I can just ask Him what_
Pate has returned to his parchment, and does not seem to be paying attention anymore, so it surprises her when he speaks. “Maesters—even ex-Maesters like your High Sparrow—are generally full of shit, which I’m sure you found out.”

“Vaellyn soiled himself, like they all do,” she agrees.

“He gave me a link for charting the astrological charts of dead people nobody cares about, and didn’t notice that I made up a few new stars in the sky to speed things along, despite all his love for the ‘celestial heavens’. No, lovely girl, do not believe anything you read in these books. There is no living avatar of the Many-Faced One walking around.”

She looks at him, really looks at him, and sees a deep, dark pool of distress beneath the Pate persona.

“Hmm,” is all she says.

JAQEN H'GHAR

They must leave soon. He should have expected the girl to defy his expectations yet again, so why is he so surprised when she picks up a book and actually reads it? And now she has a stupid philosophy rattling around in her head, and in the absence of anything more sensible it will take hold.

He gets up, rifles through his wardrobe for a moment, and returns with a slender volume of poetry. “This is better theology--the Blind God, from Lorath. Poetry, and short, and so should keep your interest.”

She looks at him with narrowed eyes, and he is not above manipulating her through her interest in a man.

“A man grew up listening to these,” he says. “You may remember them from his memories, perhaps--perhaps not.”

Immediately, she reaches for the volume.

There is a loud thumping on his door.

“Hide,” he says to the girl, but she simply loosens her hair and drapes herself provocatively on the chair.

“I’ve heard it’s quite traditional for Maesters to have a woman in their quarters,” she murmurs.

He glares at her in mock-annoyance. “It is even more traditional for an assassin to hide under a bed. Go!”

She goes.

He opens the door,
A Maester—one of Vaellyn’s pets—stands outside.

“What’s going on?” asks Pate, tone just bewildered enough.

“Archmaester Vaellyn has been murdered!” says the man.

Pate raises an eyebrow. “Can’t say I’m surprised, given the way he speaks to people. Spoke. Where?”

“Don’t worry, you’re not under suspicion,” says the Maester. “You were seen here at the time the murder was committed. He was killed on the other side of the city.”

“Of course I’m not under suspicion,” snarls Pate. “I didn’t do it! But I am the last to be informed, I assume.”

The man spreads his hands, not denying but placating. “At least you were informed. The other Maesters will be told tomorrow morning. And now I,” he shakes his head, “need to get to bed.”

“Good,” says Pate, and then he moves, faster than the Maester can register the movement.

In a moment the man is unconscious.

The girl comes out as soon as the door is closed. She helps him lay out the man on the floor, Jaqen H’ghar carefully peels away Pate’s death-mask, makes two long cuts over the unconscious man’s face, and places the mask over him. There is a trick to this, giving a face to another. It’s dangerous, and doesn’t always work.

The girl watches, very, very carefully. She may be able to do it herself, though he knows her ‘Kindly Man’ cannot. The God is very partial to her. Playing kissy-face.

The mask takes hold. Pate’s features come alive, and the Maester on the floor thrashes in the grip of some nightmare. Swiftly, the man slices open the Maester’s throat. Then, too, the girl helps him transfer Pate’s Maester-chain to the corpse’s, helps pose the corpse in a manner that indicates ‘Pate’ was surprised by a killer the moment ‘Pate’ opened the door.

The return to the table.

“Jaqen,” she says. He is wearing his own face, so it is quite appropriate. Still, he thrills to hear the sound of his name in her mouth, spoken without distress, and he must ensure his answering smile is not too enthusiastic.

“Yes, lovely girl?”

“Who is our target?”

He turns to face her. Truth, only the truth, because anything else is a disservice to another who serves the God.

“Four hundred and fifty years ago, a man was approached by a sorcerer from Asshai-under-the-shadow. A man was offered a contract for the life of the Prince that was Promised.” He says the title, the prophesied title, in High Valyrian.

“And who is that?”

“The hero in a prophecy,” he says. “A prince who will come to save the world from darkness, born
under a bleeding star, et cetera. The time for the coming of the Prince is nigh, it seems, and yet I cannot find them.”

“You believe it is a Targaryen.”

He nods. “It must be.”

“You think we’re contracted to kill Jon!”

He considers her. “A man is not convinced the King in the North is a good candidate for this. But what if he were?”

She shakes her head. “We are not. Jon is not the Prince that was Promised.”

“Did the God tell you that?” he asks, and it seems he has absorbed some of Vinegar Vaellyn’s acid bite.

“Jon will be safer with you at his side than without,” she says, and there is a ringing in her words; the light from the lanterns in the room wavers.

The man feels like cursing.

Thank you, Him of the Many Faces, for not telling a man months ago that a man does not need to kill the beloved brother of the girl a man has fallen in love with. You knew a man was trying to avoid having to give the gift to Jon Snow, but had You told a man the truth earlier, a man would not have had a chance to learn, in detail, the lineages of every single bastard the Targaryens have ever produced. A man would have missed all the delightful interactions he has had with librarians!

“Jaqen, are you yelling at the God?” she asks.

“And why would a man do that, sweet girl?” he asks. “A man has only wasted a single year after all, and what is a year to one of the God’s servants?”

Her mouth twitches.

“Well,” she says, “Um. Are we sure we want to kill someone who is supposed to save the world?”

“Not our place to judge,” he says. “A name was given.”

“And what was the price we asked for such a thing?”

He is quiet for a while. “An end to slavery was negotiated,” he says finally. “Enforced by all the sorcery that Asshai can muster. First the shadow-city itself, then Qarth, then, one by one, every citadel that can be reached by priests of the Red God.”

“You negotiated this deal,” she says.

“A man did.”

She is looking at him with that look again, and he wants to reprimand her. A man is not a hero in some tale, lovely girl.

“Well,” and there is that quixotic, mercurial change of mood again--she sounds positively enthusiastic. “It sounds like a good bargain--a prophesied royal with a stick the size of my forearm up his ass, for a million souls crying out in despair.”
“A Targaryen with a stick up their ass,” he corrects.

“High Valyrian is gender-neutral,” she muses. “It could be Daenerys.”

“We have a brother working on that possibility. Breaker of Chains, she is called. A man wanted to be absolutely sure she was the one--it does the House’s reputation no good if we eliminate the wrong target.”

“Of course,” she says dryly. “We do not judge.” Then she sits up. “But we’re going to marry her to Jon!”

He looks at her.

“Well,” she mutters, “it’s not like he loves her. He doesn’t even know her.”

“Would it have mattered if he did?” he asks.

She presses her lips together. “Inasmuch as it would cut me to the bone to kill her.”

The man looks down at the table-top. “When a girl is cut, this man bleeds,” he whispers.

He dares not look up. So many lies, that he does not have the capacity to keep this, the most fundamental of truths, within himself.

He hears her push back the chair, stand up. “I’m going to sleep,” she says. He makes to rise as well, but she waves him down. “No, finish what you need to do. I’ll take the bed.”

She goes into the bedroom, and closes the door behind her.

He finishes putting away the papers, burning the ones that need to be burnt. Then he packs, only the things that are necessary to them, and not to be found in Pate’s quarters anyway--weapons, travel clothing, bedrolls.

He needs some things from his wardrobe. He opens the door to the bedroom quietly. The girl is fast asleep, her heartbeat slow and steady.

He lights a taper, and cannot help but glance at the bed.

His lovely girl sprawls, limbs askew, somehow managing to occupy far greater volume than her body contains. She has thrown off the blanket.

The man moves soundlessly to her side, reaches to draw the discarded covering over her legs.

She stirs, and he freezes.

Her heartbeat, so slow and steady, is rising, though she is still fast asleep. Her eyes flicker, under closed lids.

*Dreaming.*

And then her hand is moving over the cloth of her shirt, and she gives a tiny moan that goes through him like lightning, and then, *then* she clutches at her right breast and her back arches. Her lips part, moist.
“Jaquen.”

The sound of her own voice wakes her. Her eyes flutter open, and she sees him hovering over her, and he cannot tell what she sees in his face for her eyes grow panicked.

She is poised on the edge of flight, except that he has backed his lovely girl into a corner and she has nowhere to run.

He pulls back, leaves the path to the door clear.

She sits up, follows his movement.

His face is utterly, completely impassive as he takes another step back.

*A man could just walk forward as easily as back, pin her arms above her head and make her say his name like that. Again and again and again…*

Something of this must have shown in him; in the candlelight it is hardly possible for her pupils to dilate further but her eyes darken. She loses most, *most* of the panic. But there is still a great deal of mortification there.

Without taking his eyes off her, he reaches into the open wardrobe, and half-bends to rummage around in her travelling pack. Her gaze follows him, confused, and she doesn’t know what he is doing.

The man, on the other hand, knows exactly what he is doing, but he is not sure if this is the time for the doing of it.

He pulls out her pouch of coin, fishes inside it for a moment, and draws forth one of the Targaryen sovereigns.

He holds it up for her inspection between thumb and forefinger; candlelight dances over its gold surface.

She is losing some of her confusion; trepidation is replacing it.

He crosses over to the other side of the room and she shrinks back from him, moves back till her back is resting against the wall.

He stands beside the bed, and holds out the coin in front of him. He is fully clothed and yet the coin is still held a little too close to his achingly hard member.

“Kiss it,” he commands in a whisper.

She moves as if hypnotized, slowly, never breaking eye contact. She leans forward and briefly touches her lips to the gold. He can feel warm air brushing against his palm; her breath trembles.

He looks down and memorizes the image: liquid black eyes, pooling with unshed tears, looking up at him. The collar of her shirt has come undone, it gapes as she kneels, and he can see the upper curve of her breasts.

Then it is over. She rocks back on her heels.

The man closes his fingers around the coin, tucks it into one of the hidden pockets sewn into his shirt.
“And now a girl will not be visiting any brothels, yes? Because her coin has already been claimed.”

“You are trying to save a girl from herself,” she whispers.

“A man is trying to save some Westerosi whore from a messy death at Jaqen H’ghar’s hand. For no fault of the whore’s, you understand.” His voice is even, and deathly serious.

She is the first to break eye contact.

“Go to sleep,” he says roughly. “We are leaving early tomorrow morning.”

She obeys; her head hits the pillow, and there is enough candlelight to show him the joyous smile that breaks out over her face. His own response is far more controlled: he permits himself only the smallest of grins before returning to his packing.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like it? Was it good? Did you figure out Jaqen? Let us know!
Jaqen H’ghar

They leave Oldtown before dawn, when only bakers and street-sweepers are going about their business. He has four horses stabled at an inn, and he wears his Alchemist brother’s face, for that is how the horses have been bought, and stabled, these past few years. The girl wears the face of a middle-aged Westerosi merchant, a mask the man is not familiar with himself.

He sells the two geldings, keeps the mares.

Given her naming habit, the girl promptly calls her horse “Steel” for the color of its mane or some such nonsense. The man’s steed he calls “a horse”, as always.

They ride through the slowly awakening streets towards the Rose Gate, which is no gate at all, but the official start of the Roseroad. The silence stretches until the gate, and then she asks him a question.

“Would it be acceptable for me to remove the mask?”

He craves her face.

“Why?” he asks.

“This man has particularly nasty nightmares,” she says. “I’d like to avoid them if possible.”

So why did she put it on in the first place? And then answers himself the next moment. A man fished the first Westerosi face he found out of the bag and handed it to her--a girl will obey without hesitation, nightmares or no.

The thought saddens him, and then annoys him. She should learn to question--a girl is just as much a faceless one as a man is, that a man is more experienced or that a man claimed her coin does not change the fact that our kind has no concept of “leader” or “follower”.

“Wear a brother’s face,” he says.

“That was the plan,” she replies.

He is not aware of anyone watching; he gives her a nod. She peels off the mask, and she is a Braavosi underneath.

The face reminds him that the faceless do not have leaders or followers, but they do have “mentors” and “students”, and she once obeyed the Braavosi as her mentor as she obeys Jaqen H’ghar now. The Braavosi are always out of control; his training is the reason she is so impulsive. And then he feels contrite--it is an uncharitable thought, and untrue; Arya Stark has always been impulsive.

This oscillation of emotion is not a common habit of his. It frustrates him.

They pass beyond the confines of the city, and the number of people they see increases. Travellers, to and from the market: mostly farmers with carts full of produce. All the food the farmers haul to
the Oldtown market is of an inferior quality, blackened or stunted; it will be a hard winter if already the crops are so blighted with frost.

The horses clop along, and he meditates upon the nature of physical desire. Desire makes time speed up--every moment is fraught with awareness, and yet passes too swiftly.

“You’re quiet,” she says, a few miles out.

“I am thinking.”

“Regretting something?” she asks archly.

He turns to her, and for a moment his own face, his Jaqen H’ghar face flickers over the Alchemist’s. “Regret is easy enough to solve,” he says. “The coin might be returned, and it would be done. Has a man given you a coin back?”

“No.”

“Then a girl should apply her logic.”

She sighs. The Alchemist returns.

Dark clouds gather over the horizon, darkening his already black mood. The horse under him seems to dislike his pensiveness as much as he does, because it shifts and pulls at its reins from time to time.

The girl keeps giving him sidelong glances.

“Would you like to listen to a joke?” she ventures.

“As you wish.”

“Do you know what the tragedy of Pentos is?”

“No.”

“Pentos could have had the Braavosi economy, Dothraki territory, and Lorathi cuisine. Instead, they took Braavosi territory, the Lorathi economy, and Dothraki cuisine.”

He waits, but she doesn’t say anything else.

“You don’t think it’s funny?” she asks, a bit indignant.

“I didn’t realize you were finished.”

“That’s what He said,” she mutters. “But don’t you get it? Everyone gets insulted a little bit which is always funny, but it’s all true--and Pentos doesn’t have anything of their own worth having, and they’re territory-stealing, horse-piss drinking bankrupts!”

He considers the explanation. “You have spent far too much time in Braavos if your thinking is so partisan.”

“Well,” she says, “Arya Stark is going to be the Lady of Braavos, it’s only right she take her city’s side.”

Fierce, irrational possessiveness consumes the man for a moment, and it irritates him further that
he can be moved to such pettiness (after all it is not his Arya Stark the Sealord is going to net).

“Please, Zural, do not try to cheer me up any more.”

She shrugs.

They stop to water the horses at midday. He notices she uses innocuous motions--adjusting a saddlebag, calming a horse--to venture closer and closer to him. He doesn’t look at her; his entire skin feels alive, and the hairs on his arms rise, straining, straining towards her as he cannot allow himself to.

Almost, he is not prepared for her when she moves; she moves too fast. Her hand is on his skin, inside his shirt and his eyes are about to close, half-involuntary, until he realizes exactly what it is she is reaching for.

He clamps his hand over her fingers, trapping the back of her hand against his heart.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Taking back my coin, since it causes you so much distress.”

“My coin now,” he says, his tone level. “A girl does not touch a man’s coin, yes?”

She tugs at her hand and he holds it tight. Her eyes glitter.

“Promise,” he prompts.

“Promise,” she spits out.

He lets go of her hand.

“Stupid Jaqen H’ghar,” she mutters as she stomps away.

The next day, it seems it is her turn to be irritated, even as his spirits have risen with the sun.

“Would you like to listen to some poetry?” he asks, drawing up his horse next to hers.

She doesn’t look at him. “Blind God poetry?”

“No,” he says, and reaches for his saddlebag. Now she does look as he pulls out a small leatherbound volume, about the size of his palm.

She sighs.

“Yes?” he asks.

“It’s not very assassin-like, reading poetry,” she says.

His lips twitch. “Who are the best assassins in the world?”

“The Faceless Men,” she answers automatically.

“And who is the oldest of the Faceless Men?”
“Jaqen H’ghar.” She glares at him.

“Given that is the case,” he says, “and given that Jaqen H’ghar reads poetry, I think it would be considered a very traditional activity for assassins. Venerable, even.”

His teasing has won a small smile out of her. “But by that token you could take up tapestry weaving and call it a ‘traditional assassin activity’, Jaqen.”

Jaqen.

The memory of the way she spoke his name two nights ago, in her sleep, unconscious and yearning...today he allows himself to savor the headiness of his desire.

Eventually, he asks, “A girl doesn’t want to hear the verse?”

“Did a girl tell you not to do it?”

“No,” he replies.

“Then a man should use his logic.”

He grins, then thumbs through the volume. He needs to choose the right one for her, something that will resonate. Poetry, it either infects a person, or it passes them by, and often the difference between the two hinges upon just such a choice as he is about to make.

“Ah,” he says, when he finds the page he is looking for. “A traditional one.”

He begins: “I met a traveler from an antique land…”

She has lost her contemptuous air by the end of it.

“...The lone and level sands stretch far away.” He lets the last line fade away into the mid-morning air, then asks, gently, “what does a girl think?”

“Valar morghulis,” she whispers, then her tone becomes grudging. “The poem is appropriate. For us.” And then she is plaintive. “Can we visit, one day? I want to see this desert.”

He nods, thoughtfully. Deserts are warm, and without rain, and he has grown tired of the cold sleet and cold damp of Westeros.

“Do you compose?” she asks.

“Alas,” he says, “I was not born under the rhymer’s star.” Which is no answer at all, and she knows this, for she looks at him with challenging tilt of her chin.

“It doesn’t seem so hard.”

He smirks. “Why don’t you try, then.”

She thinks. Then, she says:

“Roses are red,
violets are blue,
when the Mad Queen’s dead,
the Bank gets its due.”
He almost chokes, but she’s not done.

“Or,” she says, “how about this:

There once was a girl from Winterfell,
And a man from Lorath as well
They carry sharp blades
And poisons in spades
For they will send Walder Frey to hell.”

He wants to groan, but then she will throw something at him. Possibly a dagger. He restricts himself to a sardonic, “well done”.

They ride for a while, and the girl amuses herself with searching for rhymes for “Lannister”: bannister, canister, magister. Eventually, she grows bored.

“Do you have another?”

Something in him exults, secretly, that he knows her enough that he made the right choice of verse. “In this book?” He looks down at the page before him. “Not one I’d read today,” he says. “But...I can give you a very inappropriate one.”

She looks excited. “A dirty one? Is it bad?”

“Very, very bad,” he purrs. “My Lorathi brother will very much disapprove of my reading it to you-it’s the type of thing that gets passed around by the older members of the order. Strictly not for acolytes.”

She’s almost bouncing in the saddle now. “I’m not an acolyte! Read it!”

He chuckles, and exchanges the small book for an even smaller one, bound in red felt. He tastes the memory of the words he is about to speak, and as it rises through him it evokes a melancholy warmth in the wake of its passage.

His voice is quiet, resonant:

“And death shall have no dominion.
Dead man naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.”

Her eyes are wide, fixated on him, as if she cannot believe what she has just heard. “That is bad Jaqen,” she whispers. “Really bad.”

“Did you like it?”

“No,” she says immediately. A girl lies. “It tastes good, but…”

“It is too disrespectful?” Yes, let us not deny the girl’s Beloved His due, shall we? The man is amused.
She looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Are you mocking me?”

He tries to look innocent, then relents. “Maybe a little bit.”

She huffs, a short exhalation. “Well, anyways, it’s not what I pictured when you promised me ‘inappropriate’.”

“Ahhh,” he says. “What you want is a love poem.”

She grins. “I want to hear ‘The ballad of the farmer’s daughter’ from Jaqen H’ghar’s mouth.”

“I am sorry, lovely girl, but I do not know any farmer’s daughters. If such amuses you, a book of bawdy sailor’s verse can be acquired when we return to Braavos.”

“I’ll take whatever you’ve got, then.”

He knows what is the next one he wants to read to her. He does not know if he should. Undecided, he puts the red book back, pulls out another, this time a simple, unmarked book with a midnight black cover.

“How many do you have?” she asks.

“I have not travelled quite so well-prepared for a long time.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Having books of poetry counts as well-prepared?”

“Call it revenge then,” he says. “They are copies, and poorly-scribed ones at that, but the librarian is going to...require the tending of a mind-healer when he discovers they are missing. Eventually.”

“You stole them,” and she sounds almost disapproving, as if it is not a perfectly proportionate revenge.

_Hah. Had the girl been in a man’s place, we’d be carrying the librarian’s head in the saddlebag and not just his books._

They ride for a bit.

He flips to the correct page; it is dog-eared, for he has found himself landing on it often since Arya Stark became faceless. He re-reads the poem silently, and again he doubts whether he should.

“Read it, Jaqen,” she pleads.

He hesitates, clears his throat. He looks at the road between his horse’s ears. He begins, and he does not need to read from the page.

“I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz, or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.”

He can feel her stillness, the preternatural alertness that imbues her posture. He swallows, and his voice is low, right on the edge of hearing, when he continues.

“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.”

She sighs, and he finally, finally looks at her, through the corner of his eye. She bends forward to rest her head on the horn of her saddle. Her dark hair falls around her face and hides it from his
He clears his throat. “A man can read the rest on some other day, perhaps.”

ARYA

The days grow colder, the nights colder still. Every time they stop, it’s harder and harder to find a spot that isn’t damp, to find branches that take flame without a watch’s worth of coaxing. She knows enough now to know that this winter is not a natural thing, and that the days grow colder in the rest of the world but the choking ice only ever covers Westeros.

“Ah, summer child, what are you and I doing here?”

His question is rhetorical; the snow encrusting his cloak is not.

Jaqen is as much, if not more, of a summer child as she is. His memories are all of sunlit streets in Lorath, and the persistent heat of volcanic Valyria. And even when winter comes, she knows it never snows in either of those places.

In Westeros, winter has just begun.

“Say the word,” she jokes. “We can turn back, take a ship to Braavos and then go looking for that desert you told me about.”

They exchange a sardonic, rueful look over the pathetic little fire, and it is not just her imagination—he is warmer, and she has coaxed a smile out of him. Quickly, she sets up a tripod made of slender branches, and suspends a tin cup of water from it, right over top of the flame.

Then, she begins preparing a huddle.

“A good idea, lovely girl,” he says.

She throws him a quick smile over her shoulder. He hasn’t called her that since the snow started. She has not quite determined the pattern in his speaking. Mostly, he speaks with the Dornish accent, choosing words that belong to the face he wears. But from time to time he breaks the persona, and speaks like Jaqen H’ghar.

“A huddle,” she says, and the word is bittersweet, for she has good memories of making such forts in Winterfell, against an imaginary winter, with Bran and Rickon and sometimes even Sansa. The packs, arrayed in a semi-circle, to bank the wind, the blanketed horses at the back, the open side facing the fire but not too close. Blankets, insulating them from the damp ground that leaches away all warmth.

Then she reaches into the pack, starts pulling out clothes—a second pair of britches for both of them, all their shirts, the rest of the clean socks.

She is not sure it is not her imagination this time, but Jaqen looks mildly sad. “No change of clothes for a while.”

Another shared look: commiseration.

“Two more weeks,” she sighs. “When we get to an inn, we will have a hot bath, get everything
washed.” They have cut north across the center of Westeros instead of taking the Roseroad all the way to King’s Landing.

The water is boiling. She quickly throws a pinch of cinnamon and dried ginger in it, and hands it to him.

In unspoken accord, they lay down only a single bedroll. Her hands are shaking as darkness falls and they slip under the blankets together. They are fully clothed; he has unfolded the second bedroll and draped it over them.

“Lovely girl,” he says gently, and there are many things in his voice but all she hears is pity and so she puts her hand over his mouth to stop him from saying anything that will hurt even more. As long as anything remains unsaid, she can pretend it will happen, eventually, that there are reasons it doesn’t happen now.

“It’s freezing,” she says, lamely. Surely he can feel her shaking. She takes her hand away.

“Far too cold,” he replies, and then she becomes suddenly unsure, because now she thinks there may be regret in him. Surely not. He had plenty of chances, two weeks worth of chances…

He makes her turn to her side to face the fire and he is right behind her, her head tucked under his chin, his arm draped over her, and she thinks she has never felt so warm before. She curves, molds herself to him, finds herself fitting into all the hollows in his shape. She tucks his double-socked feet between her own.

She is on the edge of sleep, the howling wind more of a lullaby than an annoyance to her, when he speaks, drowsy, his words muffled against her hair.

“I can feel my toes again.” He sounds surprised.

She giggles.

It has become their habit to sleep in a huddle each night. It is good training, for one is always on watch while the other sleeps, but their little cocoon of warmth is so comfortable, it is difficult to stay alert. To aid her, she uses the many Lorathi mind-games she is learning from him, the things she did not want to learn in Braavos because she thought they needed her to be no one.

She is also torn--she knows she would prefer there to be not so many layers of clothes between them. But it’s so damn cold, she’s grateful for the layers that trap body-heat.

The fire has burnt down by the time dawn breaks, grey and dismal.

Her shoulder is being shaken.

“No, Jaqen, it’s cold,” she pleads.

“It’s going to get colder, beautiful girl. Come.”

She groans, and then they both help each other sit up. When he’s on his feet, he tosses her one of the sticks the fire didn’t quite manage to take.

“This stiffness is no good,” he says. She knows it’s not, and they are losing their effectiveness as fighters; poor consolation, that any other fighters they encounter will be in the same shape.
He attacks her without warning.

Within a quarter-watch, they are both limber. Energy flows into her, despite the dismal day, and they exchange the sticks for live steel.

They spar for a half watch, no longer, for night falls quickly in winter and they must be on their way. She kisses the blade of her saber. “Oh, I missed you, I missed you so much!” She catches him glaring at her... no, he’s glaring at my sword. “Dammit, Jaqen, I don’t need a longer reach!”

“A man said nothing, sweet girl.”

She sheathes the sword and mounts Steel.

Jaqen is right, the saber does shorten her reach, but when she can get inside the arc of his swing, he “dies” every time. Yes, she doesn’t get inside his arc more than one time out of, say, ten (if she is being overly optimistic) but then there is no other fighter like him in the world.

They stop mid-day, and he’s rotating his shoulder. “I think I pulled something,” he says incredulously.

She cannot stand the look on his face; she laughs and laughs and laughs and cannot stop for a good while. By nightfall, she’s grown a bit more compassionate. They make their huddle again, eating a supper of boiled oats, with little bits of bacon and salt.

He rotates his shoulder, going so far as it shift in place; Jaqen never shifts when he sits.

“Here,” she says, “let me look at that. Take off your shirt. Shirts.”

“Put them on, take them off, a man wishes a girl would make up her mind.”

She just glares at him.

He puts on a long-suffering expression and turns around as he pulls the wad of shirts up.

She doesn’t pause too long to gawk at his back. She’s not sure, it can’t have been more than a few heartbeats. She thinks. After all, she’s worn his body and his face many, many times (though she has always been Westerosi enough to change back to her own when undressing). Faded white scars crisscross his shoulders, almost invisible; the muscles under the skin are lean, hard, well-defined.

She inhales. Exhales. Then she turns around and rummages in the packs till she finds the block of cooking-fat. She cuts off a piece, and holds it in her hands to thaw while she fishes for a particular vial in her bandolier.

She takes up a seat behind him, and unstoppers the vial. The smell of lavender and garlic suddenly fills their huddle.

“Garlic? Are you planning on basting me?” he asks. “I assure you, I am not yet a liability, nor are our rations depleted.”

“There’s a topical paralytic in here,” she informs him. “And lots of other things. The Waif is a genius.” She kneads a few drops of the oil into the cooking fat. The fat mixes well with the oil, and it pools in the palm of her left hand. “Lie down,” she says.

She ignores his grumbling as he complies, rubbing her hands together to further warm the oil. Then she puts her hands on his shoulder. She has to bite her lip; she is touching him and it feels good, his
skin feels good. She notices she is holding her breath, and forces herself to exhale.

_The oil won’t stay potent for long, exposed to air._ She rubs the mixture into his shoulder with strong, broad motions, then uses her fingers to knead and circle nerve-clusters, smooth out muscle fibers.

Through it all, he is absolutely silent.

She knows the oil has done its work when her fingers start feeling numb. “Not so funny when it works, is it?” she asks smugly.

“It works well,” his voice is low, muffled against the bedroll.

“Well?” she asks, “it works like _magic_. I was running the roofs one time, slipped and fell, caught on at the last minute.” Between speaking and soothing, she falls into a rhythm. “But I’d torn my shoulders out of the sockets. The dislocation was easy enough to deal with, I just ran myself into a wall a few times, shoulders popped right back in. But then the next day...I am _not_ proud of the way I screamed when the Waif came to check on me, to see why I hadn’t left my room....I couldn’t even sit up! Everything from my waist upwards was completely and utterly _fucked_. But a few days of this stuff, I was back running the roofs again.”

He is a bit too still.

“What’s wrong, Jaqen?” she asks, and she realizes he has fallen asleep. She pulls his shirts back down, and pulls at his arm, gently. He rolls over onto his back, more than half asleep.

Faceless ones are trained to sleep in a way so as to never let anyone within arm’s reach without snapping to full alertness. On this journey she has learned that his ‘circle of awareness’, as he calls it, extents to beyond their campsite, and under his guidance she is extending hers--listening to the rustle of leaves (for there are no trees on Braavos), the shifting of earth, the sigh of the wind, and constantly, subconsciously, looking for patterns in them.

She’s getting better, but she’s not yet as good as he is. So the fact that he sleeps deep enough now to let her roll him over without him waking...it is a remarkable thing, this trust he shows in her.

She looks at his face--the face of a brother she does not know--and is seized by the urge to try something she has been thinking about since she saw him give Pate’s face to an unconscious Maester.

She tucks the blanket around him, smoothing the pillow half under his head, to get him used to her movements, the small breaths of air her hands stir around his face. She knows this is going to earn her a scolding, perhaps even anger. But she _has_ to try.

She gently, oh so gently passes her hand over his face, and _inverts_ the prayer for assuming a brother’s face.

Like ice under the noonday sun, the Alchemist melts away.

And then she is a battleground between two of her most persistent internal voices.

_Do it! Do it!_

_He’s going to kill you._

_No, he has your coin. He reads you poetry._
That doesn’t mean he wants you to kiss him! If he did, he’d have done it already!

It might be your only chance.

She stares at his lips, and finds she cannot bridge that final distance between them. Not when he cannot say no. Not if he doesn’t want it too.

Her gaze travels upwards, and she realizes his eyes are open, and he is watching her. Did I wear my thoughts on my face again?

She waits for the reprimand for removing his mask. It does not come. So she, too, says nothing, just puts the vial away and crawls into the blankets beside him, curling up into a little ball.

He shifts, then drapes his arm over her, draws her in close, holds her so tightly that it is on the verge of being uncomfortable.

They sleep.

The month of travel has changed the both of them. On one level, they are no longer “a man” and “a girl” travelling together, not Jaqen H’ghar and Arya Stark travelling together (though he has not returned to the Alchemist’s face and she has abandoned her Braavosi teacher’s visage somewhere along the way; she does not remember when it happened).

They are Faceless, and they react so fluidly to each other, it is as if they are a single entity and there is no indication of which of them orders a thing and which of them sees it done--when they move, when they set up camp, when the decide to stop to water the horses, they need neither words to communicate nor gestures to coordinate their movement.

On the other hand, they are very, very aware of each other; they are under each other’s skin.

He teases her, and mocks her, but he has learned the jagged edges of her patience and he stops just short of infuriating her. Sometimes she feels an agitation, like fireflies sparking along her fingertips--when their gazes cross and he holds hers too long, or when he reads certain poems to her--and she starts getting angry, and seeing her in that state he places his left hand over his heart, over the pocket in which she knows her coin still rests, and then she calms.

She grumbles at him, she picks fights with him about anything--the state of the traderoutes on the Shivering Sea, Myrrish versus Westerosi apples, philosophy. But she has learned the things that rouse that deep distress in his eyes, and she always treads around them, softly.

She has learned that poor sleep makes him irritable the next day. (Which explains their first day on the road; she had slept because he ordered her to, but he had remained awake all night, packing and stealing poetry.) So when she finds they have travelled too deep into the night looking for a good campsite, or that wild animals and brigands have kept him alert all night, she takes up Horse’s reins (she still thinks it is a very silly name for a mare) alongside Steel’s, and leads his steed while he drowses in the saddle.

There are three things they do not speak of.

They do not speak of the coin, and when her glances ask about it a bit too often, he always looks
away.

He does not let their arguments about philosophy wander into the realm of theology, and so she refuses to discuss what Him of the Many Faces says to her (though she hasn’t had a single one of those dreams since she came to Westeros).

They do not speak of the contract, the one that must be completed once Walder Frey is sent to the Stranger’s Hell. Despite the confidence she has in the God’s word--Jon will be safer with Jaqen in Winterfell--they are travelling North, and it was Jaqen who selected Jon as a candidate for the Prince that was Promised.

They do speak of her training, and his. She’s getting inside his reach almost three times out of ten; to her surprise he admits he is shit with a bow, and he is, at first (not by a normal fighter’s standards, of course, but shit by Jaqen H’ghar standards), and now he’s hitting rabbits at two hundred paces, and the quality of their dinners has improved.

She skins, he roasts, she spices (after living in Braavos, neither of them likes the taste of unseasoned meat though of course a faceless one bends to necessity). He carves.

The snow on the ground is crisp, and for once there is no sleet.

“A girl has been very quiet for two days,” he says to her. Something has shifted in him--he uses the speech-patterns of Jaqen H’ghar all the time with her now.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says. “A lot.”

“About what?”

“Of how to be like you. I think it may work better for me than being Braavosi or Lorathi.”

His brows furrow, amused. “But, sweet, lovely girl, a man is no one; he follows the Lorathi way.”

“No you don’t,” she says. He raises an eyebrow, and she takes a deep breath before launching into her analysis.

“You follow all these things the poems speak of, but you somehow...somehow you become no one and then back to being yourself.”

“It is a response to you,” he says. There is nothing but simple honesty in his words. “Even when a man wears another’s face, when he thinks of you in a certain way, his thoughts leak--Jaqen H’ghar leaks--into the face a man wears.”

She is moved by some compulsion; she comes and sits closer to him. This raw honesty from him...it makes her brave. She reaches up and brushes a red lock of hair away from his face. “Your hair,” she says. “Red, white. The red is deliberate choice,” she briefly touches the other side of his head. “This is unchosen. You balance between them. You make yourself who you are, but you will not erase the one you were born as.”

His eyes are closed, she realizes. Suddenly, uncharacteristically shy, she withdraws her hand.

“Even your name,” she says, looking into the heart of their campfire. “Jaqen H’ghar. Your mother named you Jaqen, and to you she had hung the stars in the sky--how could you give up Jaqen?”
You love Jaqen, because she loved him. But H’ghar...that one you hate. But you will not repudiate it. And so again you balance between love and hate, and find yourself somehow.”

She takes another deep breath. “Wherever I look for you in my thoughts, I find you at the point where there exists a perfect balance of extremes.”

“A girl has studied Jaqen H’ghar very carefully,” he says, his voice low and unreadable.

“It’s been a long journey.”

He wears no expression, but somehow she knows he is perturbed.

“Some truths are veiled from the self, sometimes,” he says in the tone she has come to term “cryptic Lorathi”. “Tell me,” he glances at her, “has a girl studied herself?”

“Oh, a man believes it,” he mutters.

She doesn’t rise to the bait. “I saw what you gave Him of the Many Faces in Valyria, and what I gave wasn’t enough.” She picks up a short wooden stick, pokes it around the char at the base of their fire.


“Not a bargain,” she corrects absently, now cutting shallow, parallel lines into the ground. “It was a dowry.”

She sighs, and stands up; the fire needs more fuel. But, suddenly, his hand closes around her right wrist. Her head whips around to look at him, and his face is completely blank.

“Sit,” he says. “There are things you must know.”

She is suddenly frightened by his intensity.

“Sit,” he says again, and he is more gentle this time though not any less implacable.

She sits.

“A man has recruited three others before you,” he says. He stretches out and pulls small pouch from his pack. Inside, there are a number of small cylinders--papers, rolled up into little tubes; Messages—they are stacked tightly together, in some order known only to him. He picks one of them, and hands it to her. “It came by raven a few weeks before you set sail from Braavos.”

She unrolls the tube. In the runescript of the Jade Sea, which she can read but not pronounce, it says, “A fourth.”

He waits for her to hand the message back to him. “A man knew this, the day he received your face from the God, long before his Lorathi brother realized it.”

“They died,” she says. “The Kindly Man told me. That they died, and it was not the will of the Many-Faced God. I...” she looks inwards, “I know I have their memories, somewhere, but I can’t...” she trails off. She needs to know their names, for the very first evocation of their faces.
“A man sent word, that you were to be watched, guarded at all times.” He sees the look on her face, and forestalls furious words she is about to explode with. “No. A girl must listen now.”

She deflates.

“They were like you,” he says.

“Like us?” she asks in a small voice.

At that he looks up, and there is a brief twitch of his lips. But his eyes are so, so haunted.

He puts a hand over his pocket-- their secret pocket. “No, not like us. But like you.”

He sighs, and his face flickers, and he is someone else--a man with ebony-dark skin, shaved bald, black tattoos curling around his eyes. Jaqen is the most handsome man she has ever seen, but she cannot deny that this man is beautiful; a Myrrish artist’s sculpture made in black marble.

Then, he is Jaqen again. “Each of them brought something to the Faceless--we were slaves and freemen, servants of Him of the Many Faces. When this one gave himself to the God, we became brothers.

“You loved him.”

“As if we had grown up together in the same house, as if we had been birthed from the same womb. The instant, effortless accord between us... that part is a little bit like us, you and I. The second...”

His face flickers again; he is a pale haired, fragile-looking woman with eyes of green jade.

Arya wonders if this was the woman that had brought Jaqen to his knees, the one he never made love to but dreamed about all the time. She cannot find it in herself to be jealous; he hurts far too much.

“She sought and found a man, somehow. A commoner who rose very high, very fast--the last concubine of the old emperor of Yi-Ti, . The new emperor murdered her son. The killing of an Emperor is not an insignificant thing; she gave herself to the God as payment.” He smiles, and it is heartbreaking. “She was a tigress ...the first woman in the order. Before her, each of us brought to the brotherhood what skills and abilities we had had in our past lives. After her, we trained. A man’s Lorathi brother, for all his dislike of naming things, he called her ‘little mother’.”

“I am nothing like that,” she whispers. “I am selfish and individual, I don’t even help to train the acolytes unless I am ordered to. I don’t even like people.” And nobody likes me. She won’t say that...her self-pity has no place here.

Another thought strikes. “You said you recruited three. The Kindly Man...”

“A man’s brother saw this thing happening to the third, and took him in hand. A man was not entirely certain it worked...but our brother lives, though his name does not. This one,” and Jaqen hesitates, and looks at her. “There could have been something, maybe.”

Like us , she thinks. “And the Kindly Man beat it out of him.” Jealousy has no place here either; poor payment, for Jaqen’s painful honesty. “I wish he hadn’t,” she says, and finds she is sincere. If someone tried to take Jaqen, take the God from me, and it worked ? She shudders.

It seems that is a surprise to him too, and some of his sadness...lessens. Did he think I would rage
“But,” he says, and his voice is thoughtful, “A man is quite certain none of them called the God ‘Beloved’, and traded kisses with Him in their dreams. This is a new thing.” He looks at her. “A man is not sure what the House of Black and White will become, now that you have come to us.”

An opening. She strikes, her tone deadpan. “Orgies, Jaqen, orgies all the time.”

His startled laugh breaks the stillness of the clearing; the horses nicker in response. She calms them with a thought. There is more here, more she must hear from him.

“What happened to them?”

“The two...they held onto themselves fiercely, and held on to the God, and they were...transcendent, you understand.” He breathes. Slowly, deliberately. “There is a place the Faceless Men do not go any longer. Because the two who were like you--they were lured to that place,” he says. “One on a contract, one with a storm that seemed, upon investigation later, to have been made of some fell magic. They died, and they died for a long time.”

She has learned when she can push him, and when she must be patient. She did not know this before they started on this journey; she is grateful she knows it now.

She waits.

“In Asshai, their names were taken from them,” he says finally, his voice completely flat, as if he is reciting a fact from a book. “And when they were emptied of themselves the God was ripped from them, one scream at a time…”

The God was ripped from them.

For the first time since Harrenhal, she is terrified.

His arm comes up around her, and he strokes her hair. “Bride of Death,” he says, and his voice is infinitely gentle. “Let it go. Let Him go, if you must. The God will agree with me if it means losing you like He lost the others. Ask Him, and see what He says.”

“Probably the same thing you do,” she mutters, gathering up all the shards of courage she has to her breast. “And I’ll tell Him to go fuck Himself too.”

He sighs and pulls away. He knows, and she knows, that she will never let go. “We get all of our brothers’ memories from before the God takes them, when we get our brothers’ faces.”

She nods. Everything a faceless one was, before he was faceless, the order will know. Selfishly, once she understood what determined the trailing edge of her brothers’ memories, she had been pleased that she developed her fascination with Jaqen, with the God (in that way) after she gave Arya Stark to Him, for her death beside the pool is the last of her that will be shared with the order.

He is looking at his hands, clenched in his lap. He relaxes them, consciously, deliberately. “When one of dies, the rest comes to us.”

This, she has not known.

“Our brothers are always with us,” he puts his hand in the center of his chest. “Here.” His mouth twists, with bitterness, with fury. “The memories of the ones Asshai took from us have giant gaping holes in them, ragged pieces of them that have been torn out.” He pauses, and his breathing
is erratic and she concerned, frightened now for him.

He turns to her. “I do not remember their names!” She reaches out a hand, rests it on his cheek; Jaqen H’ghar can be many, many things, but he is not allowed to be lost. He does not lean into her touch. “One day, I will know what did that to them...,” he stops, and she realizes she had been mistaken—she had never seen the true face of his anger before. She is not its target, and yet she cannot stand against it.

There is silence. She dares not look at him. She has taken her hand back.

“They died in Asshai,” she says eventually. “So I will simply never go to Asshai.”

“The second one, she said the same thing. She was still drawn there.”

“She was alone?” she asks, turning to him.

He nods.

“I have you,” she says with false confidence plastered over her face. “Have the Kindly Man assign this other one—this no one who could have been like us—assign him a partner.”

He looks at her as if she is a wondrous thing. “He hunts his target in Yi Ti, the last we heard. But we will send a raven, suggesting this thing. It should be done.”

Why wasn’t it done before? Nobody in the order is stupid, why was it not done before?

He reaches for her hand, grips it in his. “But you are here with me, and you will be kept far from Asshai.”

She has is following an earlier trail of thought that she cannot let go of. “Perhaps,” she says, and the words are dragged from her despite herself, because she is ashamed of her selfishness, because she wants to show that she, too, can give more of herself, “he can join us in Westeros and you can keep an eye on the both of us.”

Jaqen’s eyebrow rises. “A girl plans her first orgy.” He leers at her, but his heart isn’t in it.

Her heart isn’t in it either. The God was ripped from them. “If Asshai took them from us, why are we trying to follow through with a contract that comes from Asshai?”

He smiles in approval at her question, a very “Kindly Man” type of habit. “Because the one who brought us this request—he joined us when the negotiations were completed. There was no duplicity in his memories—he was given the task by his old teacher, a man he trusted, named Hallor’han. This name did not appear in what fragments of memory we received of our lost brothers.” He shakes his head. “Every city has factions, every faction has an enemy.”

“Your objectivity terrifies me,” she says. “I cannot be like you.”

And now the smile he turns on her is a sweet thing, with only a hint of sorrow clinging to it. “A girl is a wolf; a wolf does not wish to be something it is not.”

She does not have the fortitude to extract the lesson from his cryptic statement, not today. So she ignores it. The one who brought us this request—he joined us...

“Ambaysia Alayain,” she breathes. “I met him, Jaqen, right before I left Braavos. Something is going on, something strange. I do not think we should complete the contract until we know what
this strangeness is in its entirety.”

“A man is in full agreement—as is our brother who watches Daenerys. And in the meantime…no faceless one must go to Asshai.”

She shivers, and searches for some topic of conversation that does not terrify her, or cause him distress. “Our brother who watches Daenerys--how will he get past her guards?” There are two Unsullied amongst the faceless, and she has wandered through their memories as an exercise, working out strategies, determining the weaknesses of these legendary warriors. Even Jaqen will have trouble getting past more than a dozen or so, she thinks.

So it must be trickery that gains a faceless one access to Daenerys Targaryen. And Arya adores tales of trickery.

Jaqen smirks. “I believe our brother occupies the Unsullied commander’s bed.”

She chortles. “Nice!”

Jaqen gives her a look. “We have exchanged ravens. It may be that the Unsullied commander occupies our brother’s heart.”

She winces.

And then they must rise and see to the campfire before it dies out entirely.

Chapter End Notes

Slow and long, this one...a hiatus before the storm :)  

Next chapter, we meet Gendry again. And much is revealed about Asshai, and the contract.
NO ONE

The faceless one wears Arya Stark’s face, and sickens for something. It would be worrisome, if she allowed herself the luxury of worry, for Death’s favor works to keep most illness at bay—no Faceless has ever been infected when working with the corpses of lepers or even those with stone-skin.

Two weeks have passed, and she haunts the harbor daily, hiding in alleyways and eating only when she must, and then too, only food and drink that is consumed by sailors not of Asshai, trapped in the shadow city just like her; she is careful.

There is no source of infection here, and yet she sickens. Her limbs are weak, raging fevers rise with the river-tide and do not leave for days.

Her ship does not come.

She wakes up coughing one day, almost too weak to move beyond the heap of trash she hides behind, not unless duty calls.

Ash chokes the sky.

Without warning, she is seized by rough arms and the smell of something bitter, something astringent, fills her nostrils. She is weak, but she is faceless. She lashes out with the sorcerer’s blade she keeps with her, she kills two of her assailants. The third grabs her by the hair and mutters soft words over her and then all her will to fight leaches out.

She is an automaton; her will is not her own. She obeys commands. But, somewhere deep inside, a coiled darkness sits, waiting. A faceless one is not so easily controlled.

The darkness waits for its time. The sorcerer—for that is what the man is, black-robed and stinking of a charnel pit—chants another spell over her. The darkness shrinks in upon itself, but it holds.

She wakes on her knees, somewhere hot and dark and dank. With great effort, she raises her head to see herself on a stone ledge above a great pit, filled with molten fire. Large ovals...dragon eggs...a thousand, a hundred thousand, they sit in the fire and steam rises off them in wisps. The suffocating heat wraps around her throat.

Something seizes her by the hair, lifts up her head and she sees further…

A throne rises from the center of the room, a throne made of corpses arranged upright, tier after tier, faces looking outwards, limbs entwined at unnatural angles to form a densely packed structure of flesh. A grotesquely obese man, naked, his shame hidden in the folds of his fat, sits upon the
She realizes there is no throne—the pillar of corpses is underlain by the man’s flesh, engorged beyond all human proportion, and the corpses are not corpses at all. They live and they are fusing with each other and the man. Their mouths open and close, soundless wails that twist the very air around them.

They are being consumed.

Her head, her hair, is in the grasp of a thin woman, wearing the garb of a priestess of the Red God. The woman peers into Arya Stark’s face.

“Lo, our spells bring us another,” she says in accented common-tongue. She smiles, a kind, gentle smile. “Another god-touched faceless one. We are blessed.”

Her other hand rises and grabs Arya Stark’s chin, long nails digging into her flesh.

“Give her back her tongue,” she commands someone, someone out of the faceless one’s field-of-view.

There is a loosening, somehow, in her jaw.

The woman drags Arya Stark’s face back to the monstrosity pulsing in the center of the cavern.


“Not my god,” states the one who is no one. “It is but an ugly man.” She shrugs; it is a simple gesture, yet it saps almost all of her strength, to fight against the sorcerer’s hold to do it. But it must be done. “Valar morghulis.”

“Brave,” says the woman, sounding satisfied. “But so were the other two.”

Despite herself, the faceless one’s eyes widen as her gaze seeks, seeks and...finds. Two faces, planted upright into the center of this thing that is R’hllor. Their lower bodies are gone, fused into the great pillar of flesh; their arms dangle uselessly in front of them, twitching from time to time.

She knows those faces.

“Each of them gave us, in the space of a few moments, what would have taken us a thousand years of prayer and fire-sacrifices to achieve. And you will give us more.”

The faceless one’s gaze is fixated on her sister’s, and she realizes their arms, hands, are not simply twitching. They move with purpose, supplicating, warning.

“Run,” say the hands.

Something of them is still left, and it is being eaten alive.

“Do you know what a prophecy is?” asks the woman.

No one does not reply; tears are streaking down her face, and she has no control over them.

“A prophecy is not a foretelling,” continues the woman, unasked. “A prophecy is a self-fulfilling spell, laid layer upon layer upon the consciousness of people. The greatest of our number created such a spell, once. Soon, it will come to pass.”
The wonderment in the woman’s voice makes the faceless one look at her; the woman is staring at her ‘god’, gaze rapt.

She turns to the one who wears Arya Stark’s face, and now the red priestess’s look is a considering one. “I wonder if you will tell me who awakened as Death, in Valyria.”

The faceless one gives no indication that she has heard. Inside, she gently, gently wraps that name she knows, and Arya Stark knows and every other faceless one knows, she wraps it in that kernel of darkness and hides it, tucks it away into the farthest reaches of her consciousness so that not even a glimmer of that name touches her surface thoughts.

The woman smiles, as if she knows exactly what the faceless one does. “It is but idle curiosity, my dear,” she says gently. “Ten thousand years for awakening R’hllor, and yet Death woke in...moments, it felt like.” The woman peers closely at Arya Stark’s face, and it seems she finds nothing to satisfy her, because her mien turns less kind. “Idle curiosity, as I said. It matters not. Death will serve R’hllor, in the end.”

The faceless one hears footsteps, but she cannot turn her head. A second, red-robed figure—a man, this time, walks into her field-of-view.

“The Faceless Men work in our interest,” he says. “We do not say this to boast, you understand—we say this to break you. You may think to struggle, to escape—hope can be a great thing for one that is being tortured—but when you realize that your god is trapped...in the end, that is what broke your brothers.” The man sneers. “So this time will start with that.”

The one who is Arya Stark rolls her eyes.

The woman’s face distorts into a cruel sneer. “Would you like to know what we have in store for your god?”

“Our founder created a saviour, in his prophecy, his spell, and called him Azor Ahai,” says the man. “A great hero of light, to stand against darkness eternal. The champion of the God of Light. We molded this savior as times changed, and empires rose and fell. We added to the names of Azor Ahai—we made him into the Prince that was Promised.”

“Five kings have been sacrificed to his coming,” says the woman with a sweet smile.

“For the price of a single promise,” says the man, “to end slavery—and a promise costs us nothing at all—your god’s living avatar is going to plunge a dagger into the breast of the savior of humankind; a saviour that can no longer die but must rise and rise again.”

“At that moment,” says the woman, “it will not matter who your god is, or what he represents. The moment your god kills Azor Ahai, Death will be cast in the role of the Great Other of our prophesy; your god will be reborn—as the adversary of R’hllor. And the attributes of the Great Other...death will be no surcease. Death will no longer a mercy, a quiet laying down of one’s cares. Death will become unclean, feared, unwanted because death will eat away at a man’s soul and make him less than what he was, worms nibbling on a corpse, but the corpse will still move, will still live, a dreadful, fearful unlife.”

The woman’s face is glowing with some inner vision. “By his own hand, we will remake your god into the image of our enemy.”

The strength of the faceless one’s reaction is beyond her control, and beyond the control of the sorcerer who is controlling her.
She vomits.

The man steps closer to the one who is Arya Stark. “It is light that creates darkness; if the Great Other exists, causality demands that R’hllor awaken. The spell will resolve, thousands of years before it should.”

The woman has turned her gaze to the roof of the cavern, and her face is beatific. “And it shall come to pass that all the world cries out for a cleansing fire.”

“And then,” says the man, “the world will burn.”

Down in the pit of fire below the ledge, a dragon egg rocks.

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ARThUR

They don death-masks a day’s ride away from the Crossroads. The place hosts too many travellers to risk a brother’s face being exposed to someone who may encounter it somewhere else (on some other Faceless). Yet the place is too small to risk that a face will not be remembered, as is inevitable in a large city like Oldtown or King’s Landing.

Jaqen is a swordsman from the North, and goes by the name of Jorgen. Arya is a mace-wielder called Arthur, born and bred in the Vale of Arryn.

The two ride into the inn’s stablyard, and are greeted by three young men-- very young men--with crossbow-sights trained on the two Faceless. Jorgen gives the crossbows an amused, friendly smile and raises his hands in the air, so Arthur must follow suit.

“State your business!” squeaks the young man in the center, his voice at that awkward stage of puberty where every word uttered is a risk.

“Warm food, a bath, a bed for the night,” says Jorgen. “We have coin.”

“Bed”, not “beds”. Arya Stark leaks into Arthur for one giddy moment, and then she is gone.

The crossbows are lowered. It is the accent, Arthur decides--the northern accent. It demands some form of trust, even after the War of the Five Kings.

“Stable’s to the left, dinner’s served from the common pot,” says one of the other children, one whose voice has settled into something inoffensive. “Bath is ten silver each. We’ll see your coin now.”

“Ten silver!” explodes Arthur. “For hot water and soap?”

“Winter has come,” says the child. “Fuel is expensive.”

Jorgen looks at Arthur, eyebrow raised. Arthur shakes his head, holds out his hands in indecision, so it is Jorgen that decides for them. He pulls out a handful of silver sovereigns, some Baratheons, some Targaryen. “Ten each, but we want our laundry done. Half before, half after we’ve had our supper.”
Privately, Arthur thinks that the two of them may, perhaps, be a bit too fastidious in their habits. Hot baths, spiced meat, freshly washed shirts—these are not things a faceless one should care about.

“Valar morghulis,” murmurs Jorgen as they lead their horses to the stables. “Live when you can.”

“The money...” says Arthur. “The House provides only for needs, I was told.”

Jorgen snorts. “And what I need is a bath.”

Well, if he says this then it must be all right. All traces of guilt are subsumed in the thought of being warm, being clean again.

“This way, my lords,” says the boy, for he has morphed into a happy child with the pocketing of their gold.

“No lords here,” says Arthur. “We are sellswords.”

The boy gives them an incredulous look, and Arthur thinks, ruefully, that if he worked at an inn, and two mounted warriors showed up and paid twenty silver for a bath and clean shirts, she’d believe them to be lords as well. There is also the small matter of attitude...it is what led to Arya’s conviction that Jaqen, for all his Lorathi ways, was not “no one”.

There is an...an assurance in him; not arrogance, but a knowing. She recognized it in herself first, and it goes bone deep. She knows hers comes from being a Stark of Winterfell. And Jaqen H’ghar—who truly does believe that all men are equal—Jaqen H’ghar has purged every teaching and tenet of Valyria from himself and in this defiance forged a confidence that is impossible to erase.

Luckily for the both of them, their assurance carries over to each persona they wear; the confidence in the self sells their confidence in the cover. As servants, they are uppity, as soldiers they swagger, as farmers they have grit, as scholars they are pedants.

As sellswords, apparently they are arrogant (and flush with coin). But those that take them for nobles pretending to be sellswords will be smug that they have penetrated the “disguise”. Nobody will even begin to think that they could be Faceless Men, much less that they are the daughter of Eddard Stark and a man who could have been a dragonlord, but instead became something...more.

The room they are given is clean, with fresh rushes on the floor and a good-sized bed. She resolutely does not look at the bed. A large wooden bathtub is dragged into the room and set before the fire, then slowly filled, bucket-by-bucket with hot water. All the serving staff are a bit on the young side, and clumsy sometimes, though very diligent about mopping up any spilled water on their way out.

Eventually she is sits in the tub, up to her neck in warm bliss, the fireplace roaring behind her. She had expected a moment of awkwardness, in the discussion of who bathes first, who undresses first, but that strange road-accord still holds; no communication is required. She will bathe first, he will scout; the decision is made and there is no way to tell how it was arrived at.

No room for teasing either, she muses. But she is not sure how one goes about teasing when one is stark naked (though never defenceless, of course) and most of one’s weapons are out of reach, so it’s a good thing it didn’t happen.
Finally, a quarter-watch later the water has cooled and she rises, briskly towelling off. They have a few pieces of clothing left that are still clean—a thin shirt, no good for travel; a tunic with fine embroidery in case “wealthy merchant” was called for somewhere; two loose flowing pants in the Dornish style.

The first thing she wears is Arthur’s face. Then Arthur hauls open the door and calls for the bathwater to be changed.

Jorgen returns as Arthur is gathering his travel-soiled clothing into a bundle.

“There is a smith working here,” says Jorgen, and begins tugging off his own footwear.

“Our weapons are fine,” says Arthur. “I checked the horses’ shoes, too.”

“You know this smith,” says Jorgen, and his voice is flat. Absolutely flat.

Arthur looks up, and he understands. Gendry. There are some very small slivers of emotion—happiness, excitement, anger, fear—but those belong to Arya Stark, and he is Arthur, so he shrugs, and then immediately turns his back as Jorgen begins to undress.

He does not look around when the last shirt is tossed to the ground, simply gathers it up with his own dirty laundry, and heads to the kitchens to have someone take care of it.

His errand completed, a red-faced laundry woman having taken their garments with an air of false obsequity, Arthur cannot help but sneak a peek at the smithy.

Gendry has grown; his muscles are grotesquely large, and he sports a little beard, like Renly Baratheon. The look of him wipes clean most of the excitement Arya feels at seeing her old friend again—he looks now as he looked in her dream, when she died beside the pool. He looks like a thinner, younger version of the man that ordered the murder of Sansa’s Lady (who would have dared touch Sansa had her direwolf lived?), the man who drew noble, honorable Eddard Stark into a world that ate the northman alive.

This was the fate she had been trapped in, the fearful symmetry of some story Arya has still not detangled. The story of Lyanna Stark, who chose between Robert Baratheon and a Targaryen Prince, and escaped the tangle only in death. Arya, who would have chosen between the son of Robert Baratheon and a Targaryen—Daenerys, a woman, and Jon, her brother are her only candidates. Death is merciful—Arya, too, has escaped that tangle by dying.

All that is left in her heart for the smith so assiduously ignoring her as she surveys his show-pieces, all that is left is a child’s fond memory.

Arthur turns his attention from the smith to his work—the crossbow quarrels, a sword, dozens of woodsmen’s axes—the work is good. The smith’s master in King’s Landing could work Valyrian steel...Arthur wonders if it is a skill the smith can learn.

Deep inside, Arya begins to plot.

Dinner is served in the common room, all the guests and most of the servants and workers gathering under one roof. A chunk of farmer’s bread—neither fragrant nor soft, but still wholesome, comes with their bowls of stew.
To Arthur’s consternation, Jorgen takes his bowl and bread, then heads to the table where the smith is talking with two of the boys—one of them, the one with the squeaky voice, is the crossbow-wielders’ leader from before. Again, Arthur must follow.

“Mind if we sit here?” asks Jorgen.

The smith waves at them absently—it is a reasonable request, all the tables are occupied—and continues explaining the steps for annealing iron to the boys.

“What is the purpose to this?” Arthur asks Jorgen, in north-laced common. The question is innocuous enough, the smith glances at them, then looks away.

Jorgen does not respond, simply dips his bread in the stew, and takes a bite.

Arthur spoons up his stew as well, all the while watching the smith out of the corner of his eye.

*What are you trying to show me, Jaqen? Am I supposed to kill him? He was hunted by the Lannisters...has the Mad Queen unbent enough to actually hire a Faceless Man?*

“Are you giving me a name?”

Jorgen looks up, startled. “The girl knows him. It is Not Done.”

Arthur sighs, leans back on the bench. “**Do** we have work, Jorgen?”

“No.”

“Then *why* have we come this way?” He means Gendry’s table, of course, not the Inn—they are headed to the Twins, and from this point on, snow and rushing rivers will make cross-country treks inadvisable. They must follow the road north, and the road begins at the Crossroads.

Jorgen puts his bread aside, picks up a spoon. “The girl was friends with him; I thought you might want a few words.” His voice gives nothing away.

*Friends? Friendship was an easy thing, when we were children--companions and playmates thrown together. A butcher’s boy, a blacksmith’s apprentice, a pie-maker. I have changed, Jaqen, I am not the girl whose memories you have. My criteria for friendship are no longer a matter of proximity of age or happenstance--my friends are killers, each and every one of them.*

The subject of their conversation is digging into his stew with all the grace of a rampaging bull, and is completely oblivious to their scrutiny, let alone any subtext. The sound-level in the common room has risen to a dull roar as conversations and friendly grousing breaks out all around them.

Arthur lowers his voice; the one his words are meant for can read lips, after all. “She is happy her childhood companion is safe and has found a place of his own and nobody wants to kill him. But an exchange of words is not necessary.”

Jorgen opens his mouth to speak, and Arthur sets down his bowl with a heavy *thunk*.

“This discussion is over, Jorgen.”

Jorgen sighs. “As you wish.”

They sit in strained silence as the noise of the crowd ebbs and crests around them; the meal is over quickly.
As one, they rise, and go to check on the horses--the additional silvers handed over to the innkeeper should have bought Steel and Horse oats, but the honesty of teen-aged stableboys is always a chancy thing to rely upon.

The stablehands are honest, it seems, and far too curious for their own good--they linger, even when their work is done, hoping to catch the “lords” at something.

Arthur and Jorgen spend some time currying the horses and checking all the bits of tack; the silence is less strained. There are six other horses stabled at the inn, but none that look like destriers, and no tack that shows the colors of any house. Brigands and outlaws may be staying at the inn, but no professional soldiers. Still, they have both marked multiple routes of egress from the inn--the stable itself holds four, three of which allow them to take their horses.

Jorgen waits for the stable hands to finally leave before he speaks.

“He is a very handsome man.”

Arthur snorts. “If a woman wants to bed the ghost of a young Robert Baratheon, sure.”

“There is a symmetry to it,” he says softly. “Would a boy have wanted to bed the ghost of a young Lyanna Stark?”

“Death breaks all symmetry,” says Arthur, and lets Jorgen see his small, secret smile. It always makes Jaqen uneasy, that smile, and so Arya uses it but rarely.

“A girl had affection for the boy, once.”

And, suddenly, Arthur sees the shape of this thing, this thing that prompts Jaqen to throw Arya at the smith: jealousy, and some strange self-effacing masochism...and underneath it all, a test.

Arya Stark rises to the fore, and though the face she wears is Arthur’s her eyes burn with an ice-cold rage. She turns on him, and sees that “Jorgen”, too, has fled. She steps around Steel’s head, and advances on the Lorathi.

“Who was the first man a girl had affection for, childish and confused and unknowing as it was?” Her voice is a vicious whisper.

He takes a step back. “Jaqen H’ghar.” His tone is even, not yet afraid.

He dares to test me.

She advances. “Who holds a girl’s coin?” Her voice is louder now, though no less controlled, no less furious.

He ignores their looks, his gaze focused on her face. He is beginning to grow uneasy, and he steps back a pace again. “Jaqen H’ghar.” His voice is softer, placating.

I will not be placated.

“Who is the man a girl has dreamed of, night after night after night?” She is shouting now, and he has nowhere to retreat to.

“Jaqen H’ghar,” he whispers.

She steps right up to him, and wearing Arthur’s body she stands eye-to-eye with him. That deep, dark distress is rising in him; perhaps he anticipates her next question: Who is the man who led a
glimpse of the girl into darkness as she died beside a pool?

From the pinnacle of her fury, she sees his trepidation. And she takes pity on him.

“So of all the things that remain unsaid between a girl and Jaqen H’ghar,” she says, “Jaqen H’ghar chooses to talk about a village blacksmith?”

Then she leaves him, standing against the stable wall, and stalks to their room.

He comes up as night is falling, and starts laying out a bedroll before the fire.

“Unarmed combat, winner gets the bed?” She asks sweetly. She doesn’t wait for a response, she lunges at him, and the body she wears has a long reach. She grapples with him, and with what he perhaps takes to be recklessness, puts him in an elementary hold too quickly. In a fight, it is a mistake--breaking that hold is easy and transfers all advantage to the one that is currently held.

She has learned to be calculated in her anger: it is impossible for him to break the hold without hurting her. He slumps, signalling defeat, but she is too canny for such tactics. She sweeps his leg out from under him instead, and dumps him on the bed.

She drops beside him, and grabs a pillow to curl up around.

“Go to sleep,” she says.

He places a hand, gently, on her shoulder. “Forgiv--”

She sits up, yanks his pillow out from under him and takes it to the bedroll, along with her own.

In the morning, the storm inside her has passed, leaving in its wake a focused, sharp-edged serenity. It has helped, that the God has spent a portion of the night apologizing to her by giving her a wolf-dream, where she bounds through an endless forest and tastes blood as she rips out a Lannister bannerman’s throat.

They have planned to leave mid-morning, to assure the smallest chance of them encountering people on the road. Other travellers will have made a very early start, and farmers and merchants will be at their work.

Impassive, faceless, Jorgen and Arthur lead their horses out of the stable. They must pass the smithy on their way out. Arthur pauses in front of the dark doorway--the cherry-red glow of hot metal is the only thing that is visible inside.

The sound of ringing iron stops.

Gendry emerges, his eyes squinting against the light of day. “Can I help you?”

“That knife,” says Arthur, pointing to one of the blades on display on the windowsill--the poor man’s display case.

Wordlessly, the smith hands up the blade. Arthur tosses it a couple of times, likes the balance. It is not built for Arya Stark’s hand--the weight is too far towards the tip, and she likes to throw knives while holding the blade. But someone else prefers a handle-throw.

“Thirty silver.”

“Twenty, and a sharpening stone.”

They settle on twenty-eight, but with a sharpening stone and a sheath; coins are exchanged.

Arya looks out through Arthur’s eyes, and assesses the smith with all the objectivity she can muster. There is no more anger in her towards him, nor affection. No regret. Nothing.

“Are you the Gendry from King’s Landing whose master could work Valyrian steel?” asks Arthur.

The smith looks up. “Do I know you?” He is wary, tense, his hand clenching surreptitiously around the handle of his smith’s hammer.

“No, blacksmith. But I believe you had a friend once--Arya Stark.”

The smith’s eyes widen. “I knew there was something about you two--you kept looking at me! I thought you were sent to...how did...do you have news of her?”

“She is doing well. She spoke of you, described you, said you had been friends when you were children. We will convey her regards, on her behalf, as she would have wanted us to if she knew you were here.”

The smith relaxes a bit. “You are heading north?”

“Winterfell.”

“She is well?” he asks.

“Aye, she is.”

The smith sets his hammer down on the stoop, and shuffles from foot to foot. Arya’s horse dances under her, impatient to be on the road.

“Um,” says the smith, “I know she is a great lady and all...but...is she betrothed?”

Jorgen is absolutely nonchalant; Arya can feel the fury radiating off Jaqen, and the God is snarling in her ear.

It makes Arya feel all warm inside. Her joints loosen under the warmth, and Arthur relaxes down into the saddle, finds his seat.

“Yes,” says Arthur. “To the Sealord of Braavos, should the negotiations go well.”

The smith deflates a bit.

Arthur cannot let the opportunity pass. “There are complications, of course,” he says with a sidelong glance at ‘Jorgen’. “She has also found religion, and there are rumors that she is in love with yet another foreigner--a Lorathi priest.”

The blacksmith looks up, confused.

“Priests from Lorath are not celibate,” explains Arthur.

“The Red-and-White God,” says Arthur with a shrug, as if he doesn’t understand it either. “It is a Lorathi thing.”

_That_ is finally too much for Arthur’s companion. “Lady Arya is far too young for religion and priests,” says the swordsman, glaring at Arthur.

Arthur shrugs. “I just tell it like it is—you can argue with Lady Arya herself, if you like, I’d like to see how far that takes you.”

The blacksmith realizes there are undertones to the conversation, but cannot figure them out for the life of him.

“Lady Arya is far too persistent for her own good,” growls Jorgen.

A smile finally makes its way to the smith’s face. “That is how I remember her,” he says ruefully.

“Well, she sends her regards,” says Arthur, and shakes out his reins. “Farewell, Blacksmith.”

The ride out of the inn’s gates; she can feel the smith’s gaze on her back all the way to the bend in the road, until the inn finally slips from view.

With a sigh, Arya takes off the death-mask. Jaqen follows suit.

“Here,” she says, giving him the knife she has just bought. “It’s weighted well for you.”

Jaqen takes the knife with a quirked eyebrow. “A man does not know what he did to deserve a present.”

“It is an apology,” she says. “For a girl’s deplorable loss of temper yesterday.”

They ride in silence for a half-mile.

“The temper was unexpected,” he says finally. “But not entirely...undeserved. And, since a man is being honest, not...unwelcome.”

“If a man wants to be yelled at, he really should just ask for it instead of involving innocent bystanders.”

Jaqen gives a short, sharp bark of laughter. “A man will keep this in mind, lovely girl.”

She turns, looks into his eyes. There are many things still very much unsaid between the two of them, but, bit by bit... _How much more can we tease out into the open in the week we have left to the Twins?_ The thought sobered her. Walder Frey...his death is a pressing urge, but there is a place they must go after.

Jaqen is pensive; he looks inwards, and she knows he, too, is examining memories of Catelyn Stark.

Together, she thinks. And it is a strange sort of comfort, this _knowing_ that he stands at her side, always, and the worst thing that can happen to her while he is with her is death, and death, well, death is no evil thing at all.

Chapter End Notes
So I should clarify that I don't hate Gendry as a person, and Arya/Gendry has its place-in stories where the rift created by the Lyanna/Rhaegar vs. Robert ill-fated cycle is supposed to be healed, thematically speaking. This is not such a story, of course. Sorry guys, if any of you ship A/G.

Next up: Walder Frey on Saturday morning (maybe Friday).

Also, thank you everyone for your comments and feedback! Really encouraging, keeps us working like mad :)
ARYA

They camp on a small wooded dell overlooking the Twins. A small underground feeder-stream of the Green Fork bubbles out of the ground for a few lengths beside their campsite. They light no fire, instead sitting beside each other with blankets around their shoulders, looking at small river barges intermittently floating up and down the larger river half a league away.

“A plan would be good,” murmurs Jaqen.

She draws her blanket closer around herself. “I have a plan already,” she says. “We catch him, immobilize him, then make him watch as we slit the throat of every last Frey in front of him--we’ll collect the blood in a basin, and then we’ll drown him in it.”

Jaqen leans back against his pack, legs outstretched before him. “That’s not a plan, vengeful girl.”

She considers it. “What if we kill his sons, bake them into a pie, and feed it to him before we slit his throat?”

He gives her a look. “No, that is not a plan either.”

She sighs. “What would you suggest?”

He leans forward, picks up a stick and starts drawing lines into a patch of undisturbed snow in front of them. “This is the Twins,” he says. Despite herself, she draws forward. “Here is the river. And here is the Lannister army, marching back to King’s Landing.” He pauses. “Shuffling will perhaps be a better word. They are slow.”

“Geography is the mother of strategy,” she murmurs, looking at the crudely drawn map. “The road will be guarded; so will the gates.”

“Just so,” he says, and his tone finally approves of the direction of her thoughts. “Here,” he draws a small rectangle on the western side of the keep. “Riverboats dock right up against the walls. We will need a boat, some vegetables, perhaps, and they will wave us straight through to the market.”

The blanket falls off her shoulder as she reaches forward. “Deliver the goods to the lord’s kitchen, take a servant’s face…”

“That,” he says, “is the beginnings of a plan.”

“It’s too easy,” she mutters.

“A thing does not have to be complicated and macabre to be a plan, lovely girl,” he says. “Most of the time, ‘complicated’ and ‘macabre’ are simply other words for ‘inefficient’ and ‘one-dimensional’.”

He is right, she realizes. Focusing on the moment of the kill, focusing on what it will feel like to slide a blade through Walder Frey’s flesh and muscle and sinew... it limits her. And as she sees the edges of that limitation, she starts freeing herself from it, beginning with her imaginings of the look
on Walder Frey’s face (she knows he is an old man, garrulous and lecherous, but that is all) when
Arya Stark slits his throat.

As her thoughts are freed of their compulsive, circular path, an image forms in her mind’s eye—not
of the map in front of her, but another map, built of networks of alliances, threads connecting lands,
and their lords.

_Lannister and Frey, Frey and Lannister._ She looks up and Jaqen is watching her, expressionless. _If
I see it now, he’s seen it a while ago._

“How many plans do _you_ have for this?” she asks him; a roundabout question. _Is he helping me, or
training me, or testing me._

“One or two, lovely girl,” he says softly. “One or two, and bits and pieces.”

_Helping and training and testing._

“I think I have a...comprehensive plan,” she ventures.

“A girl moved from Frey-pies to a political strategy rather quickly.”

“I’m starting to like the Lorathi way,” she says, moved to honesty as she basks in his approval. “It
frees me from...myself.” She is not sure she can maintain this clarity, not when it comes time for
the kill, but for now...

She notices that he has become thoughtful, inwards-looking. “The Lorathi way is as much a trap as
any other,” he murmurs. “It, too, has its constraints.”

She sighs. _Not fair, Jaqen, to undermine my trust in a path just, just when I begin to walk it._ The
thought is...not entirely correct. _I undermined his trust in it first, when I knew nothing of it at all; I
was not fair, either._ She draws closer to him. Not touching, just...close. The stars shine overhead
through a rare break in the clouds.

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**WALDER FREY**

“Speak up, boy,” he grouses at the messenger, then breaks into muttering. “Where is the girl with
the wine, these people don’t know how to serve their lord, the wine wasn’t late when Jamie Fucking
Lannister was here, was it?”

“Sir, the two Lannister soldiers are still waiting, they are demanding to see you.”

“Pah!” he says, and waves a hand dismissively. “Soldiers don’t get to meet with the Lord of the
Riverlands. Send my son. The steward. Lothar? Where is my useless son? Ah, there you are. Go
see to these fucking Lannisters. Take Black Walder along, can’t intimidate a Lannister with that
twisted leg, can you? Go, go, deal with it! Where is my wine?”

The wine comes, the sycophants all around him, the “court” all drinking his wine.

Some time later, his son and grandson return. Lothar limps closer, and he is looking at his father.
Walder Frey has lived a long time, outlived all of his enemies—he knows when a man has murder in
his eyes.
He laughs. “Come to kill your father have you, Lothar? I made you steward and you made a deal with the Lannisters!”

The hall has fallen silent; Walder Frey’s court looks at the tableau before it with a growing unease.


His grandson, his dutiful grandson, grabs Lothar, and the weaker man cannot escape.

“I wonder how he suddenly grew a spine?” Walder Frey murmurs. Then, louder, “Out, all of you, out!” He waves at his court and they scurry, like beetles, to get out of the room. “And round up all the Lannisters and throw them out of the Twins! Tell them to get out! Get out!”

Then, and only then, Walder Frey gets out of his chair. He walks, stooped but wiry, still very much alive, thank you, to the wall and grabs a pike. “Want a lordship, do you? I’ll show you what a Lannister plot against me deserves.” He turns back to the hall. “Out!” he shouts, and the last of the useless twats in the hall flee, and then he is alone with Lothar and Black Walder.

He is baffled when Black Walder lets his uncle go, and Lothar straightens.

“That worked better than I expected,” says Lothar with satisfaction.

Understanding dawns. “You’re both in this together! Guar--”

His shout is muffled. Black Walder has moved to his side, faster than his eyes can follow--how did his grandson learn to move like that?--and Walder Frey doubles over, gasping for breath with a punch to the solar plexus.

In a few moments, the Lord of the Riverlands is gagged and bound, on his knees on the floor before the high table.

And then, Lothar reaches up and somehow... removes a mask, of flesh and hair, and so does Black Walder.  

These are not mine! One of them--the one who was wearing Black Walder’s face--is a girl, a pretty girl, with dark hair. The other is a strange man, with white and red hair and a foreigner’s features. Faceless Men. He knows the tales.

He realizes he has lost control of his bladder.

Not Lannisters. Faceless men. Where is my son? All the people that fled the hall--I will die here and they will all see a Lannister plot behind it. Who paid the Faceless Men for me? Everything, everything, all for nothing. Edmure Tully will take everything. My son! My sons, have they killed my sons?

The man with red and white hair speaks. “My brother died here,” he says, and he is looking around the hall, and it confuses Walder Frey. “My mother...well, I suppose she died here as well.”

Mother and brother...but this man is not a Stark! He is a foreigner!

The girl speaks. “Does Arya Stark wish to do this thing herself?”

Arya Stark? And he realizes the girl has the Stark look about her; not like the young wolf in this hall, but an older look, of the north and people dead a generation ago.
The man with red and white hair looks at Walder Frey.

“Killing him by my own hand,” whispers the man. “I imagine it.” Unholy joy lights up the man’s features, it twists at Walder Frey’s bowels; if there was anything urine left in him it would join the rest, puddled in cold wetness around his knees. “This feeling, I cannot expunge it, it feels too good.”

The girl has pulled out a knife, a sharp blade, light breaking into splinters along its edge.

“A gift should be given,” says the man with red and white hair. “You understand mercy. You should give it.”

The girl walks forward, and there is a burning sensation across his neck for a moment. She slit my throat! He still can’t believe it.

He starts believing it when he cannot breathe, the wet copper smell spreads with the coldness, down his chest. She slit my throat!

“Valar morghulis,” the girl whispers.

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ARYA

She holds herself in the blank detachment of a Lorathi; it comes to her now, though not easily, but as always, wearing Jaqen’s face amplifies whatever seed of serenity she has in herself.

Jaqen has worn her face for the killing of Walder Frey--has he worn it for the others as well, Meryn Trant, Ilyn Payne? The grim pleasure she feels at that thought she cannot suppress. In wearing her face he has made the deaths a proper vengeance--vengeance by proxy, but a Stark vengeance nonetheless.

No one will dare to go into the dining hall for at least half a watch. They mount Lannister horses, wearing Lannister faces, and ride openly out of the front gate in the vanguard of “their” detachment. Arya’s saddlebags bulge strangely, but the Freys are too busy sneering at the Lannisters and the Lannisters are too busy being angry for anyone to notice.

The saddlebags contain a gift for her mother: Lothar, Black Walder, and Walder Frey; three heads wrapped tightly in a banner ripped from the walls of the dining hall.

As dusk approaches, the ranking officer of their little Lannister company assigns third-watch (the worst one, when it comes to a soldier getting some rest) to the two who have been lagging behind the train.

The two wait for their watch, and then slip away on foot into the pitch-black night.

Dawn finds them at their campsite next to the stream, the horses still tethered where they left them. She kneels at the edge of the water and begins scrubbing her hands. There is no blood; this is a symbolic gesture.

“It is done, then,” says Jaqen gently, and he comes to kneel beside her.

She doesn’t look at him. “I don’t feel any different.” When he doesn’t say anything, she expands. “Arya Stark is finally, truly, dead, and I don’t feel any different.”
“The Ironborn have a saying,” he says thoughtfully. “What is dead may never die.”


She is surprised when he reaches for her; he holds her chin and draws her face towards him, and she imagines he leaves a trace of Walder Frey’s blood on her skin. But his hands are clean, and his face inches closer to hers and her heart is hammering under her ribcage. She closes her eyes, and feels the gentlest pressure of his lips on hers.

The chasteness of the kiss reminds her of her first kiss from Him of the Many Faces, and that makes her irrationally irritated. She turns away, and continues scrubbing roughly at her skin.

“Lovely girl,” he says, his face so close to hers. “Why are you suddenly angry with a man?”

She looks at him incredulously.

“A man hopes a girl does not doubt what a man feels. That a girl does not mistake restraint for...a lack of affection.”

_What am I supposed to think, Jaqen?_ But her shoulders relax, a bit.

“So a girl _did_ doubt,” he says, amused and a little sad. He sits down beside her, and she just knows he’s going to try levity.

“A man will offer a girl a deal,” he says.

“Another one?” she mutters into the the water.

“Well, if a girl doesn’t want to hear...”

It earns him a glare, which he deflects with a chuckle. “When our work here is done,” he says, “a man will take a girl back to the House of Black and White, and they can...open negotiations.”

“That’s _it_?” The words explode out of her. “One measly kiss and a promise to open negotiations?”

Jaqen throws his head back and laughs. “A girl must learn patience,” he says, finally.

“Aarrgh!” The strangled sound is the only communication she can muster in the moment. _Not all of us are immortal assassin-avatars of the God of Death, Jaqen._ “Not all of us have the time to learn patience!” she says instead. “Some of us could die any day! _Valar fucking morghulis_ , Jaqen!”

He puts his own hands in the water and draws hers out; her hands are freezing, the water is freezing, and she has not realized it until his skin burns against hers.

“But not today,” he says softly.

She turns to him, and reaches out, her fingers trailing against his jaw. “I want a proper kiss.”

Unbidden, his hand rises to her face in turn, and they are forehead-to-forehead again, and she remembers they stood like this once before on the docks of Oldtown a lifetime ago.

Their breaths mingle between them, his breathing synchronized with hers, and she can feel his pulse beneath her fingers.

“A girl plays with something she doesn’t understand,” he whispers.
“How can I, if you don’t show me?” she asks and her voice is equally low.

He twists, and pushes her down to the ground. And then she is on her back, and he is on top of her, and his mouth descends on hers in a savage, raw kiss. She bites at his lips, arches into him, her hands are fisted in his hair. His tongue strokes the outline of her lower lip, she parts her mouth, and then his tongue is in her, sliding against her own.

Her entire body is alight, a giddy, trembling warmth pooling in her lower belly. She doesn’t know what to do, she can only open her mouth more, and drown.

His hand is gripping her hip and her back is arching.

“Jaqen”, she moans.

He pulls back, but not far. He is still on top of her, his weight pressing her into the ground, and she can feel him, hard, against her thigh.

“Now does a girl understand?” he asks. “She is playing with fire.”

Both their breathing is ragged.

“No, she doesn’t understand yet,” she breathes. “You need to show her some more.”

He groans, and buries his face in her neck.

“I will take you,” he whispers savagely, and she has never known that a simple shift of pronoun can contain so much ragged need, can turn her thoughts to water. “I will do to you each and every depraved thing that I have wanted to do to you for so long.” He grinds into her. “I will slake every desire I have in your body.”

Arya’s eyes are glazed over, she knows she is looking at him stupidly, but she cannot collect her thoughts… she just feels.

His lifts himself into his elbows, and she is no longer pressed to him and she almost sobs from the lack.

“But not yet.”

“Why?” she is begging.

He doesn’t answer. Slowly, slowly, they both sit up. He shifts, off her, and instantly she finds herself missing the warmth of him. But he does not go far--he is still right next to her, half-sitting.

“Because, for some reason, a man wants to start the doing of this thing in a clean bed, with blankets against the cold and a fire in the hearth. Not like this.” He gestures to the sodden ground.

Horror is swiftly banking the fire of need in her. “Are you a romantic?” she blurts out, disbelieving.

He says nothing, waiting for her, watching her face.

“All the teasing, all the poetry…” she trails off. “That was courting.” The horror has not lessened, but she is not done yet. “I was being courted.” Now there is wonder, then a thrill. “You were courting me.”

“Words must suffice, lovely girl, when there are no flowers around.” He purses his lips. “Or
Lannisters,” he mutters.

How can she reconcile this suddenly wistful, gentle Jaqen with the man who told her he was going to do depraved things to her just a moment ago?

“So,” he says, “all those thing Sansa put into your head--this courting thing--is it so very bad?”

She digs in herself for the most true answer she can give him. “It is horrible. Please tell me you haven’t wanted me like that, like this for a whole month!”

He looks at her with some amusement, for a smile plays around his lips. “Years,” he says quietly.

She throws herself back down to the ground. “Arrgh!”

“It is not just a romantic’s ideas, lovely girl,” he says. “Something tells a man this is not the time. That a storm gathers on the horizon, and we will lose everything if we do this now.” All trace of levity has been wiped from his voice. “Is this from the God?” he asks her.

Why are you asking me, are you really that obtuse? Since you feel this way, Jaqen, of course it’s from the God.

She wants to scream again, restrains herself. The Lorathi way has its own constraints. Death marches to no man--or woman’s--timetable. And, truthfully, after the things he groaned into her ear, she is ready to forgive him almost anything at all.

“If you feel this, then it is not the time,” she says, though it galls her to do so.

“If you agree,” he says, “it must be so.”

“Will you answer something for me?” she asks, turning to her side to look up at him again.

“Anything,” he says, and his face is utterly open to her, unshuttered, perhaps for the first time. She thrills at the power of it.

“That woman, that one you dreamed about, the one who brought you to your knees...who was it? Was it a sister in the order?”

He looks incredulous. “After everything you have just learned, this is your question?” Then he sees the uncertainty in her, because he leans closer to her, over her. “It is a faceless one, lovely girl,” he says. “Though a man does not think of her as his sister in any way. She is impetuous and beautiful and lethal, and wise, and she has haunted his dreams for years.”

He, too, lies back down, facing her. Side by side--she does not know who moves first, but their legs are entwined.

“You bring me to my knees, my love,” he says.

Her eyes close; his words rouse a craving in her for something she did not know she wanted to hear. She feels a pressure at her waist--he is draping his arm over her, he draws closer to her.

“Say it again,” she commands.

“You bring me to my knees,” he says.

She opens her eyes. He’s laughing at me! She punches him in the arm.
“Not nice, my love,” he says.

And then she moves, and he is on his back and she is straddling him, careful not to touch any part of him lower than his waist; she is playing with fire, and she can break his will if she tries...but she is a servant of the Many-Faced God, and His intuition should not be so easily discarded.

She pins his arms at his side, gently, ever so gently--a featherlight touch from her fingers is enough to confine him.

She leans down, touches her lips to his; a light pressure, nothing more.

She realizes she needn’t have feared, anything, ever; she knows his lips, she knows licking the corner of his mouth makes him grin, she knows stroking his tongue with her own makes him groan, she knows sucking on his lower lip makes him aggressive.

She has been kissing him properly since she was fifteen.

“Was the courting very horrible?” he asks, and there is a plaintiveness to him she has not seen before.

“It was horrible exactly in the way that this is horrible,” she murmurs, and takes his lower lip between hers, sucks, bites down gently, and restrains, restrains him on the ground with the lightest of touches.

“Then say it.” It is his turn to demand.

She shakes her head, no.

His eyes glitter. “Say it, lovely girl.”

That was a warning, she thinks. She bites her lower lip, and considers him. She looks him in the eye and thinks of all the things she wants to do to him; she can tell by the dilation of his pupils that he knows what she imagines.

She waits.

It is only when she has taken him to the edge of his patience that she speaks:

“I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,
risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.”

His eyes have closed, his head is on the ground, unarmored throat arcing towards her. She has released his hands, and they are clamped around her hips. Her voice is low, unstudied when she continues.

“I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
so I love you because I know no other way
than this: where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.”

She watches the curve of his throat, the muscles, taut on each side.
Eventually, after some time, he relaxes, releases his hold on her and only then does he realize how strong his grip had been.

“When did a girl get into a man’s saddlebags?” His customary, sardonic teasing has returned to him. But his hands draw circles at her sides, gentle, soothing, apologizing.

“I need less sleep than you,” she says. She will wear bruises on her hips tomorrow, in the shape of his fingers. The idea fills her with dark satisfaction.

“Ah, youth,” he says.

She has no response to that, so she kisses him again.

JAQEN

She lies beside him, his cloak beneath them, her head on his chest. Her breathing is gentle, she sleeps and he must wake her in a little bit so they can find the blankets and rebuild a huddle.

But he has thoughts cascading through him, and they do not stop.

He knows what it feels like to lie beside her on a bed made of stone, and taste the pulse at her throat. A dream extended, extruded into the world.

“Beloved, let me go,” she says, and it does not sound like she means it.

“My bride is trapped,” he says playfully, “between a rock and a hard place, as it were.”

“Your bride has training, and must be allowed to wake up,” she says, pressing into him. “She will get bad looks from the others if she is late.”

“A kiss then, and I will consider letting you be on time.”

At the Citadel in oldtown, a year before she came to him, he had sent his ravens north, and east and west, seeking news of Brandon Stark. He had collected rumors, bit by bit pieced together a picture, traced a travel route over a map of the land before the wall.

“Is Bran alive?”

It is one of the first questions she has asked him, once they start speaking again after the pool.

Yes, he replies, for though he only knows the names of people once they come to him in death, there are some names he watches for, and “Stark” has not been heard by him since the Red Wedding.

“Where is he?”

“I will find out.”
Jaqen H’ghar feels like he cannot breathe.

_Breathe_.

In.

Out.

He will not think about this thing. Not now.

Her kiss was a catalyst, a triggering of a deluge no dam could stand against. Each kiss he remembers is a cascade. She knelt, beside her bed, and would not look at him as she experienced Valyria; all he could do was hold her shoulders.

His eyes are watering. He raises a hand, and it comes away red with blood.

_Breathe_.

In.

Out.

He must retreat to the first discipline of the mind he has learned—closing windows against arrogance, against ego, against being, until such a time as those things can be understood, and annihilated.

_A man is just a man; all men are equal. A man is not a god. A man is just a man. All men are equal, no better, no worse, than their fellow man. A man cannot be a god; such thoughts are born of arrogance._ Such thoughts set a man apart, set a man above his fellow man; such thoughts are not allowed to take root.

“How long must I stay here?” It is the first time she has asked him that question, though he has known it is coming for some time.

“Only as long as you want,” he replies.

“What will I do in Westeros?”

“You will see your family again. You will pray in the godswood.”

“How?” she asks. “I want to be faceless. I want to serve.”

He chuckles, places a kiss on her temple. “Bend your pretty, brilliant mind to the task, beloved, you will find a way to get everything you want.”
“Even you?”

The cat is a cunning one, he thinks, “Mmm,” he says, noncommittally. She is far too young, and Death cannot extrapolate past the third name he still owes her.

Jaqen H’ghar shudders, and continues closing windows in his mind.

ARYA

She comes to full alertness when the sky is darkening again, when he shifts under her, and they throw together a half-hearted huddle. She has first watch, and then a few hours before dawn, it is his turn.

Wolves howl all around them through the night.

In the morning, Arya wakes to find the fire already lit and Jaqen already up, and a giant grey-and-white direwolf sitting beside him.

“Nymeria!”

In her rush, her feet tangle in her blanket, and she almost falls, but she makes it to the wolf’s side and throws her arms around her.

Suddenly, everything shifts, and she is looking out through the eyes of the direwolf.

*Her people--her girl and her master, both glow with a darkness that picks them out in stark relief against the white snow. There is a smell of man, of girl, blood on the both of them.*

*The girl will bleed.*

*There are rabbits, and the acrid stink of an army nearby, and the ground smells the cold wet smell of mold.*

She pulls herself back. Jaqen is watching her.

“So that was warging,” he says.

“What did it look like?” she is very curious. “It felt...brief.”

“A dozen or so heartbeats,” he agrees. “Your eyes went white, rolled back in your head. Your face became very still.” He snorts. “It explains why a man’s Lorathi brother did not see it, when Cat-of-the-Canals warged into a cat for his test--it looks like you are blind, and he had already blinded you.”

“Oh,” she says. “Um. Why does Nymeria think you are her master, not me?” Arya knows the
answer, of course, but she wants to push him, gently.

But he just grins, unconcerned for the implications. “Someone had to take care of the wolf dreams while you were learning to be faceless. You offered her to the God; He delegated the responsibility.”

“Delegated?” Horse-shit. “I see.”

Then Nymeria turns her beautiful head, and Arya clutches her wolf tighter, burying her head into Nymeria’s fur. “I’m sorry I had to send you away,” she whispers, “but they would have killed you, like they killed Lady. I am sorry I had to throw rocks at you, I didn’t want to, I didn’t know how to make you understand. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Nymeria whuffs, then blows air into Arya’s face.

“She has a whole pack of her own now,” says Jaqen. “They hunt Freys, Freys and Lannisters.”

“We shall see how the pack likes the forest around Winterfell,” says Arya.

By his silence, she knows Jaqen is giving this due consideration. “It will have to be handled carefully. Food is getting scarce as winter comes, and they are used to eating man.” He hesitates. “And, love, she is not tame, she will never be tame, or live inside human dwellings all the time.”

Arya leans back from her (his) direwolf, and nods sadly. “Essos may not be the best place for her.” She takes a deep breath. “When we go back to Braavos, I would like to share the wolf dreams with you, know that she is well.”

He raises an eyebrow. “A girl will leave her direwolf behind again?”

There is some test there. And with Jaqen’s tests...Jaqen’s tests she always passes with raw honesty and nothing else.

Your direwolf, she thinks. “I will do what you think is best.”

He looks at her in wonder. “And when did a girl become tame?”

She smiles, showing him her teeth. “It’s just a matter of clarifying pack hierarchy, love. Nymeria is yours. But who do you belong to?”

His eyes are troubled, as if he doesn’t want to give her an answer she doesn’t want to hear; he thinks she wants to hear that Jaqen H’ghar belongs to her.

“Jaqen H’ghar serves the Many-Faced God,” he says, finally.

She smiles, reassuring. Arya’s tests, too, are passed with the truth.

“And who does the God belong to?”

He grows dark. “This is a dangerous line of questioning, lovely girl, a dangerous thing when mortals think the gods serve them.”

“I said nothing about serving; I serve. There is no hubris in me, not for this. Never for this. Look at me.”

He looks.
“Who does the God belong to?” The question is soft, measured. It is a game they have played before, Arya and Him of the Many Faces, the sort of games lovers play: I am yours and you are mine. Mine. Mine. Yours, always, yours and yours alone.

The answer is dragged out of him, and it is not by his own will. “The God belongs to Arya Stark,” he breathes.

“Just so,” she says. And then she notices something in his eyes.

Before she knows it, she is kneeling before him, her fingertips brushing over his face, something almost like panic bubbling in her. “Love, why are your eyes bleeding?” she whispers.

He gently moves her hands away from his face, shrugs. “Just a burst blood vessel,” he says. “It happens, sometimes, especially in this kind of weather. Just a blood vessel, love.”

It’s not, is it Jaqen? She feels wretched; she has pushed him too far. A man can deny the truth, and he is simply deluded but the nature of reality does not change. If her God denies the truth...does the world shift, to match His distorted vision of it?

She notices a change in his hair...black hair, coming in at the roots, hidden still on the red side, but clear against the white. There is a brief moment of regret in her, for the red and white she loves so much. Then, pragmatic as ever, she lets it go. If she knows him when he wears faces, and loves him still, what does the color of hair matter?

The God is rising, slowly, ever so slowly, and He is bringing the darkness with Him. Only now, for the first time, she wonders what physical cost He will pay for it.

She bends forward, her arms around his neck, places her lips upon his pulse. It beats in time with her heartbeat. “Have mercy, beloved,” she whispers. He tenses under her. “Be gentle with yourself.”

Nymeria echoes her sentiment, it seems, for the horse-sized direwolf comes up against Jaqen’s back and slobbers all over his neck.

The bleeding in his eyes has stopped by the time they finish breaking their fast.

She on the other hand, has just started bleeding, but forewarned by Nymeria’s heightened sense of smell, she does not soil her clothes this time--the onset of her last cycle, in the middle of the voyage across the Narrow Sea--had forced her to throw her smallclothes overboard.

She wishes her moon-blood came at regular intervals, but the blood-magic in the masks makes it entirely unpredictable; not using masks is not an option.

She is paranoid that she will bleed through the rags she has stuffed in her smallclothes, and requests the loan of an oilcloth from Jaqen’s pack. He wordlessly hands over the oilcloth, and he looks at her, and he understands.

When she is ready he attacks her, and she blocks, and their morning spar, though delayed by Nymeria’s arrival, is in full swing.

As she focuses on her footwork, she has a chance for an errant thought: Huh.

Yet another preconception she did not know she had--built of secrecy, and shame and the hushed whispers of Old Nan, the admonitions before they left for King’s Landing, about how such things must be handled and even their father shouldn’t know--another preconception of how men are, and
how a woman must be, it shatters under the barrage of blows from Jaqen’s sword, blows she must match in skill and ferocity, or die.

Nymeria’s gold eyes gleam as she lies beside the spent fire, and Arya briefly tries to warg into the direwolf, but it doesn’t happen. She is getting frustrated.

“How have you tried words, love?” Jaqen asks. “She understands more than you think.”

She glares at him, then turns to the direwolf. “We are going somewhere you shouldn’t come,” she says. She is used to the taste of man. “Hunt, play with your back, we’ll be back this way in a bit.”

Nymeria just sits there.

Arya throws a pleading glance at Jaqen. He comes forward, gestures towards the west. “Soon, beautiful lady,” he says. “We return.”

Nymeria whuffs, and rises on her haunches. Then she raises her head, and yips. The sound echoes in the trees around them, and she is answered by more barks and yips.

There must be twenty wolves here!

Then the direwolf gets up, and with a final backwards glance at the two of them, walks into the forest.

“Why does she get beautiful lady, and I’m lovely girl?” asks Arya, disgruntled and not because of the love-name—Nymeria is beautiful, though not a lady any more than Arya is a girl.

Jaqen chuckles. “Because she can kill a man with one bite.”

“I can kill you too,” she persists.

“Yes,” he says, and he trails a finger down the nape of her neck. She shivers.

“But I won’t,” she says.

“You will. Many times.”

At her confused look, he leans down to whisper in her ear. “A little death. And you won’t bite.”

To both of their surprise, Arya Stark blushes.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo...first kiss, revelations...was the buildup worth it? was it? was it?

gul and I desperately want your comments!
ARYA

No words are exchanged when they break camp, and she holds Steel’s reins while he mounts but then she raises her arms to him and he lifts her into his saddle. His arms are wrapped around her, and she leans back against his chest.

They head back towards the Crossroads for a bit, then turn east on a small track heading into the rocky hills. From time to time, she twists and cranes her neck upwards, and he bends forward, and they kiss.

“If the Kindly Man could see us now,” she says with a contented sigh after another such kiss. “I’m going to get beaten.” She considers it. “He may not dare, with you.”

Jaqen snorts. “We do not have leaders or followers, but our Lorathi brother was once a man’s student. There will be no beatings.” He thinks for a moment. “Nevertheless, it is best not to tempt him. We will start small, when we return to the House of Black and White.”

“How holding hands, from time to time?” Her tone is plaintive. More waiting?

She can feel him grinning. “One of us will move into the other’s cell, and we will confine our…” he traces the outer shell of her ear with his tongue, “activities to our bed.”

She arches backwards, wrapping her arms around his neck. “That is small?”

“Mmm. A man has had much time to think on it. That is small.”

She grins in turn.

A bit after midday, they stop. He points off to the side. And then they must regretfully return her to her own steed, for they are going off the road and the footing under the snow is uncertain.

“How did you know this was here?” The trail is almost invisible, though she can see the signs of it being actively obscured

“I asked some questions. While a girl was admiring a smith.”

“A smith’s knives,” she corrects.

Their pace has slowed, the horses more nervous than usual. “What made you speak to him at the end?” he asks. When she glances at him, he smiles. “No jealousy, just curiosity.”

“I have been thinking of what you told me about Samwell Tarly,” she says. They have had much time to talk on the journey--he knows all about her training after the pool, the mummy continued with Izembaro, the few contracts she was given. She knows about the White Walkers, and dragonglass. She knows the importance of Valyrian Steel. “We have no smith, in the House, but our brother--the one who was a slave to Bandar Khess, he has seen the making of it. We have the magesteel from Myr, we have access to dragons with this alliance. So all we need is a capable smith.”
“You would include Gendry in this plotting?”

“Do you think I’m mad?” she asks. “No, love, I would see him innocuously settled in King’s landing again once Daenerys takes it. Or perhaps Winterfell will be better, where we can control the output more easily--swords for the Night’s Watch, daggers, probably, for the House of Black and White.”

They pick their way around a particularly well-placed boulder blocking the trail.

“He seems happy where he is, smithing for the Brotherhood without Banners, bending knee to no lord.”

She shrugs. “He has feelings for Arya Stark still,” she says. “It can be used, in the phrasing perhaps, ‘Lady Arya begs you to consider starting a smithy for Valyrian Steel in Winterfell’ or some such, and then he will not mind serving the Starks. And, of course, with Arya Stark married to Braavos, shipments of Myrrish magesteel can become a regular part of the trade route. He will retire a very rich man.”

Jaqen is considering it.

“A man has affections for Arya Stark as well,” he says finally, and that is not what she expected him to say. He does not look at her. “It is a compulsion, and a man cannot blame the smith-boy for it--it is cruel, to be manipulated so by a compulsion.”

“Have I ever manipulated you?” she asks. She has; it is in their blood, their training, this twisting of intention and action.

“You breathe,” he says dryly.

She looks at him from the corner of her eye. “As do you.”

He looks away. “A man may have been guilty of a bit more...deliberate machinations, from time to time.”

She snorts. “I allow you to, you know--you always feel a little guilty afterwards and then I can have my way, later.”

“My lovely, brilliant, cunning, beautiful girl,” he murmurs, “think on it. A girl obeys a man, in her own way, a girl is practical and rational when she is not vengeful, so why does he need to manipulate?”

The silence imposed by the fording of a small, half-frozen stream is a thoughtful one.

Because you like getting under my skin, because it is a substitute, this give and take, for games we have yet to play...because it feels good, because you breathe, because you love me and you are a little twisted, and so am I.

She bites her lip, and says nothing, and then they must both turn their attention to the broken trail.

She muses for a while. “Gendry...” says, “this affection or whatever it is that gives others a hold over him--this is his choice. All men are equal--this one teaching of the Lorathi way I never fought. So if this thing I feel for you, sexual and familial and religious love all in one, if I can recognize that even this thing was a deliberate choice for me, then a simple one-sided affection from Gendry, that he clings to even when ‘Arya Stark’ is to be married--that is his choice, and if he wants his freedom all he has to do is say ‘no’.”
“Maybe it is not that way with men,” says Jaqen. “A man does not remember choosing you—you just were.”

“Horse-shit,” she says. “‘You stole three deaths from the Red God. We have to give them back. Speak three names…’ There’s no such rule.”

He has the grace to look embarrassed. “That was the Many-Faced One’s choosing…” He tries to escape.

She pins him with a look.

“But you were a child,” he murmurs.

“You were not choosing me to fuck,” she says reasonably. “That must have come later…” She considers it. “After the pool?”

He nods.

“And for that,” she says thoughtfully, “I think I chose you first.”

He inhales, and the gaze he turns on her is...something else. A waking dream, she thinks and is suddenly afraid.

“I chose the mirror of my soul,” he says.

She looks away. “That’s...too much hubris, beloved,” she whispers, “even for me. Say, instead, that you were choosing your...travelling companion, on the long road.”

He chuckles. “All right, dearest travelling companion, manipulate the men who fall in love with you as much as you like. As long as only one of them is able to manipulate you in turn, he is well satisfied.”

There is activity just up ahead. Rustling, quiet murmurs that stop, suddenly, as the two approach, and then there is the ringing of swords being drawn from scabbards. The two faceless also draw blades, and their draw is silent—for they, like all other servants of Him of the Many Faces, wrap silk on the inside of their scabbards, and around the mouths.

JAQEN H’GHAR

They have dismounted, to meet the Brotherhood on equal terms, foot to foot. He holds his blade ready, but lowered. She stands at his side in a similar non-threatening stance.

A small band of the Brotherhood Without Banners has them surrounded, and more are coming from further up the trail.

“We have come to see Lady Stark,” he says. “I have brought her daughter Arya back to her.”

That starts a wave of muttering and exchanges of glances. The leader of the band, a swarthy man with the look of the Iron Islands about him, clear his throat. “How do we know that is Arya Stark? Sellswords show up all the time, with some village girl and a demand for silver.”

“You know it because no silver is demanded. And,” and he looks over their heads, to a man just now coming around a bend up ahead, “because she is recognized.”
The man is large, with dark hair and a face half-ruined by fire.

The men of the brotherhood exchange yet more glances, then back away a fair distance, talking amongst themselves. They leave a large space for the newcomer.

“Hound!” Arya starts forward, and Jaqen raises an arm, warning her back. There is conflict here, in her voice (happiness and trepidation, anger and...regret) and conflict in the man’s face.

The man walks forward, peers at her; recognition is slow, but when it comes, he reaches forward and grabs her hand, drags her forward. “It’s the Wolf Bitch!”

Jaqen stands aside. The girl is fully capable of cutting this Hound to ribbons, should he actually be a threat.

“You left me to die!” snarls the Hound.

“But you’re alive,” she says, her voice calm.

_Calmness may be a mistake; this man is brimming with turmoil._

“I begged you for mercy.”

There is anger in his words. _Not killing rage, it is hurting rage_, Jaqen reminds himself. Still, he keeps his hands clasped behind his back to prevent any...impulsive motions on the part of Jaqen H’ghar.

“I should kill you,” says the scarred man, eyeing her saber with undisguised loathing.

_There is fear in this man_, Jaqen realizes. _Of women that wield swords._

“Perhaps you should,” she replies.

In the next moment the man has turned aside. “Pah!” he says. “Fucking cunts, all of you.” He rounds on Jaqen. “And who the fuck are you?”

“A man is called Jaqen H’ghar,” he says.

“You’re the Jaqen H’ghar she kept talking about,” says the Hound, his surprise overmatching his anger for the moment. “’Jaqen can kill you before you move, Jaqen eats Hounds for breakfast...’”

The man so named raises an eyebrow at his lovely girl. She is a bit embarrassed, though she has done nothing wrong --he had told her “Jaqen H’ghar is dead”, and she had no way to know he had given her his true name.

The Hound sighs. “Come along, then, you’ll be wanting to see her Ladyship.”

The two faceless exchange looks: Arya is excited, and trying to hide it; Jaqen advises caution, for many reasons.

Jaqen takes the reins, leads the horses as the girl walks ahead with the Hound. The rest of the band travels a few lengths ahead, some already out of sight as the path twists around a strand of birch trees, their branches laden with snow.

“And where’ve you been all this time?” the gruff man asks the girl.
“I took a ship to Braavos,” she replies.

“To the great Jaqen H’ghar. He taught you how to use that fancy sword you’re carrying? I remember you said he had to leave...how’d you convince him to teach you, suck his cock?” the hound throws a look over his shoulder. “You like little girls, H’ghar?”

“Once they grow up,” replies Jaqen, evenly.

She says nothing.

“Hah,” says the hound. “A wolf-bitch like you, who’d put their cock anywhere near your mouth and risk getting it bitten off?”

More silence.

*He is goading her, this hound, looking for an excuse to start an actual fight.* Jaqen can see rage simmering in the other man, and he knows the Hound will lash out soon.

“By now I bet your sister’s learned to suck cock, in King’s Landing.”

Jaqen reaches forward, grabs the girl’s wrist, but her other hand also holds a blade. She throws it at the Hound, hits him with the handle in his face. *Not aiming to do real damage.* “You fucking *dog* ,” she says, “don’t you *ever*--”

“My name is *Sandor* ,” the man snarls even as he draws his sword--he is faster than his size suggests--and lunges.

She side-steps to the left.

Jaqen drops the girl’s wrist, takes a single step forward, to the right, and he is under the man’s guard. The assassin uses his left hand to twist the fighter’s sword out of his grasp, and as the Hound tries to abort his lunge, Jaqen takes a second step, his left leg stepping down on the heel of the man’s unbalanced foot.

It is over within four heartbeats. Sandor Clegane is on the ground, Jaqen’s sword-point at his throat. The girl has not moved further, nor drawn her sword.

The Brotherhood men have just started to look back, take notice of them again.

“That was uncalled for,” says Jaqen, mildly.

“She left me for dead,” Sandor snarls. “I *begged* her to kill me, and she left me to rot.”

“She will apologize,” says Jaqen evenly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the rebellion in the set of her shoulders.

Jaqen turns back to the man on the ground and transfers the sword to his right hand, so now he is holding both blades. Then he offers the man his left. The gesture is ignored, and Sandor climbs to his feet on his own.

“You saved her life,” says Jaqen. “A few times.”

She is startled at his tone, at what it portends. *A life must be balanced.* “Jaqen?”

She needs to understand this thing--in the isolation of their calling and its purpose, if there is such a
thing as a standard a faceless man is held to, it is their own, and absolute, not defined in relative terms by the behaviour of those around them.

“A balancing,” he says, quietly, in Lorathi, “also for the girl’s lack of mercy, which is as much a man’s fault as hers, for she did not know how to give the gift, and a man could have stayed with her as she asked and taught it to her earlier.”

His love is devoted to her calling, she has died for it, but she still sees herself as part of the world of the living, and her acts of balancing are not a judgement, they are retaliatory--the Hound hit her over a raw wound in her side, and so she must hit him back.

Her eyes are wide, staring at him, and slowly, slowly, she understands. She bows her head. “A girl is ashamed,” she whispers, also in Lorathi, and his heart clenches in his chest.

She pushes back her shoulders; her jaw is set. It is the same look she had on her face, the day she saw Valyria, and she promised Him of the Many Faces “I will do better.”

In this moment Jaqen H’ghar is very tempted to bash the other side of Sandor Clegane’s face in.

He hands Sandor back his sword, which the man takes with a look of slight disbelief. Then Jaqen bows. “This man owes you a debt, for the girl’s life which is everything to him.”

“I want her to fucking beg me to forgive her,” says Sandor Clegane.

She takes a deep breath, and steps forward. “I am sorry I did not give you mercy when you asked for it…” Her tone is low, even.

The Hound sneers.

“I beg your forgiveness, Sandor Clegane” she says, and Jaqen can see the anger rising, though it is controlled, “for not killing you when I had the chance.”

To Jaqen’s ear, the words ring of truth, and he wonders if Sandor Clegane has just lost a friend he did not know he had. He glances at the Hound’s face, and is surprised to find that Sandor actually looks a bit amused.

A more complicated man, this, than it appears on the surface.

A moment or two, and then Sandor Clegane shakes his head. “She’s a handful.” His gravelly tone has softened, a bit, backed away from the hard, irrevocable edge of bitter fury.

“Just so,” says Jaqen.

“Well, she’s your handful now.” Sandor has actually unbent enough to pat Jaqen H’ghar on the shoulder. “Good luck,” he says, and walks ahead to his band, probably to explain some of what has transpired here.

“I am sorry,” she says, looking at Sandor’s retreating back. “Not just for…for starting this. He has a foul mouth, he doesn’t mean much by it; I shouldn’t have hit him.”

Jaqen brushes the back of his hand against hers. “A man can be a hypocrite sometimes, love--he’d have done it if you hadn’t.”

And there, there’s the spark in her eyes as she turns to him. “You put him on the ground,” she says. “Have you any idea how many times I fantasized about just that when I was travelling with
“Him?” She sighs. “A girl can be a hypocrite sometimes too...the Hound is not...Sandor is more complicated than he comes off.”

Jaqen’s mouth twitches, a little. “So, my handful, shall we continue on with these good folk to the camp of the Brotherhood without Banners?”

“Your handful of what, Jaqen?” she asks sweetly.

It’s the first time she has used his name since they...grew honest with one another, beside the stream. Now she utters his name as a challenge, a sharper word in her mouth than “love”; it inflames him, makes him reckless.

His steps smoothly around her, turns his back to the group. She is facing him, hidden from view of the Brotherhood’s men. His hands rise, and he cups both her breasts through her shirt; his thumbs graze over her nipples. “My handful of tits,” he whispers in her ear. And then he lets go.

He watches the stunned look on her face, memorizes yet another expression of Arya Stark. She had not expected her provocation to actually provoke him, not to crudity.

When she speaks, he can tell there is neither artifice nor control left in her.

“Please, Jaqen.”

“Soon,” he says and his voice is a dark promise.

They both have to school their faces into faceless blankness after that.

As the Brotherhood leads them closer to the camp, even as the two faceless lead their horses, Sandor Clegane comes up to walk beside them.

“Lady Stark,” he begins. “She is called Lady Stoneheart now.”

“I have heard that,” says Jaqen. “She’s been killing Freys and Lannisters and Boltons mercilessly in these parts.”

Sandor pauses. “That’s not...it’s not only that.” he says.

“What do you mean?” asks Arya.

“She is not...who she used to be,” says Sandor.

Arya looks at Jaqen. He shakes his head; he doesn’t know what that means, either.

“You’ll see,” says Sandor, grim.

“She’s my mother,” Arya whispers. “How different can she be?”

And Jaqen feels something, an unease, something that tells him the answer is not going to be to anyone’s liking.

They are taken to the mouth of a large cave. Word has been sent ahead with swift-footed runners—a figure in a tattered dress stands at the mouth of the cave, surrounded by Brotherhood men.
The figure is a corpse. Her hair is thin, and matted, and white, her flesh is blue-gray, there are long, scarred, unhealing furrows in her cheeks. Her throat--slit ear to ear--gapes open.

The figure raises its head, and he sees Lady Stoneheart’s gaze lock onto Arya.

The two women look at each other across the distance for a breath, and then Arya is running, pelting pell-mell towards her mother.

Eyes wide, the one who used to be Catelyn Stark backs up, backs up until she is stopped by a stone wall behind her, and then she curls up into herself, crouching on the ground, and she covers her face.

Arya has reached her. “Mother,” Arya whispers, her hand reaching out. “Look at me, mother. Everything is all right. Mother, look at me.”

Slowly, slowly, the creature that was once Catelyn Stark--is still Catelyn Stark, for all that Lady Stoneheart is a more appropriate moniker now, she draws her hands away from her face and looks up at the girl bent over her.

Sounds, air, whistle out of the ruin of her throat.

“You remember me, Mother?” asks Arya.

Lady Stoneheart clasps a hand over her wound. “Arya,” she croaks. “Arya.”

Arya smiles, and kneels gracefully in the packed dirt of the cave mouth. Her hands reach out, gently brushing Lady Stoneheart’s hair. “I’m here now, mother,” she says. “And I brought you some presents.”

Jaqen exhales. The memories threaten to rise, and emotion along with them, but all he allows himself to feel is pride, in his love’s composure, in his love’s capacity for mercy.

“Most people are scared,” says the Hound, and there are a lot of things in his voice--surprise, disgust, awe. “She looks like a corpse.”

“The girl is not afraid of corpses,” murmurs Jaqen.

“You’re not either,” surmises Sandor.

Jaqen does not reply. He sees a woman come out of the cave, some command from Lady Stoneheart he cannot interpret, and then the corpse-mother rises.

“Lady Stone--Lady Stark needs to rest now,” says the woman.

Arya nods and steps back, and watches as her mother is led into the cave. Then she turns around and walks to him, slowly.

He opens his arms to her, and she collapses into him, sobbing, sobbing as he has never heard her sob before, as if the world was breaking, as if nothing will ever be right again.

ARYA

Jaqen says nothing; she knows he understands that no endearment, so soothing sound will do. And
yet even in the midst of her weeping, she knows there is something...a kernel of darkness...within her. It waits.

So she lets the sorrow take her, until the pressure of it lessens and subsides to something that cannot break her. Then, one by one, she offers everything to the darkness: pain, sorrow, regret. Despair. She gives everything to the darkness until she is hollow inside.

“If I had known,” he whispers, when it is done, “I would have prepared you, my love, I did not know. What rumors I found said she had grown vengeful, and unforgiving...I did not know.”

She raises her head from his chest. She wipes her face. “Beloved,” she says to him in High Valyrian, though Sandor has taken himself off a ways in an uncharacteristic show of perceptiveness. “Can you give her back to me?”

She sees the sudden flare of panic, the something that stops him from knowing who he is; the veins in his eyes turn suddenly dark, filling with blood.

*There are more needs in the world than mine*, she thinks. “Jaqen,” she says, and her tone is calm. “Can the God give her back to me?”

The blood in his eyes recedes a little, and he speaks. From the regret that enshrouds his first words, she knows He cannot. “It is not Death’s doing, this half-life she has,” he says. “She is all here--the darkness holds nothing back. But the brain decays, the body decays, and it cannot hold to all the functions of life. All the things that are the domain of the mind--talking, remembering, moving--these will not return.” He looks at her, and his voice is gentle. “All the things of the soul--love, that transcends the mind, vengeance, that seeks beyond the grave--these things she will not lose.”

Arya sighs and looks down. Jaqen may have believed he was bringing her here to be reunited with her mother; Him of the Many Faces brought Arya Stark here for a different purpose. “I will go see to her,” she says.

“Your courage shames me.”

She shakes her head. This tangle is not of His making, what has courage to do with anything? The one who is responsible is dead and from all accounts Beric Dondarrion acted out of a good heart.

Arya has already mourned her mother once; she has had practice in it.

“Valar morghulis,” she says, and starts walking towards the cave.

“Valar dohaeris,” he whispers after her, and the heartbreak in his voice--the heartbreak she no longer feels because she has entrusted it to Him, it is enough for her to turn.

He raises his hand, places it over his heart--their pocket--and she takes the image and stores it up in her. It is *life*, out of death, a bulwark against what she has been called here to do.

“Valar dohaeris,” she whispers in turn, and walks forward again, and then the cave swallows her whole.

Chapter End Notes

Next one on Tuesday: Elegy for my Mother
ARYA

She remembers this hollow hill, the cavernous space, the confusing tunnels branching off it. She unpacks the banner-wrapped heads from her saddlebags, then follows the smell of mold, down a small rock-hewn tunnel.

The men of the Brotherhood Without Banners watch her, uneasy. They will not interfere, not in a daughter’s duty. They may even be grateful—Lady Stoneheart’s uncanniness is a thousand times worse than Beric Dondarrion’s, and Lady Stoneheart has bent the Brotherhood to a *Stark* vengeance, a Tully vengeance, neither of which sit too well with those that bend knee to no lord.

There is a small cave, curtained off from the tunnel, and her mother’s trail stops there. Arya pushes aside the tattered curtain, and steps inside.

There is a table, strewn with parchments and maps, and the stub of a single candle burns in a dish. Boxes and trunks line one wall; there is no bed. Her mother does not sleep.

Lady Stoneheart stands in the center of the room, facing away from the curtain.

“*I brought you presents, mother,*” says Arya.

Lady Stoneheart turns, and Arya slowly unwraps the heads. They are a bit worse-for-wear, but still recognizable.

Slowly, bit by bit, Lady Stoneheart relents, and sits down on the stone floor. Arya sets the heads down beside the curtained entryway, then walks further into the room. She sinks to the ground beside her mother and rests her head against Catelyn’s shoulder. This time her mother does not shrink away from her.

Arya has been taught how to give solace. To the dying, and to the dead, and her mother is both.

“*Do you like them?*” she asks.

Catelyn covers the wound in the throat. “*It is done,*” she wheezes.

Arya panics. “*Not yet,*” she pleads. “*Please, not yet.*”

The candle gutters, then dies out, the smell of cheap tallow and smoke a momentary distraction from the smells of death in this room, blood from the heads, and rot, and water-weeds.

But it is as if the darkness has freed them both from something. Catelyn wheezes a question at Arya, and to Arya, who has learned to decipher a hundred tongues and manners of speech,
detangling her mother’s halting, breathy words, is no feat at all.

“My dancing master bought me time to run,” she begins.

She does not speak of Him of the Many Faces; only of Jaqen. But when she gets to the weaving of the plot, of marrying a substitute to the Sealord of Braavos, of her journey across the Narrow Sea, she realizes she has tangled herself up in all the threads of her story, and her mother has stopped asking questions.

“And he brought me here, to you,” she finishes.

Then it is Arya’s turn to ask questions.


That last name is most unexpected. “Why him?” she asks.

“He betrayed your father,” says Catelyn.

“And he sold Sansa to the Boltons,” says Arya thoughtfully. “It fits.”

“Sansa?” Catelyn Stark is agitated. Arya takes her mother’s hand in hers, and speaks.

When she gets to Rickon, to the battle of Winterfell, she hears some sounds from her mother she cannot identify. She pauses, and realizes Catelyn Stark is trying to cry. When she tells her of Sansa’s feeding of the dogs, Lady Stoneheart laughs, a wet sucking sound.

There is quiet for some time after that. They sit in silence, and Arya tries to put off the last truth she must speak; it is a prolonging of bittersweet agony, this silence, and Arya lets herself feel it, a little. But the smell of water-weeds has grown, and is choking out the last of the air in the room, and finally Arya submits.

“Father never betrayed you,” she says. Catelyn Stark turns, in the darkness, and Arya knows her mother is staring sightlessly at Arya. “He did something unspeakably honorable.” Arya’s mouth twists at the irony.

“Arya…”

“Jon is not my half-brother. He is my cousin. His mother died giving birth to Rhaegar Targaryen’s son.”

There is a shifting, the dry sound of fabric sliding on stone. Arya reaches out in the darkness, blind, groping for her mother, and finds Catelyn sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest, head bowed.

Arya waits. A half-watch, perhaps less. Then, she speaks. “Mother?”

Catelyn Stark does not reply. She rises, and fumbles in the dark, and Arya hears the sound of a flint, sees sparks falling on the table, and then candlelight--almost too bright after the consuming blackness of the cave--fills the room.

Her mother walks to a large trunk set against the wall. Even in death, Catelyn has not lost the grace that made the Lady of Winterfell so impossible a role-model for boyish Arya. She throws open the trunk--her mother is so much stronger than she appears, Arya realizes--and pulls out a roll of cloth. Arya stands, and together they unroll the cloth. The parchment inside is creased, damaged by damp
and mildew, but still readable.

“Jon Stark,” says Arya. She looks up at her mother. “You let Robb do this?”

Catelyn smiles, and the wound in her throat stretches to accommodate the motion. She covers it with a hand. “…could never deny Robb anything.”

His marriage, that led to his death, it hovers in the air between them.

Solace, to the dying and the dead.

“You were not to blame. Tywin Lannister laid more plans than just a Frey alliance.” And then Arya lies. “Even if Robb had done everything right...I have seen the records of my order--Tywin Lannister paid the Faceless Men gold, and a dragon egg, for the life of a King.”

Renly, or Balon Greyjoy, Arya thinks. “It was before I joined the order, or the contract would never have been accepted.” A lie. The Kindly Man would simply not tell me. Agitation, at a betrayal that never happened but could have, stirs in her, and then is calmed by the very next thought: Him of the Many Faces would not have allowed it. Her faith in Him, at least, is absolute.

“We returned the gold,” she continues, “when you were killed. But the dragon egg was forfeit; I carry it with me, as a gift to the King in the North.”

A truth and four lies, lies that could have been true; Catelyn Stark accepts them, and her smile grows thin.

“I am tired,” she wheezes.

Not yet, please, not yet.

Arya closes her eyes. “Bran lives,” she says. “Sansa. Jon.” She deliberately does not include herself in the list; Arya Stark is dead. “Will you write to them?”

Catelyn nods, reaches for parchment, for quill and ink. She struggles with the implements, spills the ink over the parchment. Her fingers curl around the quill, and snap it in half.

Gently, Arya closes her hands around her mother’s. “I’ll write it for you,” she whispers. “Tell me what to say.”

Catelyn surrenders to Arya’s touch. And when new parchment is brought and the ink wiped and the quill sharpened, she speaks. Arya puts the tip to paper, and she imagines the long, looping strokes of her mother’s hand, and she begins to write.

To my sweet, sweet baby boy...

My beautiful, strong one...

Catelyn begins Jon’s letter with Son of my heart, and then, then Arya has to stop for a moment and still her shaking hand. They cannot tell Jon he is a Targaryen; this letter will come from his father’s wife, and it will be a bitter, bitter thing for him, for her to beg his forgiveness from beyond the grave.

Arya does not look at her mother when it is done; Jon’s letter...Arya finds she wants her mother’s posthumous approval more than she wants to be dead. She reaches for a fresh bit of parchment. “And will you give me mine?” she asks.
Catelyn’s hands, gaunt, with swollen knuckles and blue-mottled skin, they reach for the parchment and the quill. With a determination that belongs in equal part to Lady Stoneheart and to Catelyn Stark, she curls her fist around the quill.

The inked tip breaks through the surface, digs into the table, and Catelyn keeps moving it, tearing long strokes into the parchment. Arya realizes her mother thinks she is writing; she cannot see that there are no words, no patterns, just long jagged furrows that match the furrows in Lady Stoneheart’s cheeks.

When she is done, Catelyn carefully folds the tattered parchment into uneven quarters, and hands it triumphantly to Arya. Arya folds it yet smaller, and tucks it into the hidden pocket over her heart; Jaqen’s holds a coin, hers holds torn paper, and she does not know what any of it means, or if it should mean anything at all.

Solace, to the dying and the dead.


Solace, to the dying and the dead.

“It will be done,” Arya lies.

“Your betrothed,” Catelyn asks. “Sealord of Braavos? Jaqen. He came with you...why did he come to Westeros?” The complexity of Arya’s plot is too much for Lady Stoneheart.

“He loves me,” she replies, simply.

“Is he an honorable man?”

He is absolute. It is not what Catelyn wants to hear. “Honor is meaningless to him,” says Arya instead.

Catelyn smiles again. “Good. He will not get himself killed, like Eddard.”

Arya bows her head. “You must be tired, mother. Do you want to rest?”

Lady Stoneheart breathes through the gap in her throat. “I have forgotten how to sleep,” she says, sadly.

Arya reaches for her packs, her bandolier. “I have a tonic that will help.” The vial she is looking for is filled with a viscous green liquid, honey-sweet and smelling of anise; she unstoppers it. Lady Stoneheart accepts the vial, and drinks it down. Most of it dribbles out of her throat, onto the front of her dress, but it hardly matters.

“Come lie down, mother,” says Arya. “I will brush your hair while you sleep.”

Arya sits on the floor in the corner, her mother’s head in her lap. She strokes the thin, white hair.

“I have forgotten how to sleep,” says Lady Stoneheart. Her words are more slurred than they were a little while ago.

“Close your eyes,” whispers Arya.
Lady Stoneheart closes her eyes.

“Imagine we are in Winterfell,” says Arya slowly. “And there is no snow on the ground.” She closes her eyes too, and sees the land as it was in her childhood. “Summer has broken out of his halter, and Bran chases him round and round the trees, trying to get it back on. You and I and Sansa, we sit in the godswood together, and you are tired, so you rest your head on my lap as I brush your hair.”

Arya has to pause, wipe her face. She does not know where the tears are coming from. The breath rattles in and out of her mother’s throat.

“Sansa is married…” Arya thinks. “She is married to Willas Tyrell, the heir to Highgarden.” Arya’s voice grows softer still. “Rickon…Jon and Robb and Theon are teaching Rickon how to hold off three assailants at once; they’re getting most of it wrong. Father…”

Arya wipes at her eyes again. Her mother’s breathing has gotten quieter, slower. Arya keeps stroking her hair.

“Father sits a little ways away. His hair is almost all grey now, but his sword is at his side, and he is telling a story to Robb’s son. Your grandson, he has the Tully hair, but Stark eyes…”

Arya weeps, for all that had been, for all that could have been, and all the while her mother slips further and further away.

“The air smells of springtime rain, and you sleep under the heart tree while all around you the godswood flowers, for winter has come and gone in the blink of an eye…”

By the time it is done, there are no more tears left in her.

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**HIM OF THE MANY FACES**

He listens to the whispers beside a pool, across the Narrow Sea. He listens to the whispers beside roads, beside battlefields, beside beds. And when there are no whispers, he listens, and the silence, too, is heard.

He hears everything through the thin curtain. For reasons unknown, Sandor Clegane keeps the vigil beside him.

There are torches burning in wall-sconces, but the light is dim. Small changes, to Jaqen H’ghar’s body, they will go unnoticed by most. Death is kinder than fire, than ice, than abstract things like justice and motherhood--the human body already knows how to die.

There is a rushing of wings. *Catelyn Stark.* He makes a brushing motion with his hands; the bonds that bind her to her body, stronger than steel to force one such as her back into that rotted, cold prison, the bonds fall away like cobwebs.

Arya’s mother brushes past him, through him, into the darkness.

“Beloved,” he calls.

She comes out, and the curtain drops behind her. Her eyes are swollen, but dry, and she looks at him leaning against the stone wall of the corridor.
She exhales. “You are here.”

“My bride has need of me.”

He is aware of the sharp look from Sandor Clegane, the man’s mouth forming the question “married?” in disbelief, but he ignores it.

She does not reach for Him of the Many Faces as she might have reached for Jaqen. She stands before him tall, unbowed, a soldier before her commander, and though he aches for her touch he, too, keeps the distance between them—the respect her duty deserves.

“I can’t hold her ever again,” she says, her tone even, matter-of-fact.

“The darkness will hold her,” he says, and the torchlight falters for the space of a breath. “In a place without tribulation, and a time where all her pain is made holy.”

Her eyes are dark mirrors, they reflect the flickering torchlight. “Let it go, beloved,” she says. “I will not carry two bodies north.”

He exhales, and then it is as if he drowses, bit by bit. He dreams a dream: he is Jaqen H’ghar.

JAQEN H’GHAR

There is pain, at the corner of his eyes; ice sears his veins for a moment. And then it recedes. Arya stands before him, and the smell of death—mold and rot—it clings to her as she moves towards him.

“Love,” he says, and he realizes she can see the change in him.

“Do not do that again,” she commands. “There is nothing I cannot bear, except that.”

He bows.

She walks a few steps towards the main cavern, raises her voice. “I need water, and some cloths, to prepare my mother’s body.”

Someone in the Brotherhood must have heard her, because he hears footsteps, scurrying to comply.

A few of the Brotherhood come into the corridor, gather around them. “I must take my mother home,” she says to them. “There is a place prepared for her, beside my father.”

He has heard Lady Stoneheart answer Arya’s questions--Catelyn Stark sent her husband’s bones north, with Silent Sisters to keep him company along the way.

“We can give you a cart,” says one Brotherhood man, hesitantly.

“What do we do now?” asks another.

“You were the hands of Catelyn Stark’s vengeance,” she says, and her mouth twists. “The King in the North will make a place for you in Winterfell. There will be work—Sansa is raising another army, I think. But if you do not wish to bend knee...do what you will, and with the gratitude of the Starks and Tullys.”

The men of the Brotherhood go off to talk amongst themselves.
“The little bird is in Winterfell,” murmurs Sandor.

Jaqen looks at him, and he can read every expression on the man’s ruined face. “Another of Eddard Stark’s daughters you protected,” he says.


Jaqen smiles sadly. “It is never enough.”

Arya has watched this interaction.

“You should come north with us.”

Sandor frowns. “I don’t fight in anyone’s army, not anymore. Why the hell would I go north?”

Arya gives him a smile that is a mirror of Jaqen’s own. “To drive the cart.”

Sandor Clegane throws his head back and laughs and laughs. They wait for him to sober.

“All right, she-wolf,” he says. “I will drive the cart.”

Chapter End Notes

tl;dr: Arya gives the gift to Lady Stoneheart, Jaqen temporarily assumes god-form to free Catelyn from repeatedly coming back to life, Sandor joins the party (he’s going to drive the funerary cart to Winterfell).

So...this one was really, really hard for me to write. It had to be done. A bit nervous about it, truthfully...what did you think?
CERSEI LANNISTER

The Queen of the Seven Kingdoms sits at her council table, alone save for her Hand, and runs her fingers through the pile of coins in front of her.

Her brother enters, with two members of the Queensguard.

“The servant girl’s been found,” says Jaime. “She’s not the one, Cersei; she doesn’t even know why she was arrested!”

Cersei does not look up.

Qyburn clears his throat. “She is the one who started rumors of suicide.”

Jaime shakes his head and sits down at the table. He stretches his legs out in front of him, leans his head back against the chair. “She keeps begging for forgiveness and she doesn’t know why. ”

“Asking for forgiveness is a habit with the Sorrowful Men of Quarth,” says Qyburn. “He would not have jumped, not when the command to burn the Sept came at his hand. He’d had enough of the machinations of his Queen, of the Sparrows...the King came into his own, under his mother’s tutelage,” the Hand of the Queen shakes his head in sorrow, “and they pushed him off a ledge for it.”

Jaime keeps staring at the ceiling. “I should have been here,” he whispers.

Cersei finally raises her head, exchanges a look with her Hand. Cersei wants an end to her brother’s self-recrimination, and quickly; Qyburn’s gaze counsels her that it will be better-received from the Queen’s mouth.

“The Mountain was guarding him,” says Cersei. “You couldn’t have done better.”

“What use is the Mountain guarding the outside of a chamber when an assassin is already inside?”

Cersei’s jaw clenches. Her brother holds onto things for far too long when progress, when survival lies in moving swiftly to secure the future.

“Qyburn, tell the Mountain he may begin by flogging this girl--this Sorrowful Man. In the courtyard below,” she nods towards the large windows on the eastern wall of the council chamber, “so we may watch.”

Jaime raises his head, and she can see him about to form the words “There should be a trial.” But “trial” is a...sensitive word, here and now, and Jaime thinks to manage her sensibilities while all the time she manages his.

Jaime subsides. “Fuck everyone who is not us,” he mutters.

Qyburn bows, and walks to the door, opens it briefly to pass on the Queen’s instructions to the men standing guard outside. Then he returns.
The gold coins—each stamped with the Targaryen seal—tinkle through Cersei’s fingers as she returns her attention to the table. “Do you think Daenerys hatched this plan?” she asks Qyburn, continuing the conversation Jaime’s arrival interrupted.

“The girl has made some canny decisions in the past,” says Qyburn.

“It took me years,” says Cersei, “under Robert, being ground to pieces before I became what I am. Do you think she is better than me?”

“No, my Queen,” says Qyburn, and then he rises, walks to the eastern windows, peers out. Cersei can hear thin wails, the sound of irons being dragged on flagstones. “She has good advisors.”

Cersei takes a sip of wine. “Yes, she does.” She turns to Jaime. “Do you want Casterly Rock?”

Jaime snorts, a bitter half-sound. “No. Never did. You?”

Cersei’s mouth twists, despite herself. “Oh yes. But what is a fortress to an entire kingdom?” She, too, stands, and walks to the window.

The girl’s clothes have been torn off...before she was brought to the courtyard, if the blood on her thighs is anything to go by. She is bent over a block, and the Mountain raises his whip.

“Qyburn, send a raven to the representative of the Iron Bank,” she says.

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Tell them I will give them the Lannister gold mines against the debts of the Crown.”

Jaime speaks up. “The mines are worked out!”

“They don’t know that,” murmurs Qyburn.

Twenty. Twenty-one. Cersei is counting the whip-strikes. Eventually, girl stops screaming. Her skin is in tatters, blood flecks the entire courtyard.

“And they can also have the choosing of the next Lord of Casterly Rock,” she says, “once they bring me the dwarf’s head.”

“Yes, my Queen.” Qyburn gives a half bow.

“They must use a Faceless Man. The Sorrowful Men are just...not good enough.”

Cersei opens the window, leans out over the courtyard below. “Keep going, Ser Gregor,” she calls. Obediently, the knight raises his whip to comply.

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JAQEN H’GHAR

They left the Brotherhood Without Banners in silence, and silence holds them in its grasp still. A few murmurs, when setting camp, the howl of the wind and of the wolves travelling beside them through the forest, the grind of axle and wheel as Sandor Clegane guides the poorly-built cart up a
hill—it seems these are the only sounds that can be mustered.

She has not ridden with him, nor does she touch him in the light of day. At night, when they huddle under the blankets, and Sandor Clegane snores under the cart, she draws his arms around her and he holds her to his breast, her head tucked under his chin. They clutch at each other, each awake by turns, and do not speak.

Death rises in him, uncalled, though so far he has managed to hide it from her—his lies have been honed over lifetimes lived by other men, and his bride is perceptive, but not in the midst of her grief.

He can feel the ice in his veins, and the taste of blood now always hovers at the back of his mouth. The duality of who—he is, it must be understood; once it is understood, it will be annihilated. There is some residual sadness in him, for this. She will grieve for Jaqen H’ghar. But the other option—to understand the god, and annihilate Him...she will lose Jaqen H’ghar then, too, for His favor will be withdrawn from the world. It will be the end of the Faceless Men. The end of mercy.

Pure selfishness makes him hesitate. He wants to speak with her once more, to touch her, //claim// her. Once. Before death rises for the last time.

He waits.

Surprisingly, it is Sandor who breaks first. He has been watching them set up camp, go through the motions of melting snow for water, erecting a barricade against the wind, all without words.

“How long you two been married?” he asks.

Jaqen kneels beside the pot, waiting for the snow to melt. Their fires are small, but still it takes longer than it should. “Two years,” he says.

“Two years five moons,” she interjects sharply from the other side of their small camp, and her voice carries a hint of annoyance. It is the opening he has been looking for, the first sign of anything beyond blankness in her this past seven-day.

He rises, and moves swiftly to her side.

Sandor snorts behind him. “Yeah, you’re married to her all right, you poor son-of-a-bitch.”

She is drawing the horse-blankets over Steel; the nose-bags and grain have already been distributed between the two mares.

He reaches for her, and she turns, and it is an almost compulsive thing, this movement, that draws them closer, forehead-to-forehead, though her hand stays at her side.

“Two years, five moons, six days, six hours,” he says, softly. “Shall I count you the heartbeats, love?” He uses the Braavosi cant—a language of comfort, for her. Lorathi is too laden with intent, Westerosi too raw for the both of them.

And then, //then// her arms rise and close around his neck. “Thank you,” she says. “For bringing me to her, for coming with me, for....I keep thinking...” Her words tumble over themselves, as if the dam that held them back has broken.

Jaqen H’ghar silently takes back every single inimical thought he has ever had towards Sandor Clegane, for asking a question with the power to banish silence.
“...she wouldn’t have died if we were not here,” his bride says. “Someone would cut her down, and she would rise, with yet another horrific wound in her, and--”

“But we came,” he says. “The gift was given.”

She shudders in his arms. “She gave me new names.”

He raises his face, presses his lips upon her forehead. “Had she aught to pay you with, for these names?” he asks over her head.

“Not even her own life,” she replies, sadly.

“Then we cannot accept the contract. A payment must be given.”

She relaxes into him with a sigh. “She called me her vengeance.”

The words are a statement, not an urge; Jaqen H’ghar and Arya Stark do not need to exchange words to know that the time for vengeance is done.

They walk back to the fire, sit side by side, and though there is quiet around them, it is not silent.

That night they pull the blankets over them, and she does not hold him quite as tightly as she has been since the Hollow Hill. Slowly, he runs his hand down her side, then reaches her hip. He slips his hand under her shirt, and lays his palm, flat, over her the bare skin of her stomach. She draws closer, nestles herself into him, and he knows she can feel his hardness pressing into her.

He draws lazy circles on her stomach; she relaxes, and sleeps.

The next day, he mounts, and she holds her arms up to him and he pulls her up into his saddle with him.

Sandor Clegane snorts again. “Assassins, my ass,” he mutters.

They both ignore the commentary.

He kisses the back of her neck as they move out, the cart creaking along behind them. It is not entirely safe, this double-riding, for the wars have left many bandits in their wake, but they have just moved beyond the Neck; they are in the North, and a direwolf’s pack hunts beside them, unseen but not unheard.

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**NO ONE**

The one who wears Arya Stark’s face is chained to the ground, the chains driven through the rock with crude iron stakes. She is in another cavern whose mouth overlooks the dragon pit, surrounded by red-robed sorcerers--more sorcerers than she has ever seen in one place. She is grateful for their presence, for they block her view of the thing growing in the center of the dragon pit.

A slave is made to stand before her, and his throat is cut, slowly, and the wound held over a basin. The basin fills, then overflows, and the blood dripping down its side has strange patterns in it, patterns on the edge of understanding that is no understanding at all. When he is emptied of blood, the slave staggers away, to where, she knows not.
He is still alive.

Death has no dominion in Asshai.

The basin has been filled at the order of the woman sorcerer the others call Ember. They all bear half-names such as this, “ember” and “blaze”, “kindle” and “flicker”--no sorcerer wants another knowing their true name.

But a true name is not required by the Faceless.

“I can see you thinking, pretty one,” says the woman.

“Fuck you,” says no one.

The woman walks forward, runs a hand through Arya Stark’s hair, as she has done many times.

“You truly have no name,” she says in wonder. “You have forgotten it.” She tugs at Arya Stark’s hair. “I wonder if your god has forgotten it. Will he rise out of you, do you think, when you scream?”

The one who is no one snorts. “I have no god in me. Perhaps I was god-touched, once, but no longer.”

“It is not a bond so easy to forget,” says the woman.

“The god has been repudiated.”

“Really?” The woman seems to be fascinated. “However did you manage that?”

No-one shrugs.

“But has your god has repudiated you?” Her gaze is considering. “Unlikely,” she muses. “Death is a hard thing to undo for anyone other than R’hlbor.” Suddenly, the woman takes away her hand, and the loss of pressure comes as a relief to the one who wears Arya Stark’s face. “He will come for you. And when death comes...he will give you your name again, and we will take you into R’hlbor.”

The sorcerers have started chanting, a dolorous sound that grows, bit by bit, with every refrain.

“Jaqen is not that easily manipulated,” says no-one, and then she realizes what she has said, and cannot take back. Her eyes widen in horror.

“Jaqen?” asks the woman. “How very...pedestrian.” The sorcerer looks over her shoulder at one of her brethren; the chant changes, becomes more focused; Death’s name is woven into it, now.

“No...no, no, no.

“Spells move within men,” says the woman, her gaze somewhere far away. “Men think they are thinking their own thoughts, but it is the spell, guiding them, trapping them in a maze of their own making. If he cannot be manipulated, someone else will manipulate him for us.”

“Faceless Men are not stupid,” spits the one who is no-one.

I cannot stop talking!

The woman chuckles. “You were not stupid, certainly--you knew where the others of your order
had died. And yet...yet you came here. Did you forget, conveniently? Did your order just not think of it, to set a guard on you, to warn you not to tread here? Did your god lose track of your travels?"

The woman smiles, and it is a knowing, wise smile.

“A spell of Asshai is a subtle thing, assassin,” she says, “and no man--avatar or otherwise--is immune.”

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ARYA

“Speak to me of theology, my love,” says Jaqen. Again, as the night before, his hand slips under her shirt, rests against her bare skin. A warmth radiates outwards from his touch, and she leans back, rests her head against his chest.

His heartbeat is too slow; it stutters. Terror seizes her, and a sudden, virulent hatred of the Lorathi way makes her clench her fists. You want to understand, love, and understanding, to you, means death.

“Why do you tremble?” he asks.

“You breathe,” she says.

Arya Stark does not surrender. I will make him understand, my way, and then he will not die.

“Where does the God end, and Jaqen H’ghar begin?” she asks.

He chuckles quietly. “Do you know how many times I have asked this of myself?”

She has asked that question herself, before, and found an answer she can give him now.

“Death has no end,” she breathes. “The God is in you, Jaqen.” The words reverberate somewhere behind her eyes. “You are dying. Every moment and every breath. So am I. So is everything else--the earth, the sun, the stars themselves. So am I--the God is in me too.” Her mouth twists at the last, challenging and insinuating, holy and profane in equal measure.

His fingers dip lower, they stroke along the waistband of her britches. “Not yet,” he murmurs, and there is an entirely different kind of silence between them for a moment. It seems he is not above claiming godhood when it serves his teasing.

“So where does Jaqen H’ghar begin?” he asks, eventually.

In Valyria.

She twists to look up into his eyes. No blood. “Have you noticed the shift in your speaking?”

His lips twist: a helpless smile. “It is all a response to you. Nothing to do with the God…the ‘I’ and ‘you’...love seems to impose this curious sense of self; it feels like self-defense, almost, against a dissolution into you.”

“You are under my skin,” she agrees, turning back to the road, squirming closer to him. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, quotes: “...so close that your hand on my chest is my hand.”

“So close that your eyes close as I fall asleep,” he finishes for her, a low murmur that thrums up her
spine.

Then, reluctantly, they must stop to water their horses, and feed Sandor, whose grumblings have been growing steadily louder over a half-watch. They unpack the hardtack from their saddlebags and portion it out, eating while standing up as the horses slurp from buckets of half-melted snow.

“Had your fun?” Sandor sneers at them.

She narrows her eyes at him.

“There is a lot that needs to be discussed between us,” says Jaqen, and his voice says he is not offended.

Sandor snorts. “There is only one reason a man puts his woman up on his horse in front of him, and it is not for talking.”

She takes a deep breath, opens her mouth, and then catches Jaqen’s gaze. His eyes glitter, and she cannot help but respond: her cutting tirade becomes a giggle, and then something louder, but the sound rings across the clearing and it startles her, the sound of her own laughter, and she bites it off.

But then he chuckles, and it is the best sound she has heard in days. “I knew I was doing something wrong,” he murmurs.

Softly, blending her voice into the timbre of his humor, she allows herself to laugh again. “Fondling, not talking,” she says, when the air grows still once more, “thank you, Sandor, I will remind my Jaqen of what is proper the next time we find ourselves on a horse together.”

Sandor gives both of them a disgusted look, and stalks off to make water behind a tree.

Jaqen comes closer, and his fingers trail up and down her arm, raising goosebumps on her skin. She burns, under his touch. “Tonight,” he says quietly. “Once Sandor is snoring, so as to spare ourselves the commentary...or criticism. If you agree.”

She closes her eyes, leans forward, rests her head against his chest. This thing, this wanting, she realizes she did not lose it, in the Hollow Hill, as she had feared...it merely went to sleep. Jaqen’s words, his voice, his touch...

I am awake. And if he wants to do this thing, then he is not prepared to die just yet.

“I thought you did not want it like this,” she whispers. “On the cold ground.”

“I was a fool,” he says.

The self-censure in his voice makes her draw back, look up at him.

“It is a silly thing, this playing of games, when death rides in the both of us.” He pauses, though his hand continues its maddening stroking. His voice becomes quieter. “A man has kept his lovely girl waiting far too long as it is.”

His shift to Lorathi idiom has circumvented her brain. She can feel the wetness between her legs. “When you speak like that...,” she murmurs against his chest.

“Mmm. Remind a man never to take a girl to Lorath, he might lose her to someone who uses the speech more consistently than him.”
Take a girl to Lorath… “Am I ever going to get a contract like other faceless do?” she asks, and it is but half a jest. Go somewhere, by myself, carry out a gift-giving in its entirety? The last one, in Oldtown, it felt like a continuation of her training in Braavos.

He knows what she asks, for his arms tighten around her. “You are come but newly to me,” he says. “The urge to keep you by my side is too strong.” And his voice changes to jest. “Ask me again in a hundred years--short trips to the market by yourself, these may be permitted by then.”

“Poor Jaqen,” she says, mournful. “You are entirely trapped, aren’t you?”

He laughs ruefully, his breath tickling her ear.

“I will serve the Many-Faced God,” she decides, “taking what contracts I want. You can tag along beside me, and sharpen my blades or some such.”

“I am very good at sharpening blades,” he agrees. And then Sandor returns, and it is too soon for she is not done with this conversation, and she will not ride Horse with him because then Sandor will think Jaqen is groping her (she needs him to touch her, but not...not with the Hound knowing, and commenting).

Then they have to mount up, and continue northwards.

It is a land of barrows here, of graves and men’s bones laid to rest so long ago that even the North has forgotten their names. Gentle, snow-covered hills rise on either side of the road, and it is hard to tell which of them covers the dead, and which are simply soil.

He draws his horse up beside hers.

“If all men are equal,” he asks, “how can a man exist?” He has fallen back on the old speech patterns, and she cannot determine if it is to tease her, or because he’s desperately trying to deny himself, lose himself in the safe anonymity of “a man”.

*Oh my Lorathi love, you are so-fucked in the head.*

“There are two problems,” she says. “And they both stem from the Lorathi way, which is designed to annihilate a thing once it is understood--pride, fear, anger. But what if the thing that must be understood is a god?”

“That is a problem,” he agrees.

She remembers the words of the Kindly Man, when he had tried to make her understand. “The Lorathi way, it is a way, a road,” she says, “not the journey or the destination, and all roads lead to the truth, eventually.”

“A man never gave you those words,” he says, “and yet you parrot them back at him?”

Startled, she looks up. *Our Lorathi brother had once been a man’s student.*

*Oh*.

Arya realizes she is so very painfully out of her depth...what can she teach Him? “Why do you need me, love?”
“Because it is all your fault,” he says, with a smile to take away the sting. “Almost half a millennium, not a twitch, and then you give a man his own name, and then you show up beside the pool, begging for kisses. And after that, two years with a new equilibrium, and one kiss beside a stream undoes it all.”

“You killed me first,” she mutters. “And I didn’t beg.”

“Oh, I fully acknowledge my part in the tangle,” he says, conveniently ignoring the discrepancy in their interpretations of “beg”. “But a...new balancing is called for.”

It seems the both of them are aware of the precipice looming before them. *I will lose you, and soon, if you are not brought into balance with Yourself.* She controls all reactions that will betray her fear--she *can*, she realizes.

*Breathe.*

“Why didn’t you just cut my throat?” she asks, and it is a serious question. The God, partitioned away from Jaqen’s waking mind, the God would have taken her under His wing in the darkness. “It would have been easier.”

“I considered it,” he says, and looks sidelong at her. “Does that upset you?”

She snorts. “I considered it, in the Hollow Hill when I saw you standing dead before me.” She shakes her head, “but it was too late. You would still have to untangle this thing, and with grief laden on top.”

“If not something worse,” he murmurs. She doesn’t want to know what that “something worse” could be.

*...like mother, like daughter.* She shudders.

“Talking is better,” she says.

“And, in balance,” he says. “The tangle, as we call it--the scale still tips to the side of the kisses.”

They share a momentary look, giddy in its intensity. *Life, out of death,* she thinks. *This...this will hold him to me.*

“You would abide the cold ground tonight?” she asks.

He smiles, a slow, lazy smile that makes her shiver. “Are you any less you on the ground?”

His eyes are trained on her, and they are black--no whites, no pupils, no irises, just darkness that goes on and on and on...but unless she is very much mistaken, Jaqen H’ghar does not want to be lost to her any more than she wants to lose Him.

And then the words unfurl within her. “Are you any less you when you are in the trees and the stars and all the people of the world?” she asks in High Valyrian. “Are you any more you when you concentrate yourself into your body so thickly that you crowd out all life?”

“Two problems, you said,” he ventures.

She nods. “One, equality, and two, boundary.”

He raises his eyebrow. “Equality is not a problem. The problem is the worship, the bending of knee, which none should abide.”
She disagrees. “Equality is a problem. Poorly understood, it veils from you Your nature.”

“You understood this thing before I did,” he murmurs. Then, louder, “That’s why I need you, beloved--your objectivity.”

A lie. She is not objective in the least.

“Tell me,” he says.

She needs time to formulate a reply, to find a way into his order. Quickly, she thinks...she dares not look across to him, but she can smell blood. She must draw him back from the precipice, somehow.

“Beg,” she says.

The darkness in his eyes falters a bit as he blinks at her. I surprised him. In the next moment, he wears his usual smirk. “Please, sweetheart?” he asks.

She makes a face.

“Darling?” he asks.

She makes a gagging sound.

“Honey lips?”

“I. Will. Kill. You.”

“What is dead may never die,” he says, then grins. “Let us try beloved on for size, shall we?” His voice has darkened, it is velvet caressing her bare skin in a lightless room.

“Mmm,” she says. “I like that one.” She decides she is satisfied with the very Jaqen nature of his begging. “Equality can only occur between two similar things,” she says. “A handful of gold sovereigns, each is equal in value to the others--accepted as equal value to the others--though there might be miniscule differences in weight. And yet they are not equal, alone or together, to the intrinsic quality of monetary value.” Thank you, Varro Massag. “Men are coins, beloved, and death is our intrinsic quality, the equality that we carry within us.”

“Coins to monetary value,” he murmurs, looks over to her. “Sweetness to honey.” He smiles, challenging her.

“Crimson, to blood,” she responds, glaring.

“Death, to men?” he says, and this time it is a question.

“Valar morghulis,” she reminds him.

“Valar dohaeris,” he reminds her in turn. “And so we come to the concept of people kneeling.”

“Jaqen H’ghar taught me,” she muses, looking directly at him. “He taught me that a swordsman is no better than a servant, that a dragonlord is no better than a slave.”

“Does a girl like learning things from a man?” he asks. His lazy smile leaves no doubt as to his meaning; warmth tinges her cheeks even as she understands another thing about him--Him of the Many Faces seeks to distract Himself as much as her, throw them both off the trail and avoid the tangle for a little bit longer.
"What do you say to the god of death?"

"Men bow to dragonlords and submit to swordsmen," she says, as if he has made no interjection at all. "Just as men kneel to gods. This tendency to bend knee, it is not a fallacy imposed upon them by the God. It is an error, a thing of men."

Jaqen sighs. "Men are very silly."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes."

"So what is the problem of boundary?" he asks, and then answers himself. "Where does the God end and Jaqen H'ghar begin..."

She shakes her head "no". That question is meaningless.

"Where does the God begin?"

Death has no beginning. She shakes her head "no" again.

He closes his eyes, is silent for a while. "Who am I?" he asks, finally.

"You are Jaqen H'ghar," she replies. There is a passage, in Jonathan Pryce’s book about gods, a passage she has memorized and now twists to suit her purposes. "And Jaqen H’ghar is the name of the Many-Faced God, the consciousness at His core; the Many-Faced God is more than just Jaqen H’ghar, but He is nothing without Jaqen H’ghar."

He sighs. "I am Jaqen H’ghar."

She pauses. "A man can live with that?" she asks.

He blinks, and the darkness in his eyes retreats. There is no blood; no expression of pain mars the perfection of his features.

"Valar morghulis," he murmurs. He thinks. "If at the end Jaqen H’ghar is simply one that...balances. And if Jaqen H’ghar is the One of Many Faces, then he can decide that he neither deserves nor desires worship."

He can sustain some teasing at this point, she thinks. "That is unfortunate," she murmurs. "There is this thing I found in the memories of our brother who was a Myrrish courtesan before she was faceless...it was called the ‘worship of--’"

"I know what it is called," he interrupts, gazing at her with half-lidded eyes. "Perhaps we can negotiate."

She grins. "One worshipper, from time to time?" she asks.

"One , I will abide." He smirks at her. "Unless a girl is planning an orgy," he says.

He seeks to toy with her admittedly possessive nature, and she refuses to give him the satisfaction of her annoyance. "A girl would first like her coin’s worth," she says, "before she plans anything further." She shrugs, deliberately nonchalant, looks at him out of the corner of her eye.

And If I am merely possessive, what is he? Murderously possessive, if she reads him correctly at all.

"When I talked about kissing Him of the Many Faces," she says, "...did you not feel even a little
jealous?"

He looks a bit sheepish. “Not a bit...that should have raised some questions, in retrospect....” he casts her a look. “A jealous god, in all other situations, if you are wondering.”

“I don’t wonder, beloved,” she says. “I annoy.”

He chuckles. “Arouse, surely.”

_Arya Horseface...I do arouse him, but only because he loves me._

At her shrug, his expression turns unbearably fond. “You arouse the dead, my love.” It is a figure of speech, and yet...he is thinking about something. “What did it look like, to you when...”

_When you died? _“When you assumed your aspect?” she asks.

“Mmm.”

“Your body was dead,” she says. “There was no _room_ in it for anything that was not dead.”

“And yet I live,” he says, thoughtfully. “I must understand this thing.”

“I can explain it to you,” she teases.

“My brilliant, cunning, beautiful love,” he says, “is there anything you _cannot_ explain?”

_Your mercy. My mother’s grace. Father’s honor... I can explain vengeance, and what use is that when a lie does well enough? _ “I cannot explain poetry,” she says. “No, don’t say anything, I saw your face when I was rhyming.”

“There once was a queen of the Lannisters, she broke her head on some bannisters,” he murmurs. “It _is_ missing a certain...something.”

This playful, sarcastic quality of his voice she stores up in her, alongside the image of him with his hand over his heart.

“So,” he says. “Explain--or should I beg this time as well?” His eyes are bottomless pools of darkness again. And yet he _lives_. Somehow, in the space of a few words, he has taught himself how to redistribute death in a sustainable manner. She thrills at it, triumph snaking its way up her spine.

“It is not done, to make one’s god beg,” she says, and one side of her mouth curls up. “Unless some form of worship is involved.”

“There are many hills here, and valleys tucked in between them, out of sight of the road. Sandor has fallen behind. Say the word, we will ride to a patch of suitably cold ground.” There is no teasing in his voice at all.

She considers it, and it sounds like a very, very good idea. She opens her mouth, and the both of them are equally surprised with “later” comes out of it.

He shakes his head, rueful and admiring at the same time. “When you have a problem between your teeth, love, _nothing_ distracts you from it.”

“Theology,” she reminds him, for they should speak of magic, and dragonlords, and the confluence of blood that first awakened Him.
“I am tired of it.” His turn, to be irritated. *Hah! How does it feel, Jaqen?* She almost chortles, and catches his glare out of the corner of her eye.

“You don’t want to know what I think?” she asks.

“Did a man say he was tired of it?”

“Yes,” she says meekly.

“Then a girl should use her logic.”

In the next moment he leans over, precarious, reckless, and draws her into a kiss she returns with equal ardor. More, because she realizes “later” is a very stupid word, and Sandor is catching up to them.

“Tonight,” she murmurs against his mouth.

“Tonight,” he breathes. “And I swear to you, we will speak of theology till the world ends, if it so pleases you. *After*.”

He draws back, reluctantly, when Horse shifts under him. Reluctantly, she lets him go.

“But there is a thing I must...,” he says, and there is such somberness in him that she finds herself growing afraid for him all over again. “There are names I have lost. I would reach for them, in the darkness. Surely they are kept here, somewhere. I would know what happened to them. I will reach--” he murmurs.

“No,” she says. *Those names were lost in Asshai. We must not touch anything to do with Asshai until we understand what they do there, to Faceless Men.* But she needs to distract him from himself, and this is no bad thing, for him to consciously administer His domain.

She casts around for a task, finds it, and couches it in the most pragmatic terms she can. “They are dead; they have passed beyond suffering. But there is one who may need aid--you said he hunts in Yi Ti. Find *his* name, beloved, and give it back to him.” *And that, for the Kindly Man and his beatings,* she thinks smugly. She feels a deep kinship with this brother of hers, whom she has never met and whose face she does not know, who once loved Jaqen (who could not?) and was called friend by Jaqen in turn.

He looks at her as if he sees the thoughts passing through her mind. She snorts. *He can read me like a book.*

His mouth twitches. “Some books are harder to understand than others, even if you can read them,” he murmurs. “But yes, I should search for our living brother first.”

“We will stop soon for the night,” she says. “This thing should not be done on a horse. You can do it while I set up camp.”

“My lovely, *practical* bride,” he says, his hand reaching out to touch hers. “What would I do without you?”

“Fall off a horse,” she replies.

Stormclouds boil over the horizon to the west. The sun is setting, but the only indication of it is the gradual loss of light. Nymeria is close, and yet too far, for when the wolves start howling, her howl sounds almost a half-day’s ride to the northwest.
THE GHOST OF HIGH HEART

The men of the Brotherhood Without Banners have come and sung Jenny’s song to the tiny woods witch. They wish to know their future, now that Lady Stoneheart’s vengeance rules no longer within Hollow Hill.

But the woods witch does not acknowledge them. She sits crouched on a stool, her knees drawn up to her chin, and she croons to herself.

“...a white wind sweeps ash before it and death’s bride dances on his bones. And all the land has done is undone but it will not save her in the end...”

BRAN

He sits below the heart tree a short raven’s flight from the Wall, and dreams.

He dreams of a great darkness, and in the heart of it is a fire that grows and grows and engulfs the world. The darkness is destroyed, and it should have been a happy thing, but then there are men, a thousand, a hundred thousand, all marching in a line with death-wounds upon their bodies, from sword and axe and fire, and they mourn the darkness.

Arya is there, and their mother and their father and Nymeria, and then Arya picks up a knife made of Valyrian steel and stabs herself in the stomach with it. All around the world, people of power, people that can dream, people that have offered blood sacrifice, they close and bar their doors, and tremble.

PATCHFACE

The man of the Night’s Watch hands the fat little jester his bread, but he can’t get the man to eat. Yet again, he curses whoever it was in Stannis Baratheon’s army that was supposed to have taken “Patches” with them, and forgot him here at the edge of the world.

“Eat it!” snarls the Crow.

The jester begins to cry, great heaving sobs, with fat blobby tears the size of a man’s fingertip falling from the corner of his eye.

Immediately contrite, the brother of the Night’s Watch crouches beside the table so his head is level with the jester’s. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry Patches, I didn’t mean it!”

“My lord,” wails Patchface. “My lord, oh my sweet lord, they are going to chain you up, oh lord,
they will eat you up.”

MELISANDRE

Wolves howl in the distance, and Melisandre draws closer to her fire. Failure sits in her mouth like ashes; Jon Snow sent her south, and the farthest she’s gotten is the Barrowlands. Her supplies are running low, and there is not a single village, nor shelter outside the barrows of the dead.

She shivers, and stares into the fire, and for the first time since Castle Black, she sees a vision in it.

*A man, with black-in-black eyes, he stands behind a girl...* Melisandre knows this girl, she has seen the darkness in her, and R’hllor told her they will meet again. The man...she shudders. She does not know him and yet she fears him.

The sorceress wonders if R’hllor is sending her a vision to show her where she must go next.

*The man walks in a cavern full of dragon eggs.* There are only three dragons in the world that Melisandre knows of, though there were rumors in Asshai, rumors the highest of R’hllor’s priesthood had not denied at the time of her last visit.

*The man is chained to the ground, and split open, and darkness spills out from him.*

She does not know how to interpret the vision, but there is a sense of great victory. “Lord of Light,” she whispers. “May thy will be done.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is the BIG ONE...both in terms of happenings, resolutions, and word-count...we’re going through it piecewise, so we may be a bit late - Saturday evening instead of morning, perhaps. We’ll try to get it out in time.

Love you all for your encouragement and comments, and just really, really thrilled that the story has touched so many of you! I hope you like the rest...
Black blood white weeping...

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Necromantic sex ritual, questionable sex, blood sacrifices...there may be a squick factor for some. Also, explicit sexual content, but you knew that already.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANDOR

Sandor transfers the reins of the cart-horse to his left hand, and leans back with a sigh. *How can two people have so much to say to each other that they just keep talking and talking?* He’s gotten heartily sick of their “discussions”—they’ll even try to draw *him* into it, when they speak in the common tongue.

The sly-blade slows his horse. *Guess it’s his turn now.* *He* is usually less abrasive, but he smiles too much--usually it’s the wolf-bitch that drops back, tries to get a rise out of Sandor. He wonders what conversation he’s going to get saddled with, this time. Last night around the campfire, it was horseflesh. Not a bad topic, as topics go, but then the she-wolf went and lost her temper when both Sandor and her husband sided against her.

At least it won’t be gods. He shudders. *Arya Stark...Arya H’ghar (they haven’t said, he hasn’t asked, not his business), she has gotten religion, in a bad way.* She’d only mentioned it the once, but the way of her mentioning... *If I was her husband, I’d be holding a mighty grudge against this “Many-Faced God”.* Sandor’s “fuck all the gods to hell” had seemed to settle the matter.

Jaqen draws his mare up beside the cart. “We will stop a little early today, if you agree,” he says.

“What the fuck for?” asks Sandor.

The other man’s gaze is unfocused, as if he is contemplating something. “There is a thing I must do,” he says, and then he *smiles* again. “My bride insists it should not be done on a horse.”

Sandor wants to say something pithy, to put the smiling, sword-wielding Lorathi in his place, but something feels...off.

“Some assassin thing?” he asks.

“Hmm,” says the man, noncommittally.

Despite himself, Sandor wonders what it is. There are many, many tales of the Faceless Men, the things they can do. And here *he* is, traveling on the road with two of them, and all he’s seen them do so far is *talk*.

*He put me on the ground, and I didn’t even see him move till the last.*

Sandor grunts.

The cart creaks along, and Jaqen rides silently beside it. He usually does, leaving Sandor the hard work of starting the conversation.
“How did Sansa Stark get to Winterfell?” he asks finally, a question he’s been meaning to ask for days and never quite found the right time for.

Jaqen replies in his customary quiet voice (he’s never heard this man’s voice raised in anger, not even at the She-Wolf, and she can be fucking infuriating). “To the best of my understanding, Petyr Baelish helped her escape King’s Landing after Joffrey’s wedding. The Boltons took Winterfell. And then Petyr Baelish married her to Roose Bolton’s bastard.”

Something deep twists in Sandor, something held so tightly within himself that he has almost forgotten the thoughts that go with it, and the twisting of it makes it hard for him to breathe for a moment. “Married again,” he grunts finally. “Hope she’s happy this time.”

Jaqen lets the silence stretch between them before he speaks. His voice is measured, and he looks straight ahead at the road. “Be careful, Sandor...Sansa Stark is not the same girl you knew in King’s Landing.”

The assassin turns to look at him, and Sandor purses his lips; it must be said that Jaqen H’ghar, too, knows what an obsession with a Stark woman does to a man. This they do not need to speak of, and Sandor would be grateful if it is never mentioned again, and Jaqen nods, and that is the end of it.

But then Jaqen lowers his voice to a very quiet murmur (is the Wolf-Bitch’s hearing really that good?) “Not married anymore; she fed her husband to his hunting hounds.”

The “be careful” makes a lot more sense now, Sandor thinks as he watches the sly son-of-a-bitch spur his horse to go ride beside his Stark.

He’s not exactly sure what this thing means...in all the dark imaginings of his loneliness, he has never become anything--lord or soldier or thief, to steal her away in the night--he has never imagined himself as anything that could fit beside a little bird.

But she is not a little bird anymore.

The thought makes him both sad, and...something else. He wants to see what she has made of herself, he wants to see if she has room enough in her fortress in the north for a man who used to be a dog, a man who can be her shield even though he can never be her lover.

Wonder if my face will still scare her.

For the first time in a long while, Sandor Clegane is not drifting from one place to the next, but travelling, and he has a destination in mind.

He is driven by curiosity.

They set up camp in a little valley, sheltered from the wind by the bulk of two great mounds. Somebody else has had this idea before them...Sandor sees shapes below the snow. A cart…

“Bodies under the snow,” says Jaqen. “Someone was ambushed here.”

It’s not a good omen, as far as Sandor is concerned. But the stormclouds are roiling overhead, and there may not be such a sheltered place further on.

The she-wolf purses her lips. “They left a cart...maybe it’s better than ours.”
Hah. She’s learned all right, thinks Sandor with satisfaction. But Jaqen is motioning to him, behind his back. What the fuck? Sandor sidles over to one of the snow-covered shapes, brushes aside the snow. It’s hard to tell, but the grey cloth...Silent Sisters. Silent sisters with a cart--taking a body somewhere, then.

He needs to figure out what Jaqen has in mind. He looks up, and sees the assassin subtly shake his head.

“Farmers,” says Sandor out loud. “Bandits, probably.” It’s hard to tell under the snow, the bodies could have been here for months. Sandor does not like it. And, it seems, neither does Jaqen. “I think we should move, to somewhere we’re not surrounded by corpses,” says Sandor.

The girl shrugs. “We’re all corpses in the end, Sandor.” Then she looks uncertainly at Jaqen. “But maybe we should keep moving.”

It starts to snow. Lightning arcs in the sky overhead.

“Well,” says Sandor sourly, “the decision is made for us, thanks to your nattering. We’re going to have to stay here till the blizzard passes.”

“Stupid winter,” the girl mutters, and they start preparing the camp--they set up right beside the snow-choked entrance of one of the mounds, using the cart as a barricade, leading the horses to the overhang and covering them with the horse-blankets.

The girl starts a small fire--she’s very good with that--and sets a pot to boiling.

Meanwhile, Jaqen has retreated to the little blanket-fort the two build every night--it looks right comfortable, Sandor thinks, had he but anyone to share one with he’d have built one too.

“He’s not eating?” asks Sandor, when the girl divides up the boiled oats in two portions.

She looks over her shoulder. Jaqen sits cross-legged, his back against one of the travelling packs. His eyes are closed, his hands resting on his knees. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“What is he doing?”

Her mouth twitches. “Magic.”

Sandor snorts. “Looks like sleeping to me.”

She doesn’t respond.

“What kind of magic?” he asks.

“One of our brothers is...lost,” she says. “He is searching for him.”

Sandor shakes his head. “Still looks like sleeping to me,” he mutters.

It grows darker, but the snow reflects the lighting overhead; an uncanny grey radiance fills the landscape. The wind is picking up; even the wolves that seem to have kept them constant company along the way (my direwolf, the girl had explained, she has a pack now, which doesn’t do anything to reassure Sandor, but what choice does he have?)--even the wolves have stopped howling.

The snow is coming down heavy now, swirling around the mounds, and it brings with it a bitter, bitter cold. Ice crystals are forming on his eyebrows. The heavy snow has doused the fire, and there won’t even be any embers left to start tomorrow’s blaze with.
“I think,” says the girl, her teeth chattering, “I think we need to move further into the barrow.” She rises, brushes the snow off her head, and moves to Jaqen.

Dead bodies outside, dead bodies inside, Sandor doesn’t believe in ghosts, but he wonders if whoever it is that is buried here will mind the intrusion.

“Jaqen,” she says, “Jaqen!”

Her voice is too high. Sandor creaks to his feet, slumps over to her side. The man’s lips are blue, his fingers are blue. Sandor pushes his shoulder, and Jaqen just...falls over. Sandor has seen enough dead bodies...

“He’s dead,” he says, in complete confusion. “How’s he dead ?”

The girl’s lips are pursed, she’s worried but not panicked. “It’s temporary,” she says.

And then Jaqen’s body convulses, it arches off the ground and the dead man opens his mouth and screams . The scream rings through Sandor’s head, it turns his blood to ice far better than the blizzard raging overhead, and the girl is on her knees, shaking her husband, screaming his name.

Sandor slumps to his knees. It’s getting colder and colder.

He comes to himself half-frozen--the girl has a hold of his hair and she is tugging at his head. “Sandor, Sandor! Get up! Get inside.”

“How is he dead?” asks Sandor.

There is a blankness in her face, and it terrifies him. “Get under the overhang,” she says, then turns away. He watches through snow-encrusted lashes as she bends, and half lifts, half drags Jaqen’s body. She’s dug a hole, he realizes, through the snow blocking the barrow’s entry.

Another Hollow Hill , he thinks. His thoughts are slow, sluggish. He’s not really feeling cold anymore.

She drags Jaqen’s body through the hole, returns for her packs. “Sandor! Get inside.”

“Not going in a grave,” he mumbles. “Not in a grave yet.”

She snarls at him. “Then fucking cuddle with the horses, because I’m not driving the fucking cart, and neither is Jaqen.”

“Jaqen is dead.”

“If you die on me, dog , I’m going to burn your body in the biggest fucking pyre you can possibly imagine.”

That gets him going. With a roar that is more of a whimper, he rises to his feet. She has already disappeared into the grave. And now that he is on his feet, he might as well keep moving--he gathers up the blankets and bedrolls, heads on over to the horses, and does what he can to minimize how much of him the wind can bite at.
THE STRANGER

It is a gathering of the self, this darkness that rises in him and through him.

_You are dying. Every moment and every breath. So am I. So is everything else--the earth, the sun, the stars themselves. So am I--the God is in me too._

He would have liked to beg her forgiveness, for the day full of pleasant lies he placated her with. _Time_, he thinks. He does not control the timing of it; someone, some _thing_ else does. And he knows not what it is, but death is in its thrall.

He saw, what she did, with the twisting of her words.

_Not enough._

He would have liked to have given rein to his desire, and hers, once. For that, too, someday the god will have to beg her forgiveness. The snow falls, and they are surrounded by the dead; it is too late.

Death is in her, a thousand times a thousand pinpricks of death, she breathes in death and exhales it out into the world.

He expands, through her breath.

There is death in the bones resting on a cart, in the deep hill that holds the grave of a king, in the grass that has withered and frozen under winter, in the sky through which the winds scream.

It is as if this place has been _made_ for him, a valley perpetually in His shadow. On this land, he is the Stranger, and there must be a pattern to His strangeness: each of the Seven are reflected around him in death’s mirror. The Maiden, who has died for him. The Father and the Mother, dead. The Crone curled in the corpses of his handmaidens strewn around what was once a glade. The Warrior with his flame-ravaged visage, who has defied the Stranger time and again, as is right. The Smith, who forged the First King’s starfall blade, dead in the barrow behind him.

Death expands, through this, the seat of his power. There is no coming back from this.

He crosses the Narrow Sea.

He begins in Volantis. Death, in doorsteps and streetways, death, upon the butcher’s block and deep within the Black Wall.

His brother is not here.

He expands, and goes north, and east. Through the Dothraki sea, where the grasses suffer under a merciless sunrise, to Qarth, jewels giving up their light a flicker at a time, and he sees them only as the dust they will be, in time.

His brother is nowhere to be found.

Death expands into the east.

And he finds that he cannot expand any further.

There is a barrier, and beyond it Death sees nothing.

_Asshai. Our brother is in Asshai._
Fear takes him.

He contracts then, and death is drawn out of the world, out of the familiar body sitting in a frozen glade under a blizzard and as death leaves, so does life. He draws out of the woman he loves, out of the grasses and the hills and all the people and things between Westeros and Asshai.

He draws him into himself, until he is an impossibly sharp thing, concentrated to a single point, and he throws himself like a spear at the barrier that dares to bar His passage.

The barrier shudders, but holds. Death shatters.

He screams, in rage and pain and fury, and he gathers himself again. He is a hurricane, and he slams against the spells that hold him back; there are minds behind the spells, and though they may not die, they remember death.

Death washes over the barriers of Asshai, and one mind dies, then another.

A path opens; the barrier cracks.

Death snarls in triumph, and pours into the crack, and he takes all the darkness of the world with him.

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**BRAN**

After seeing Arya once in his dreams, Bran sees her every time he closes his eyes. And so he dreams, and dreams again, hoping to find her, to find the lord who walks beside her, and warn Him.

He dreams of a great hound, marked by fire, flames still lick the side of his head. He is dying in the snow in the mouth of a grave, his breathing stops as he sleeps, and yet...yet his eyes flicker in dreaming.

A wolf, twin to his lost Summer, pounces on a half-frozen rabbit under a snowbank, and the rabbit meows. The direwolf shakes the rabbit in its jaws, then drops it bleeding upon the white snow, and backs away.

“I am so sorry,” says a sorrowful man, and slides his blade into a woman’s ribs. She turns, eyes wide, as she bleeds out over him. He withdraws the blade. Both of them look, confused, when she does not fall.

A ship sinks, men thrash and wail, breathe water, drawn into the depths. But though they do not breathe, they do not die, and the Drowned God hears not their pleas. Sharks circle, biting, and the men have not the voice to scream, but they do not die.

*It is too late,* Bran thinks, *too late!*

Death has passed into shadow.

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**NO ONE**
A fever rages within the one who is no one, and she slumps, the chains keeping her upright. She stirs, briefly, as the sorcerer grabs Arya Stark’s hair and pulls, forcing her to face the red-rimmed eyes of R’hhlor’s servant.

“Do you feel it?” asks the woman. The faceless one does not respond. “No,” the woman murmurs. “You feel nothing—you have repudiated your god.”

One of the sorcerers chanting at the front of cavern staggers, falls to his knees with a strangled gasp. Then he falls over, convulsing on the ground.

“My, my,” says the woman, as she watches slaves drag away the fallen sorcerer’s body. “It is so good to see a god’s devotion to his servant.” A hundred sorcerers chant; two baby dragons, newly hatched, flit in lazy circles above R’hhlor’s grotesque form. “He is throwing himself against the barriers of Asshai,” she says, and smiles.

To the right of the faceless one’s place of confinement, another vast circle of chains has been prepared. Now slaves light torches all around it, and she sees the pattern of it laid out in cold iron, and despairs.

The sorcerers’ chant slows, then dies away. One of them breaks away from the throng. “It is done,” he says to the woman.

And, slowly, slowly, Arya Stark’s face slips away from the one who is no one.

Again the woman seizes his hair, lifts his face to hers. “Mmm,” she says. “R’hhlor is going to be very pleased with you, my dear.”

There is a darkness inside the one who is no one, coiled tight, like a serpent under a rock. In his mind’s eye, he closes his fist around it.

He waits.

“The hour grows late,” says the woman, dropping his head. “Open a passage for the god of death—a small one. Time it, shape it—let him think it is his idea.”

He can feel her gaze boring into the top of his head.

“Not that he can escape, of course,” she says. “It is far too late for that. But...appearances matter.”

The faceless man raises his head on his own with some effort; his vision had doubled and redoubled, and he blinks to clear it. Seven sorcerers have stepped forward, and as one they raise their belt knives, and slash their own throats.

“Each of us is bound to the barriers,” says the woman, as she watches the blood spread down the front of the sorcerers’ robes, a dark stain in their already crimson attire. “More!” she calls, and seven more sorcerers step forward, and slit their own throats again. “Self-sacrifice means so little without death,” she says. “It takes many, even for a small crack. More!”

A dagger has fallen just outside his reach, slipped from the blood-slick hands of one of the sorcerers. Fallen, beneath notice.

He waits.

He does not know how many sorcerers bleed themselves dry, are led out of the cavern by slaves, but when it is done only the woman stands before him.
And a shape forms, in the corner of his eye.

The woman inhales, and her voice grows resonant within the chamber. “I feel a darkness coming. He comes.”

The one who is no one looks to his right, eyes wide. The ground is shaking, and darkness is gathering in the center of the second circle of chains.

“He fights, oh, he fights,” the woman moans, her eyes closed. “He fights to escape now. But we let him in, and he cannot leave. Death has no dominion in Asshai.”

The walls shudder.

The shadow solidifies, and Jaqen, naked, kneels on the ground, chains wrapped around his wrists, his legs.

Borrowed from what core of strength he knows not, the one who is no one calls out. “Leave, Jaqen!”

Jaqen looks up at him, and there is no white to his eyes—they are black, in black, and emotion runs amok in them. Jaqen opens his mouth, to call out.

“Don’t give them my name!” mouths the one who is no one, straining in desperation against his bonds.

The woman walks forward, towards the chain circle that holds Him of the Many Faces. Two dragons are perched on her shoulder. She is looking up, and away--the one who is no one realizes she cannot see Jaqen.

“Leave, please, Jaqen, leave,” he whispers.

Jaqen looks around, and no-one can see his brother assessing the barriers, searching for exits, those well-honed habits of infiltration and escape they both share. The one who is no one knows the exact moment Jaqen lays eyes on the thing that is R’hllor. On the faces fused to R’hllor’s front.

Rage, such rage, as he has never seen in Jaqen’s face before, and some part of him trembles in fear. Another part revels in it. His vision is turning white around the edges.

Jaqen rises to his feet, heaving at the chains that bind him with monstrous strength; there is no strategy to him, just rage and darkness, and he pulls at his chains. They rattle and stretch, and they will not let him go.

“Three hundred years in the making, those chains,” says the woman. “Avatar of Death, you cannot escape them, not when we hold your name.”

There is no room in the breast of one who is no one for guilt, or apology. Instead he reaches, reaches, for the blood-slimed dagger, and dislocates his shoulder, but his fingers close around it. He inches it closer to himself...he cannot raise his hands to his throat, or he would have slit it. But he can reach a wrist. And he has been watching the workings of these men and women, these servants of R’hllor, and he has learned some of the paths they walk.

His vision is speckled with white, with rage, with need.

*They try to chain my god but all their words will come to nothing, less then nothing, the salt and the sea will drown all of them and He will rise...*
Blindly, he slices at his left wrist.

The woman is focused on the circle that holds Jaqen. The one who is no one pools his blood on the cursed ground, and refuses despair; he feeds the ground his blood, and the darkness coiled around his heart eases, and slips out of his veins.

A serpent forms, made of darkness and torment, its surface so dark that no light reflects off of it. The serpent slithers along the ground, growing, lengthening, still connected to the pool of blood under his wrist. It reaches the first chain, a chain that holds Jaqen’s left arm, and coils around it. It constricts.

The chain burns, white-hot, and snaps.

The woman whirls around, stares at him. An ugly smile twists at her features. “A murderer’s blood,” she says. “Given willingly. How very fitting.” Her voice grows softer as she crosses the floor to him, grabs him by his hair again, a motion that makes mockery of blessings by a septon. “It will not save him,” she says, softly. She steps around him, and her grip grows painful as she yanks his head up, exposing his throat to the torchlight.

“Look at your servant, Lord of Darkness,” says the woman. “We will flay him, and feed him to R’hllor, piece by piece. Or, you can give us his name, and we will let him go.”

The sorcerers’ spells have left no lies in the one who is no one. “She lies,” he screams. He looks into Jaqen’s furious, pain-filled eyes, and begs him to understand. “Forget me,” the one who is no one whispers. “Forget my name. Forget everything. Leave.”

There is only so much they can do to me without my name.

“He cannot leave,” says the woman to no-one. “Come, god who is drowning,” she raises her voice to reach the other side of the room, “let us abandon pretense and trivialities. Give us his name, and he is free to go—we will put him on a ship ourselves. Just a name, and it is all over. Even you--whatever is left of you once R’hllor takes this one’s name--we will allow even you passage out of Asshai.”

Jaqen’s jaw clenches, and he pulls at the chains holding him fast.

“A murderer’s blood will not free you, my lord,” says the woman, and smiles.

Beneath them, his wrist still pumps blood onto the ground; the blood pools, and the serpent made of darkness undulates as it rises over yet another tangle of links. A chain snaps, then another.

The woman looks down at the one who is no one. Her brow is furrowed in consternation. “Sanctified?” she says. “A priest’s blood? But you repudiated your god!”

The sorcerers’ spell still wraps around his tongue, a band of silk and ash. “I did not repudiate my brother.”

Another chain snaps.

There is not much blood left in him. But Death has no dominion in Asshai; the one who is no one yet lives.

The woman, frantic, kneels, tries to staunch the wound with the skirts of her robe, to mop up the blood on the ground, but the one who is no one simply cocks his wrist back, and the blood spurts in greater volume.
The last chain snaps, and then Jaqen is upon her, he passes \textit{through} her, and it is as if all the ages of the world have fallen upon her at once. She withers into decrepitude, and then further, until she curls up into herself and falls, finally, to dust.

\textbf{HIM OF THE MANY FACES}

“You should not have come here,” says the one who is no one.

Together, they are undoing the chains that hold the faceless one to the ground. Him of the Many Faces is not much use; the spells lie in tatters with the destruction of their focus, the woman-sorcerer with the gloating habit.

“I did not know you were here,” says Him of the Many Faces. “I would have come sooner.”

His brother shakes his head. “Once, you might not have. You are...changed.”

Death’s lips twist, momentarily. Somewhere...there is a deep well of sorrow in him, a well he cannot plumb, and her face lies at the heart of it. He brushes the sentiment aside.

Once the one who is no one is freed, his wrist properly bandaged with strips torn off the sorcerer-woman’s robe, the two faceless men peer over the edge of the dragon pit.

They contemplate the thing pulsing in the center.

“More sorcerers will come,” says the one who is no one. “Can you do something? Before...”

“I have no power here,” He says. “You must be my hands, brother.”

“\textit{Valar dohaeris},” says the one who is no one, and his face is alight with a savage anticipation.

He picks up the dagger he used to cut himself, then another lying in the pile of dust that was once a sorcerer. His hands are shaking, but he is faceless, and Death stands at his back.

Slowly, he climbs his way down to the central cavern along the rocky wall; the sorcerers’ propensity for grandiose carving works against them now, for the icons and monsters picked out in rock around the pit aid the faceless one’s descent.

There is no sorcerer in sight. The one who is no one snorts. “They used them all up, getting you here and binding you. And it availed them not.”

Him of the Many Faces says nothing.

The one who is no one picks his way across the cavern, stepping where he must to avoid the fires. He is sweating now--the fever seems to have been sweated out of him--and the heat clamps around his lungs like a vise. Death follows.

The one who is no one reaches the pulsing form of R’hllor, towering over them as if set to reduce all men and their horrors to insignificance.

He pauses to vomit all over a cluster of dragon eggs.

The dragons overhead are screeching, diving at him, their talons reaching for his eyes. Him of the
Many Faces wades into the fray, and the dragons are confused, flapping back and forth between their target and the shadow beside him.

When he has overmastered his gut, the one who is no one finds first a foothold, then a handhold on the pillar of flesh, and begins to climb. His feet search for purchase--they find faces. Almost, it seems, the hands dangling from the corpses fused into R’hllor, it seems the hands are helping him climb, as if they know what he intends.

He reaches the first face, a face he knows so well. He does not know how to kill it, this tumor that she has become, so he simply cuts the face out. She is not screaming--she smiles as he does it. When he is done, the arms lie still, and do not twitch. He tucks her into his tattered shirt, and climbs higher.

“Valar morghulis, brother,” he says as he reaches the second face, and then he cuts him out as well.

“Now, R’hllor,” calls Him of the Many Faces.

The one who is no one looks down. “What do I do?”

Him of the Many Faces purses his lips. “He cannot die…but, we can reduce him.” He circles the bulk of the unawakened Red God, and starts pointing out faces to the one who is no one.

Obediently, no one cuts.

When they are done there is a pile of faces, waist-high upon the ground, and he is covered head to toe in blood, and he thinks there is no more strength left in him. The dragons, it seems, are opportunists--they feed on the open tears in R’hllor’s flesh.

“God-touched ones, all of them,” murmurs Him of the Many Faces, looking at the ruins of those that had been consumed by R’hllor.

The one who is no one looks at Jaqen. “Other gods?”

“There must have been,” says Him of the Many Faces, “sometime in the past few thousand years. And look,” he points to one or two of the faces, strange in their proportions. “Some of them are not human. And R’hllor has servants enough breathing life into the dead around the world, so a god can still touch someone, even when the god sleeps.”

“We need to get out of here now,” says the one who is no one.

Death looks at him sharply. He had expected his brother to offer other means to dissect R’hllor, not suggest an escape. “Since when did you become practical?” He asks.

The one who is no one snorts. “I was her too long.”

Again, Death brushes aside remembered sorrow. “The faces,” he says, and points to a spot in the ground where the cracks are wider, and magma-like fire burns. The one who is no one gathers the faces he has cut, one by one, and throws them into the crack, all save the two he carries close to his breast. Slowly, slowly, the faces smoke and splutter, and amidst the smell of cooking flesh and crisping skin, the faces burn.

The bulk of R’hllor is no less grotesque for it.

Then the one who is no one looks around. “I don’t see a way out.”
Him of the Many Faces walks to one of the carving-encumbered walls. “We climb.”

“I’m tired, brother.”

Death reaches for him, passes through him. “Just a little bit more.”

They climb. The one who is no one falters, rests, then climbs again. Time flows, and does not stop, but it does not touch them either. He sleeps, for a while, and Death keeps watch over him.

Eventually, they reach the docks.

There are no vessels on the phosphorescent green water save for two ill-used fishing boats, used, it seems, by destitute shadowbinders to eke a meal out of the cursed river.

“They stifled their own trade,” observes Him of the Many Faces.

“Fucking sorcerers,” says the one who is no one, and there is something in his voice...a *despair*. In short, succinct sentences, the one who is no one explains. Azor Ahai, the Great Other. Prophecy.

“It will be undone,” says Him of the Many Faces, finally. “All of it.”

“I would pray for it, if I could,” whispers the one who is no one.

“We reduced Valyria to ash and smoking ruin,” Death murmurs, his gaze fixed on the horizon. “We cut, and Gogossos bled to nothing. Asshai, too, will fall.”

“You have a plan, Jaqen?”

Jaqen is dead.

“It is fitting, when the manner of giving the gift matches the recipient,” says Him of the Many Faces. “These sorcerers layer plot upon prophecy--Asshai *schemes*. A schemer is newly come to the House of Black and White.”

*If she remains in the House, after Jaqen H’ghar is gone.* Renegades are hunted down and killed--there are always a handful, every century. *Not her. Let her go to Winterfell, let her travel to what deserts she may wish to see, let her marry the Sealord of Braavos; though she abandon me, she is still my bride. No hand from the House of Death will be raised against her.*

“One cannot go with you,” says Him of the Many Faces, “I will find another way.”

The one who is no one gives Him of the Many Faces a worried look, but seems reassured by what he sees in His countenance.

Him of the Many Faces walks with him all the way to the edge of the water. “Brother,” he says, as the one who is no one steps into the boat. “I have your name.”
The one who is no one waves it away. “Keep it safe for me,” he says, and then he casts off.

MELISANDRE

The fire tells her nothing more, but she still stares into it, willing coherence out of chaos. And then, the hairs at the back of her neck rise; something is watching her.

She looks over her shoulder, and there are two gold eyes gleaming out of the darkness. Wolf-eyes, but too high...too big.

A direwolf. Has Jon sent Ghost to finish me off? No. Jon Snow would execute her by his own hand, or not at all.

“Hello, puppy,” Melisandre calls. “Come into the light. I will not hurt you.” Slowly, she unsheathes her blade, nicks her finger on it. She still has strength here, not nearly as much as on the Wall, or in Asshai, but strength enough to bind the shadows dancing around the small campfire.

The beast leaps towards her, faster than she can summon the shadows, and it sinks its teeth, each one as large as a dagger, into Melisandre’s shoulder. And then the shadows are upon the direwolf, ripping into it with claws of smoke and darkness. Blood splatters upon the snow, black and viscous; the beast will not let go of Melisandre. She hears a sickening crunch of bone, there is blood everywhere, in her mouth, on the beast, and her vision blurs.

Then the beast is off her. She looks down--half her shoulder has been torn off. But the direwolf lies on its side, heaving, as shadows tear into its innards.

“Lord of Light,” Melisandre prays, and there is no response. Age spots her hands; her charm is broken, lying near the jaws of the direwolf. “Lord of Light, your servant begs your aid,” she moans.

There is no answer. Her only consolation, as consciousness drifts away, is that the direwolf dies with her.

HIM OF THE MANY FACES

Death reforms in his habitat--kneeling in a circle of chains above the dragon-pit.

The blood and sorcery, the last of His favor, that had gone into his brother’s spell--clumsy and ill-formed, but with a great deal of power behind it--the power has faded.

He is chained; he has always been chained. Whatever part of Him of the Many Faces had been freed, for a time, to help His brother...that part of him has dissolved into the blood-tainted air of Asshai.

There is no way out.

Bit by bit, he can feel death draining away from him; he is weakening steadily, and he does not know why, save that R’hllor slumbers below.
A mistake, thinks Him of the Many Faces, to claim the Red God for ours. R'hllor’s flame burns in the House of Black and White. A mistake. It forges a link, through which the Red God can subsume Death, though it was meant…

_It was meant as a mercy, for those that follow R’hllor, and come seeking death._

Him of the Many Faces folds to his knees, and tries to reason his way out of the chains that hold him. But there is no reason to be found—not even R’hllor’s sorcerers planned for this, for Death is no use to them _here_, not if they told his brother the truth about their intentions. They had wanted some small part of Him present, to be tricked into uttering his brother’s name. This…the entirety of Him, chained in the heart of Asshai, it is of no use to anyone.

_And there is no way out._

---

**ARYA**

_**Jaqen has plans for me tonight, he is not going to leave me.**_ No, something has just...something unexpected has happened, that is all. Him of the Many Faces will sort it out, and return soon.

It is dark in the barrow, the torchlight doing nothing more than shifting the shadows from around itself to the edges of the chamber, where they gather thickly, waiting.

_There should be no fear in me, not for darkness._

And yet, she is afraid, in the very marrow of her bones, and an icy chill wraps around her that has nothing to do with the blizzard outside. She wipes a hand over her face, prays. “Jaqen H’ghar”, she says.

Nothing.

Frantic now, she does it again, keeping in mind the sunlight glinting off the canals in Braavos. “Zural Mobhai.”

Nothing.

The God is not in his body, and neither is life, and she has to do _something_ and she knows not what.

_I have to bring Jaqen back to life._

The vision of Catelyn Stark, white-haired and blue-skinned and unable to remember how to weep, it rises to threaten Arya’s white-knuckled hold on herself.

_I have to bring him back quickly_.

If the Red God’s sorcerers can do it...the parting words of her brother, in Braavos, they have been intruding upon her consciousness for days, and now she knows why.

Her breath comes in ragged gasps. “Ambraysis Alayain!”

Nothing.
No, no, please, help me! Beloved where are you? The panic is threatening to take her reason from her. But there is more to a Faceless Man than a god’s favor; she retreats to the lessons of her childhood, kneels on the cold, cold stone floor, and does not look at the corpse lying next to her.

She kneels for as long as it takes for her breathing to steady, for her heartbeat to become measurable.

Who are you? She asks herself, finally.

*I am Arya Stark,* she replies. *And I am not afraid.*

She can almost feel the swish, a line of pain, as the Kindly Man’s switch comes down on her palm: *a lie!*

But it has helped, some. And there is a darkness coiled in the center of her, a darkness that matches, and overmatches the shadows waiting in the corners of the barrow. *The God is in me, too.* She draws on the darkness, somehow, she knows not what she does but she pulls it up and into her. There is not much of it. But there is enough--a residue of His favor, the scent of honey in the midst of famine.

Enough for one name.

She cups her hands over her face, and prays. “Ambraysis Alayain.” The darkness consumes itself, makes of itself a face and lays it upon her own.

Memories rise.

There are too many. Too many spells, too much speculation, too much blood. Ash-choked Asshai and the trembling of the ground. A red plague, a screaming plague, sweeping out and over monstrous figures.

*Focus.*

Again, she retreats to lessons learned in childhood, this time, her brother’s childhood. Blood sacrifice, and the raising of the dead as it was done, in a time before the priests of the Red God outlawed the practice and burnt alive any sorcerers that had the knowing of it.

Two parts, the spell has: the finding of the spirit, and the binding of it. It is a simple spell.

So.

She lets go the face of Ambraysis Alayain--she is not sure she can cast the spell in a man’s body, she has but the theory of it. Then she turns her attention to the corpse of Jaqen H’ghar.

She maneuvers his body upon the long, narrow sarcophagus, somehow; her strength is failing her. Then, slowly, methodically, she undresses him. He is cold, beneath her fingers, a grey statue lit by flickering torchlight. The cloak first, then the boots. She unbuckles the dagger strapped to his chest, the small knives at his thighs, his forearms. She finds one tucked into the back of his waistband, and this one is poisoned, its tip glimmering a wet black. There is a flicker of amusement--she has slept within his arms for more than a month, they have grappled and embraced and she has watched him out of the corner of her eye while he undresses, and yet there is something she does not know about him.

She draws his shirt over his head, then runs her hands over his shoulders, then turns to his britches. She folds his clothes, puts them aside neatly near their packs. The process is mechanical for her.
Embarrassment flickers, briefly, as she removes his smallclothes, and she pushes it aside. His manhood lies curled amidst a dusting of fine, white-gold hairs...the God has abandoned this body and it reverts to its Valyrian roots.

Trepidation, too, she casts aside.

She gathers snow from the mouth of the barrow, and makes him colder still as she washes him as best she can. Then, swiftly, she undresses herself, the chill fingers of winter closing around her ribs, her hands and feet. She wipes herself down with the snow-damp cloth, and it comes away from between her legs smeared with her red-brown moon’s blood, the blood that doesn’t seem to stop despite her not having worn a mask for days.

She cannot stop shivering.

She focuses on the pattern of the spell; the components are simple: profane words, profane deeds--the twisting of a prayer, the twisting of the natural act of procreation into something not intended by nature. *The finding and the binding*. She wills her limbs to movement, rises and mounts the sarcophagus, straddles the corpse of Jaqen H’ghar.

She speaks the words, and as she does she knows they will hold no power for her--they are profane to a people that have passed from memory, taking their gods with them.

She casts back, to their travels on the road, and murmurs the most blasphemous words she knows.

“...*dead man naked they shall be one, with the man in the wind and the west moon...* ”

Power flows out of her mouth, curls around her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. She follows the path of the power, down and down, and when she reaches his manhood she sees that he is erect, his cockhead blue with death. It is not *life*, merely an approximation of it, and she has seen the beginnings of it before, in other corpses; it is nothing new to her.

“...*though they go mad they shall be sane, though they sink through the sea they shall rise again...*”

She lowers herself, positions him at her entrance, and then in a sharp, swift motion, she impales herself onto him.

She tears.

A maiden’s first blood. It mingles with her moon blood, with the slick moisture of desire between her legs that comes, unbidden, because this is *Jaqen*, and she has wanted Jaqen since the day she died.

Her blood coats Jaqen’s shaft as she rises and lowers herself on it yet again.

“...*And death shall have no dominion.***”

The *world* tears.

She rises into the storm, a howling white wind. The spell is a simple spell--it finds her the past of least resistance. She smiles into the wind and she calls her direwolf to her. *Nymeria*, she remembers dimly, *her name is Nymeria*.

The direwolf comes, rising into the storm, and her teeth are stained red-brown with blood. She *wargs* into it, its spirit already half-untethered from the world. She is wolf, and girl, and something
The finding, she reminds herself, and then the binding.

The wind and the ice saps the last of the darkness from her. Merciless, murderous; Arya Stark was not tamed, was not tempered by darkness, merely placated by its benevolence. Without the God sitting coiled in her chest….

She seeks death, and she ranges east.

Winter follows in her wake.

---

**The Wind**

Death has laid a trail for her, a channel, and she howls along it until she reaches a towering barrier of flickering green fire and red-rimmed ash.

A thousand sorcerers have built this thing, to constrain death, in all His forms. She is not death; she is winter. Ice rains down, drawn from the deep winds at the edge of the heavens, and where it encounters the arrogance of Asshai, the barrier tears.

The wind solidifies; it has a shape, part wolf, part woman, and it walks across the ash-choked city. And where she walks, ice blooms; the surface of the river gurgles, and tries to defy her, and yet it freezes.

There is a place at the end of the city under the smoking mountain, a place of dark stone, with fingers of fire licking at its cracks. The fire scalds the moisture from the wind, dries it to something that belongs in the desert. But the cold...the cold thrives in dry air.

She finds death on his knees, in a circle of chains, surrounded by red-robed sorcerers. They feel the wind--how can they not?

He raises his head, slowly, as if the action takes unmeasurable effort. Their eyes meet; his, black-in-black, hers the white of a warg that rides winter.

The House of the Faceless Men in Braavos has two doors.

In that moment, she knows.

*He lied to me.*

*He killed Jaqen*.

He understood everything and still He killed him for...for what?

*He wanted to leave me.*

*Just for spite*, the wind cajoles.

There is no fury in ice, only a sort of pain, sadistic and masochistic by turns; she understands spite very well.

The wind reaches across the sorcerers, and it wraps around the darkness. He falters, against the
cold, and then she knows the darkness has been drained, can be drained further. There is no pity in
her; he can stand, or he can be consumed.

A vortex of bone-chilling cold swirls around the circle of chains, and where it passes, sorcerers die.

He stands in the eye of the storm, and she walks to him.

“What have you awakened?” he asks.

“Cruelty,” she says, and she knows it to be true--the counter to death is not birth, for birth is merely
the harbinger of death. Death is mercy, and there is none of that left in her.

“You made a mistake,” she says.

“Yes,” he murmurs. “Will you forgive me?”

She throws back her head and laughs, and ice rims the walls of the cavern; the crystal chime of her
laughter raises a shrieking behind her. The wind whips around, and sees bodies, many of them
without faces, fused to a some construct of man and sorcery, growing out of a pit full of eggs. The
shrieking comes from small dragons, hovering over the construct.

“It is eating you,” she surmises.


“It is but an ugly man,” she says, and shrugs. “Valar morghulis.” And then she turns around to face
her true prey once more. “I told you,” she says, and smiles. “Jaqen H’ghar is the Many-Faced God.
The God is more than Jaqen H’ghar, but he is nothing without Jaqen H’ghar. The brain decays, the
body decays--how can the Many-Faced God think if he has no brain to do it with? How can He be
merciful if he has no heart?”

is going to take you from Yourself, like you took Jaqen from me.”

The binding, she remembers as she speaks. She can bind death to the wind, and the wind will
never die. She will spread winter over lands that have never seen it before, and she will drown
them in frozen tears--the Dothraki Sea, the jungles of Leng, and with them all the deserts of the
world.

The vision of the snow-covered world, where direwolves range and feed on corpses...it fills her
with what she would have called joy, had she still remembered what that felt like.

The last of the sorcerers dies, shards of ice embedded in his eyes. She watches, unmoved. When it
is done she smiles at Him of the Many Faces.

“And now it is your turn,” she says. “Can you stand against me?”

The wolf within her unfurls, and Nymeria sinks her teeth into the wind’s thigh. Black blood flows,
cold and turgid. The memory of blood is a dim thing for her--spells and the working of them is far
beneath her domain. Where the blood touches the chains, they freeze and shatter, and the dragons
scream.

He unwinds from his crouch, slowly, painfully, and she can see the fear in him. That, too, brings
her joy.
She reaches for his throat.

“It is not done,” he murmurs. “A girl knows a man’s name.”

Her hand stops. The rules of her order wrap themselves around her, and it is she who is bound now. She bares her teeth, and the wind whips around the chamber in a frenzy.

He smiles, a sardonic twitching of the mouth, and it is her turn to be afraid.

“What else have you chained me with?” she snarls.

He walks forward, and his lips descend on hers. *That* feels good; the wind allows it. And then his lips are beside her ear, and he kisses the pulse at the base of her throat.

“Have mercy, beloved,” he whispers. “Be gentle with yourself.”

The wind slacks.

There is silence, in the air around them. Snow blankets Asshai, and for a moment the city is white, pristine. But only for a moment, for in the wake of the dying of the wind, the ash returns.

She closes her eyes, and bit by bit she slides down till she kneels before Him of the Many Faces, her head bowed.

“No,” he says, his voice appalled. “Never.”

She ignores him, and focuses on diminishment. The wind dies further, until all there is left of it is a thin white channel that stretches over the clouds, over the ash, to a grave under a hill.

He is holding her shoulders, trying to get her to rise, and she finally complies, she wraps her arms around him, and binds him.

JAQEN H'GHAR

His awakening is sudden, a paroxysm of ecstasy, and he spills his seed as his eyes open and he sees her above him, in all her glory, flickering torchlight and shadow wrapping around the curves of her frame.

There is ice in his veins, every joint aches, but warmth spreads from his groin...he cannot help but reach for her outthrust breasts.

He strains upwards, into her.

She winces.

Immediately, he pulls back. Her dark eyes are boring into him; he breaks their gaze, looks down.

There is blood on her thighs, and the muscles of her groin are clenched in pain.

“You tore yourself,” he says, not bothering to mask his annoyance.

She snorts. “Did I ever tell you about the time I sliced my leg open with a Dothraki blade?”
A man does not strangle his wife. It is counterproductive, and he will lose his touching rights.

He sighs. “Was that before or after you pulled your shoulders out of their sockets running over rooftops?”

She blinks at him. “I thought you were asleep when I told that story,” she mutters.

“Mmm,” he says, “merely trying to restrain myself.”

“Restrain yourself?” she asks, coy.

He rises upon his elbows; his black hair curls around his shoulders and he has to sweep it out of his eyes. “From strangling you,” he says gently, then sits further, wraps his arms around her, and swings them both into a fully seated position. Holding her to himself, he stands, and she wraps her legs around him instinctively.

He looks around, and finds their clothes sitting in a corner, neatly folded. He heads for them, holds her with one arm as he crouches, and spreads his cloak on the ground with the other.

He kneels to lay her down on the cloak, and slowly, slowly pulls out of her; his shaft is sticky with his seed and her blood and her arousal. Not nearly enough of the last. But he is relieved--most of the blood on her is moon’s blood; she has not actually torn herself, only breached her maidenhead, nor has she received any more hurt than she would have at a somewhat rough deflowering.

He lies down beside her and she nestles into his arms, her head on his chest. His fingers cup her breast, and he should be focused on how her nipple pebbles under his palm, but all he can think is she was not nearly this thin the last time I did this. He shutters his dismay--all magic has its price, and they are both...unaccountably lucky, that the price has not been higher.

“Cold,” she says.

“Hmm,” he replies, then reaches over her and finds her cloak, and draws it over them. There is a chill in the air, though he seems to be immune.

His fingers circle her areola, a blush of dark rose against her winter-pale skin. Her nipples harden further, and his fingers sweep lower, drawing patterns between her breasts, around her navel. She looks up at him when he drifts lower.

“What are you doing?” she murmurs.

He kisses her forehead. “You were not prepared, love.” There is no admonishment in his tone, only a little regret.

“I know this is not what you wanted,” she says, “I’m sorry.”

At that he has to pull away, and look her in the face. “Are you mad?” He softens a bit at seeing her uncertainty. “You misunderstand me. I wanted you, I want you still,” and he thinks his waxing arousal speaks for itself, pressed against her side, “I want you no matter how you come to me. But I also wanted a thing for you that was untainted by pain.”

“Well, I didn’t know what I was doing,” she says irritated. “I’ve never even seen...” she trails off.

He smirks. “Really? You not peeked at certain of our brothers’ memories?”

He expects her to blush; she does not. “I know that,” she says, “I meant it was the first time I cast a
spell, how was I supposed to concentrate on--”

“No, no,” he interrupts, “clearly a girl has no idea what to do,” he feigns ruefulness, “A man will have to teach her.”

“I know about that!” she snarls at him. “For two years, you would kiss me and then leave…”

Mmm. Yes, I can imagine, my beautiful, lovely girl, all by herself... he reins himself in, and his palm caresses the plane of her stomach, drifts lower till he is hovering over the curls at the juncture of her thighs. She is still, under him, and he lowers his head until his mouth is beside her ear.

“Did I make you touch yourself?” he whispers.

He pulls back to see her reaction. Her pupils have dilated, her mouth is parted with need.

“It was a thing a man had to do, as well, many times,” he murmurs, “after he left his lovely girl’s stone bed.”

At that, she relents, spreads her legs, invites his touch as she twists to give him access to all of her, but there is a glint in her eye he is going to have to pay for, later.

The world is overlaid with shadows and light and she burns and he knows his eyes have darkened.

He smiles, a slow, lazy smile. “Turn, beloved,” he says, and she obeys, twisting away from him, her back cushioned against his chest. “Every night you have lain in my arms like this,” he breathes into her hair.

He draws her yet closer, then reaches and hooks her leg over his his. His hand slides up the inside of her thigh, until he reaches the juncture between her legs. He cups her sex, gently rubbing his palm over her lips.

Slowly, slowly, she relaxes into his touch.

He uses a single finger to trail figure-eights over her slit, avoiding her nub though she squirms impatiently under him. He circles, circles, until her wetness has coated his hand, until it drips down onto his thigh.

“Every night you have lain in my arms,” he murmurs, “every night I have wanted to do this to you.” He slips one finger into her, slowly, and she sucks in a breath.

He works his finger in and out of her, shallow, again and again, until she is mewling with need.

“Why...didn’t...you...” she pants. “I...”

He allows himself to thrust against the curve of her back, in rhythm with the finger he is using to fuck her. “Didn’t...wouldn’t...stop,” he breathes.

“Don’t... ever,” she groans.

He curls his finger, stroking her from the inside, and all the while his thumb rubs her lips.

She is biting her hand.

“No,” he murmurs. “Let me hear you, love.” My name, beloved, from your lips. Please.

A strangled moan is all she gives him, and even so he trembles with the effort of restraining
himself, keeping up the rhythm of his finger, until he starts to feel the walls of her sex flutter around his invasion. Then, then he flicks her clit with his thumb.

She gasps, and convulses. He waits, trails his tongue over her shoulder, twenty heartbeats, maybe less, before she stills.

He flicks her clit again, harder this time.

She moans, and again her sex throbs around his digit. He doesn’t wait for her to come down from her climax—he puts two fingers inside her, stretching her as she should have been stretched before his cock got anywhere near her, and she is thrashing under him, and this time he is relentless as he rubs her clit.

Her breath comes in gasps punctuated by breathy whispers. He presses his cock against the curve of her spine, wanting more, wanting her wet heat wrapped around him again.

“Jaqen,” she moans, and it is almost enough to override his restraint. “Jaqen, please, please …” His vision blurs; he bites down on her shoulder.

She screams, arcing away from him, and the strength of her orgasm traps his hand between her legs, his finger still inside her, for a moment. Then she falls back into his arms, limp, and he realizes she hovers on the edge of unconsciousness.

He looks at her, utterly lost, his own arousal forgotten for the moment and then he cannot help grinning madly into her shoulder. Her effortless, uninhibited response to him, the unstudied, unthinking intensity of his own need… “Beloved,” he whispers, “you are going to break me.”

She mumbles something in response, then falls into a deep sleep.

Jaqen himself is full of energy; his blood has been replaced with wine. He disengages himself from her, and looks for something...his eyes fall upon a bowl, filled half with water. He adds snow from the mouth of the barrow--the blizzard has blocked the entrance entirely, and they must needs dig their way out.

Gently, he cleans her with a moistened rag, trailing snowmelt over her shoulders, her breasts, between her legs, her thighs. She stirs, smiles, does not wake. He is achingly hard again by the time he is done, and though he cleans himself brusquely, and the water is cold, he wants with such a degree of longing...

He dresses himself, as a defense, before he kneels before her and begins to gently, gently, draw her britches over her legs.

He looks up to see her watching him.

“You left me,” she says, her voice entirely devoid of emotion.

He sighs, rests his head on her knees. “You were right,” He says.

“About what?”

“The Lorathi way is shit.”

It earns him not even a chuckle. He looks up, and her eyes are glimmering with unshed tears. “I was going to kill you…”
He smiles sadly. “Not a bad way to go, love,” he says. “But then you would have been all alone, and neither man nor god could bear the thought of that.”

“Liar.”

He shakes his head, wills her to understand. She does, a little, he thinks, when she says, “but we talked.”

“Talking is not understanding,” he says, then looks for a deeper truth he can give her. “After all, what can a faceless one fresh from the training yard teach the great Jaqen H’ghar?” His mouth twists with the bitter sarcasm of the admission. Arrogance, and a blindness to it, these should not have been a part of him, and yet they were.

Her hand reaches for his head, trails through his hair. “Tell me what happened.”

He sighs, and together they finish putting on her clothes as he tells her what his brother has told him--R’hllor, the prophecies, the spells. His entrapment, an error on all their parts, even their enemies’.

“No more lies,” she says at the end of it. “No more half-truths, because it seems we are each other’s only defense.”

“I only ever lied to you about the… the dying,” he says, and cannot quite mask his sheepishness.

She snorts. “I’d prefer it if you would tell me the truth about things like that, and lie about my poetry.”

He smirks. “Never. Bad poetry is your one saving grace--a person must have some flaw.”

_That_, finally, draws a smile from her, and then she sober. “Where is our direwolf?” she asks.

“The wind took her,” he says. “She has a wider hunting ground now.”

They are both silent for a while after that as they prepare their packs for the departure. He looks around at the chamber they have found themselves in. The long, narrow stone tomb over which they mated, heaps of dust and metal around its head and foot--death-offerings, offered more than ten thousand years ago.

“This place was prepared,” He murmurs.

She shakes her head. “Even sorcerers can’t reach into the past. It is coincidence, nothing more.”

_No more lies, no more half-truths_. “There is a thing I will show you, outside, and then, when you are ready I will ask you again what you think of coincidence.”

She looks at him, uneasy. “Jaqen?”

“Outside,” he says. Then he uses the last of the snowmelt to clean her blood off the sarcophagus.

“What are you doing?” she asks. “Leave it.”

It seems she is _embarrassed_. He raises an eyebrow. “Not wise, to leave something this powerful just… lying around. Practitioners of blood-magic are subtler than you think.” _This is hallowed ground now, after you brought death back to life_. Beyond stupid, to leave her blood here.

She steps forward, watches the last drops of blood cleaned off the stone. “What did I do?” she
whispers. “I was...cold, I think.”

“A sacrifice like the one you made is very...unlikely to be offered again,” He says. Sacrificed to death, of all things. My bride has no sense of self-preservation.

She bites her lip. “The spell doesn’t require blood sacrifice, I thought…” She shakes her head. “Murderer’s blood?” He has told her of the freeing of his brother. “It amplified the effects, I suppose.”

He looks at her, aghast. She has no idea. He thinks back to his brother’s words, the sudden awakening of Himself...power, blood, self-sacrifice. R’llor lacks one of the three, though his worshippers try to gain it for him through prophecy and conflict. He looks at her through the eyes of death, seeking, seeking and finding...a few remnants of winter still embedded in her, deep, but nothing more.

The power has drained from her.

She drained it from herself. He wants to laugh, but the moment is too fragile for such. “You could have been a god ,” he says.

“That makes no sense,” she says. “Finding and binding, nothing has anything to do with gods .”

I’m not the only arrogant one, it seems . She has cast a great spell, she is replete with the casting of it, and so she thinks she knows everything.

No lies, no half-truths. “I helped Ambraysis craft the Red Death…” his mouth quirks at the startlement in her gaze. “I am not always merciful.”

Her mouth twists into a smile that reminds him of the wind from last night, and now, in the barrow with death humming through both of them, it arouses him. He steps closer, his hands circle around her neck; he strokes her jugular with his thumb. “Blood is not often combined--there are kinds of blood that are inimical to each other--murderers and maidens, for example, it is near impossible to harness the two in tandem to draw the same cart. And yet...you did.”

She is thoughtful. “Good thing you didn’t earn the coin earlier.”

He chuckles, buries his face in her neck. “My practical one, you haven’t seen the earning of a coin yet.” He can feel her flush under him. “And the virgin blood is powerful, but sorcerers drain maidens all the time...there is much more to you than that.” Priest’s blood, King’s blood, warg’s blood...who knows what else is running through your veins, beloved, and you sacrificed all of it willingly on My altar. In a first coupling with the living avatar of a god . “It made you into a god, and you refused it.”

She shudders. “I’m happy being Arya Stark. I don’t ever want to be anything more.” She sighs. “Truthfully, it fades--I have no idea...hold on to the shapes of my thoughts in the wind, and I cannot hold on to it.”

He strokes her hair, her back. “Let it go, beloved,” He says. “Let it go.”

He remembers.

Cruelty, she would have been, something that twists all the joy of the world into sorrow beyond memory.
BRAN

Death has returned to the world--people die again, though some few have found succor for their bodies when they should have died, and they live instead. Bran sighs, his exhaustion finally taking him into unconscious dreaming.

He dreams of his sister’s direwolf, grown to a monstrous size, larger than mountains, larger than seas...she spreads.

He dreams of sorcerers in the east, red-robed and vengeful, the few wargs left to the freefolk, the strange magicians of lightning and water that come from beyond Leng...all of them are dying, will be dying--some part of him knows that this vision is still to come, and he sorrows.

A plague that arrives with winter, that films over their eyes with white, and they shiver and shiver and cannot get warm until the blood in their veins suppurates, and corruption leaks from their skin, and the fevers take them, and they die, their sightless eyes open to the sky.

The White Weeping, the whispers say. It came after the Night of Ice.

Nymeria hunts on the wind.

Chapter End Notes

A *very* long one, with lots of large-scale movement. And I'm sorry I had to kill Nymeria...but it was time, and she will serve a purpose, later...a balancing, if you will.

As a reward/fanservice/character development, next chapter (to be posted Wednesday) is pretty much all smut, with fluff interludes :)

and then gul and I will be going on hiatus for two weeks (work obligations, summer vacation, some important deadlines due...) to return on August 15th with the first chapter of the second half of the story.

Thank you all so, so much for reading! And commenting (turns out I'm a pretty insecure writer...huh...who knew?)!!!
ARYA

She can hear the horses outside as they dig their way out of the barrow. The snow is soft, easily packable.

They find Sandor slumped in a cocoon of blankets, wedged between Horse and Steel. Jaqen shakes him awake.

Sandor’s eyes widen, he creaks to his feet, his beard rimed with snow. “You died!”

*So did you, Sandor, but Death was not here for you, and the wind drove the blizzard east, and you lived.*

There is unease in her, deep inside; the wind does not like *saving* things, even coincidentally.

“It only looked that way,” Jaqen lies. “There are many poisons that mimic death; sometimes use of them is necessary.”

Sandor grunts, still suspicious, and looks beyond Jaqen to see her standing there, arms crossed, foot tapping in impatience. His suspicion calms. “Bah, I should have known you weren’t dead--the she-wolf was far too calm.”

Jaqen’s mouth quirks, and it is a sad smile he throws her way. His eyes flash dark for a moment, and the wind stops nagging her to finish the job the blizzard started.

She regrets that Jaqen feels need to protect her, even from herself. *The wind is dying, I don’t need your help.* She supposes he is better than other men--he has never constrained her, and they are equals, at least in their trade, but yet...she remembers the gentleness of him as he washed her in the barrow, so gentle it felt like her heart was breaking and she had to pretend to sleep, or she would have wept.

*So Jaqen is not other men, but he is not immune to this thing, this need to protect, though he hides it well.*

He strides through the snow to her. “Valar morghulis,” he says, and his tone is impassive, the hallmark of the faceless.

Something bad is coming; he will not protect her from it. She thrills. “Valar dohaeris,” she replies in the same mode.

“Wear a brother?” he asks.

She feels disappointment, that he would wish to bolster her with another’s fortitude.

She shakes her head. “I must learn this. And...Sandor will see.” She draws resolve around her like a suit of armor.

Sandor makes his way over, and he looks comical, lifting his feet high to clear the snow. Together, they clear off one of the small, shapeless mounds around their campsite. Under the snow, there is a
cart, and on the cart there is a chest.

Bands tighten around her ribs, but she steps forward smoothly, and throws back the lid.

Bones, picked clean by the Silent Sisters. Cushioned on a suit of clothes, a missive sealed with the sign of the Seven.

“Who is it?” she asks. She knows, oh she knows, but she must ask.

“You must ask?” Jaqen says.

“Eddard Stark,” she says, and is proud of how very even her voice his, slightly thoughtful. “His bones never made it to Winterfell.”

Sandor huffs, looks at her with wide eyes. She knows he sees nothing in her face.

She can give the pain to the wind, it would tear it from her and grow stronger. She can give it to the darkness, and it will swaddle her in numbness. Instead, she balls it into a hard sphere under her ribcage. She feels nothing. It may come later--a price must always be paid for composure. But this day will earn no keen from Arya Stark.

She closes the lid, puts her arms around the chest, places a kiss upon the latch. “Sandor, can our cart carry this load, or should we take theirs?”

Sandor is looking at her with pity.

She doesn’t react to that, either.

“We can take it,” he says. “Little wolf…”


Sandor’s eyes widen further. “Who are you, and where the fuck is Arya Stark?”

She sees Jaqen’s mouth twitch, and her own lips curl in response. “I am no one,” she says. Then she relents. “Sometimes I am Arya Stark.”

Sandor shakes his head. “You people are barking mad, all of you.”

You people. Your people. She turns to Jaqen. “Not coincidence.” She sees again in her mind the network of people, of alliances and plots, and now there is a new hub, with spiderweb thin tendrils of shadow and ash winding around everything.

She turns, would pace if the snow allowed it.

Sandor grunts. “Fucking corpses everywhere,” he says, then shuffles off a fair distance. He’s making water.

He has changed, as well. The Hound wouldn’t have given two fucks about pissing on corpses.

High Valyrian is the language of strategy, to her mind--the Valyrians had so very many words for all shades of war. It is in High Valyrian that she speaks now. “We led ourselves into a trap.”

“It seems that way,” Jaqen replies, cautious.
“We must turn back. Sandor can go ahead with the bodies; messages will have to do for the rest. You and I, we cannot go to Winterfell.”

“I will not kill your brother.” His eyes shift, his irises expand till she looks into the black-in-black orbs of the God.

She breathes in the sight of him, then shakes her head. “Beloved,” she says, as gentle as the wind allows her to be, “the trap is laid for you, not Jon.”

His answering smile mocks her. “You were thinking something earlier...I didn’t grasp all of it, but enough...something about overprotective spouses, if I don’t miss my guess.”

“Is this a new aspect of you, reading thoughts?”

“It is the same as it has always been, lovely girl--reading faces, and extrapolation.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “You extrapolate a little too well,” she murmurs, then raises her voice. “Are you sure this is not arrogance again?”

“Tell me,” He says.

“I will think on it,” she promises.

He gives her a half-bow, his hand over his heart.

She thinks about it for a long time. The three of them maneuver the frozen chest off the Silent Sisters’ cart and onto theirs, gather the last of their items from the campsite.

The horses are ready to move. She mounts Steel, and automatically shuts the wince that accompanies the motion--he’s noticed, no doubt, and damn him to the seven hells if he thinks it’s going to stop or slow what she has in mind for him. Then they are on their way.

The trail they followed here is snowed over. The horses sink into it, fetlock-deep, but yet again the wind has been kind to them--much of the snow that fell last night has been scoured away from the plane, revealing the shape of the main road.

There is an ache between her legs. But it is pleasant, like the ache in muscles that comes a day after hard training; she has learned to relish that kind of pain. And one must consider the source, after all.

Jaqen was in me.

The flash of memory ignites her desire yet again.

This thing of the body, this wanting, it obeys no rules, no decorum. Our minds, our souls, they are all flotsam to it; it is a hurricane.

It has no mercy in it.

The thought pleases her. She closes her eyes and sinks down further in the saddle, feeling the soreness between her legs.

She opens her eyes, and he is watching her, and the darkness in his gaze has nothing to do with the God. She closes her eyes against the intensity in him, savoring it, and then reluctantly turns her attention to the problem at hand.
R’hllor and prophecy. Prophecy and sorcerers. Jon and Targaryens. Where do I fit into it?
Because Arya Stark fits into the story somewhere, but so far everything she has done has broken
the pattern. Break the pattern. They expect us to go to Winterfell, so we must not. But they expect
that as well, they will lay traps along the path south as well, so we must continue north. And then
we return to the original problem. Winterfell, or not.

They stand by the side of the main road by the time she has sifted through all the information she
has, by the time she has redrawn the map of influence and potential in her mind. The answer, with
the limited information she has, must be simple.

“Left, or right?” he asks.

“To Winterfell,” she says.

Sandor sighs. “Eight, nine days, if there’s no more fucking snow.”

“The wind has taken all the snow east,” she says. It is true--the sky is overcast, but the clouds are
thin, and the disc of the sun is visible, like a torch flickering through fog.

JAQEN

He has never considered that agony could be a pleasant condition and yet somehow, in the glances
that they share, in the nights they spend holding each other, in the whispered flirtations, rare but
potent, agony has become something he looks forward to. They are suspended, him and his bride,
their own desires on one side and all the world in the other.

For days they talk of trivialities, including Sandor when they can.

The cart travels slower now, and they must stop from time to time and haul it over a snowdrift or
ice-scoured pothole in the road. It extends the time they must share space with the bodies of her
mother and father; but the House is a house of corpses, in the end, and he is the god of all dead
things.

He cannot read her. Either she is too far away, or she is as serene inside as she appears on the
surface. But he can ask; what is a marriage for, if this thing cannot be asked?

“I cannot extrapolate,” he murmurs to her; she is armed to the teeth, his bride, and only honesty
may disarm her. “Lay my mind at ease, beloved, tell me how you are.”

“How many times can I mourn the same thing?” she asks.

“As many times as you wish,” he replies.

Something shifts in her, her face opens to him more. “I do not wish to mourn any more.”

She has kept her vigils. “Then let it go,” he says gently. She can; the Lorathi way is not good for
the complications of gods and prophecies, and she has always resisted it, but this much she must
have learned from his Lorathi brother--how to watch an emotion in the mind’s eye, watch it pass
through her and away from her, until only she remains.

“It is just grief,” she says with a sigh. “No more anger. It feels...it feels complete,” she says. “So if
the finding of his bones, if all the coincidences that led us to them, if it is sorcerer-mischief, I’ll
thank them for it before they die. My mother and father should come home together.”

He nods, and is satisfied.

That night they build their huddle further from the cart, from the campfire, much further from Sandor than is their wont. They are under the blankets, and they reach for each others’ clothes, the frantic undoing of laces accompanied by whispered admonitions to be quiet.

He pushes her britches down to her knees, then pauses. “Love,” he says, in the Braavosi cant, “we can wait, you know.”

She chuckles. “My heart,” she says, and then her words are the raw things the Dothraki use as language, “if we wait for us, for me, to be an uncomplicated creature, for my desire to be something pure and untainted by anything except itself, we will wait a very long time.”

She tugs at his smallclothes, impatient. He allows her to bare him, and he comes to rest on top of her, between her legs, skin to skin, and he cannot deny that desire may be a complicated thing for the both of them, but it is powerful.

Her mouth is calling to him, insistent, and he lowers his lips to hers. She meets him halfway, tongues clashing, and he groans.

Her hand has found its way to his back, and she is running her fingers over his shoulders, leaving lightning in the wake of her fingertips.

He responds by grasping her breast, tweaking her nipple between thumb and forefinger. He is hard, against her, and she squirms. They share a look as she tips her head towards the other side of the camp.

“I believe I promised you a conversation about theology,” he teases, in a softened form of High Valyrian, one spoken by slaves of the great houses, tempered by their awareness of their own mortality and not by the arrogance of the dragonlords, who were arrogant until the very end.

“Mmm,” she says, as she parts her legs, and her hips rise to press her against him. She undulates under him, and he must bury his head in her neck or risk making more sound than they are already making. “This is something I have been trying to think through…” she says in the same speech, then she pauses, draws his face down to her chest, and he engulfs her left tit in his mouth, sucking and nipping by turns. “What is magic?”

He draws away from her, reluctantly. “As I understand--”

“Don’t stop unless you have to correct me,” she says. He grins, and obediently returns to his obsession with her nipples. They are rock hard, and wet from his saliva. He transfers his attention to her right tit, even as his hands stroke down her sides, reach her hips.

“Magic is power, but so is money--buying power, selling power--the power to do something, to create something, to make men think a certain way.”

This is the second time she has used a monetary metaphor. He has a sneaking suspicion… “Have you been studying Varro Massag’s memories?” he asks.

“Mmm.”
She is tugging at his hair, but he is too curious to be diverted; in apology, his hands stroke their way to the inside of her thighs. Then higher. He cannot quite control the change in his breathing, the red fog that rises through him when his fingers encounter her wetness.

“I learned a lot,” she gasps. “His memories of the world...the flow of coin as a river, with numeracy as its deluge...his mind is so very **twisty** --” and she loses the thread of her conversation.

He chuckles. Like calls to like, it seems. But there is a tinge of sadness about him as well. He *doesn’t look at the world like that anymore.*

“What is...magic,” she arches under his fingers, “but a gradient--”

“Arrgh!” snarls Sandor from the other side of the campsite. “You two can’t even **fuck** without having a discussion about it!”

They still, and hear Sandor haul himself out from under the cart, and stalk off a ways, grumbling. “*Man can’t sleep, stupid talking all the time, just have the decency to be quiet.*”

“I thought he’d never leave,” she murmurs.

“Mmm,” he says, and nuzzles her throat.

“Put cock in cunt, then go to sleep!” Sandor shouts at them over his retreating form.

“Nor does he understand the function of foreplay, it seems,” says Jaqen, amused.

“**I do not either, at the moment,**” she says.

She is getting annoyed. He can’t have that; he wants her incoherent. His fingers grow more insistent, his mouth is reserved for finding the sensitive spots on her collarbone, her neck, until she is squirming under him, artless, and both their breaths come in short gasps. He positions his cock at her slick entrance, pushes against her. She spreads her legs, she rocks forward, but he draws back.

“**Jaqen ,**” she pleads.

“Beg,” he murmurs.

She begs.

Sweet blasphemy, out of her beautiful mouth, and he captures her lips with his own, swallows her moan as he sheaths himself in her in one long motion. It is enough to send her over the edge--she spasms around him, clenching down on him, and he swallows her moan.

Only then does he start to move, and all restraints fall away from him.

His thrusts are hard, erratic, all his attention focused on the feel of her around his cock, wet and tight and heat, and he pulls out and thrusts back in, only dimly aware that her back is scraping back and forth on the ground. She is clawing at his back, the sweet, sharp burning of her nails inflames him further and he is so deep in her.

It is unstoppable, the rising tide within him. He pulls back, right to the edge, only his cockhead still in her cunt, and then he drives forward, and her sex grips him, again and again, and there is nothing in him except the need to fuck her, not even concern for her pleasure, nothing but the need to bury himself in her until he finds...salvation, it feels like, beckoning him.

Her hips are rising to meet him.
“Arya,” he moans, “...close...” so close.

She groans and the walls of her sex shudder.

He spills in her, deep inside, and she is clenching around him, milking every last drop of his seed from him, and his mind is empty, empty of everything except her and the force of his release.

She’s on watch...she’s... . Any more coherent thought is not possible. He collapses on her, buries his face between her breasts, and allows himself to drown in the scent of her, into oblivion.

ARYA

Jaqen’s breathing is quiet, his weight half on top, and she can feel his seed seeping out of her. Sandor returns soon, far too soon, sees them lying still; she is feigning sleep. He crawls into his bedroll, and he’s snoring within a quarter-watch.

The snoring wakes Jaqen.

They dress under the blankets, quietly gather up their packs and a sleeping roll, walk a distance from the camp to a small glade surrounded by fir trees.

They undress again, use snow-dampened cloths to clean themselves.

Something else happened, in the barrow, she thinks. He doesn’t feel the cold; I feel it, but nowhere as much as I should.

Her gaze follows the planes of his body, the hard, lean muscles, moonlight and snow picking out his frame in stark relief. His hair is all black now, and it has grown longer; it brushes his shoulder-blades as he moves.

He’s watching her with the same kind of vapid expression she thinks is on her face.

“I hate sticky,” she says.

He smirks. “There is a certain amount of mess involved, lovely girl.”

“Well, if it is inevitable, maybe we should not do this again for a while,” she says, mock-innocent.

“Yes,” he agrees sagely. “That will solve the problem.”

They grin stupidly at each other.

Clean, she lies against his chest, naked under the blanket. They haven’t rebuilt their huddle, just laid the bedroll onto a patch of flat-packed snow.

He toys idly with her breasts. She likes it, but she wonders what pleasure he gets out of it. She can just ask.
“Do you like doing this?” The question is not precise, but he understands.

“Mmm.” He thinks. “You know that feeling you get, when you run your whetstone over the edge of your sword, and you can hear the blade getting sharper?”

“Good,” she says. “And you just want to keep doing it, and...”

“That,” he says.

She draws closer to him.

“Did you like it?” he asks, and it is not a precise question either, but she understands.

“Far more than what I thought a coin was worth,” she says, quietly.

He entwines his fingers with hers. “Beloved,” he says, and she can feel him grinning. “A coin has not been earned yet.”

The world is silent except for the susurration of the wind, blowing dry snow across the ground. She imagines a desert would sound like this, as zephyrs drive grains of sand before them. Far away, she can hear Sandor snoring.

Jaqen is naked, his legs entwined with hers. She bites her lip; she can feel the wanting rise, and this time he is here and not half a dream. Had she been in Braavos, she would have closed her eyes, imagined him so...

It was a thing a man had to do, as well, many times...

There is a memory she has of him, one that she has avoided out of some sense of...courtesy, perhaps. Courtesy is a meaningless word between the two of them now, and there is only the hurricane gathering power, gathering the sea to itself.

In the memory, he stood on a terrace, a flat platform high in the sky, jutting out of the gargantuan facade of the H’ghar stronghold. The air smelled of metal, it shimmered in waves from the heat rising off a river of molten rock far below.

His sword was raised, and he observed the still form of three golems, animated by mages to provide targets for the young lords of Valyria (those that preferred the inanimate, for the greater punishment they could take compared to flesh--Jaqen--or for those that were too impoverished to throw away skilled slaves on an afternoon’s sparring session--the Targaryens, for example). The mages were kept on retainer by the house, for such sessions--Valyria still thought it could claim Jaqen H’ghar, Valyria was still being kind to him--but the mages were at the limit of their skill.

He was the same age as she is, now. And the aggression in him...she can feel it in the man he has become, it thrums under his surface, but in the present it is a lethal, focused, thing. In the memory, he has not yet tamed his aggression; triumph sings through his veins, a vicious battle-rage that does not ebb even when the golems lie still upon the ground. He turns, strides through the stronghold till he is in his chambers; he is impossibly aroused, he takes himself in hand, strokes himself with swift, firm motions...

She turns in his arms, draws circles through the sparse hair of his chest.
He awakens, of course. And he sees something in her, because he reaches, but she grabs his wrist and returns his hand to his side, then places her finger across her mouth, indicating silence.

She rakes her nails down his chest. He makes no sound.

She rises a bit, reaches forward, licks at the base of his throat, along his vein, bites the crook of his neck, very, very gently.

His breathing has changed.

She likes the taste of him, the feel of his skin rubbing against her. She places small kisses all the way down his arm, to the tip of his finger, then his thigh. His cock is rising; she twists, bends, quickly, places a kiss on its tip.

The muscles of his stomach, his thighs, they tense and his manhood is rigid.

She draws away, a cruel smile on her face. She grabs his wrist again, leads his hand downwards till it is resting on his cock.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Show me,” she mouths. “Show me what I made you do to yourself.”

His eyes are wide, his gaze locked on hers. Slowly, his fist closes around his erection. She watches, heat rising from the base of her spine. She feels that time is moving too slow; he drags his hand upwards along his shaft, then down again.

It feels like the whole world is concentrated in the most infinitesimal movement of his hand, his skin stretching and relaxing with his strokes.

There is no sound from either of them.

A drop of fluid appears at the tip of his cock as he pleasures himself for her. As if hypnotized, she reaches out, gathers the drop upon her index finger. Then, almost absently, she puts her finger in her mouth, tasting him. His strokes become erratic, frantic, he shudders, and his cock spurts: an arc of white falling against her thigh.

He has still not made a sound.

She looks up to meet his eyes. His face is blank, utterly still, and she is aroused beyond reason, and it feels good. She gathers up his seed from her thigh, does not break eye contact, and licks it off her fingers, one by one.

“Your watch,” she whispers.

Dawn is just over the horizon when she awakens, his hardness pressing into her.

She does not expect it when he moves; there is no tell at all. His hand covers her mouth and he thrusts into her from behind. She bites, shifts instinctively to give him better access, and he thrusts deeper. She reaches over them, throws the blanket aside, even as she hooks her leg over him. The shifting of blanket-cloth against skin, rhythmic, it is too much sound even for the muffled air of the snowbound landscape around them.
Naked under the pre-dawn winter sky, they move together in the most absolute silence they can manage. Some sounds—*the wet sucking sound as he withdraws from her, the quiet sound of flesh meeting flesh as he enters her, these are unavoidable.*

She tightens her muscles around him every time he thrusts, thrusts back against him, thrusts steadily through her orgasm, the whisper of his name the only sound that is allowed, and his refrain, murmured into her ear, “*Arya….Arya,*”, until he clamps his hand around her breast a little too hard, and she feels his cock twitch inside her.

They subside, sweat cooling swiftly in the cold air, and he draws the blanket over them again.

Sandor drives the cart, all his sleeping blankets wound around him. The cart gets stuck again, they heave it over the large warp in the road that has drawn and packed snow around it.

By midday, both Jaqen and Arya throw back their cloaks, loosen the ties at their throats.

Jaqen is in a strange mood, one that she has never before seen in him. They ride in the wake of the cart, and she is in the saddle in front of him—Sandor is far too cocooned and cold to spare much energy looking backwards.

Jaqen’s hands are under her shirt, on her breasts, his fingers and the cold draft from where her shirt ride up...she has been in a state of near-constant arousal for more than a watch. The oscillation, between want and wait is…

...*is a metaphor for sex.* A metaphor being written and constantly re-written on her flesh.

It rides her, makes her limbs heavy and alive by turns. She thinks she finally, finally understands one of the subtler aspects of the games Jaqen plays with her.

*With himself.*

Jaqen’s head is buried in the crook of her neck. “I love you,” he murmurs. “I have always loved you, long before I ever laid eyes on you in Oldtown, I would have taken the world apart stone by stone to make you mine, and yet now...now that you are, I want to serve your whims. I want to please you.”

She exhales.

“You want Cersei Lannister?” he asks. “I’ll give you her head, tied with a red ribbon, and fuck all destinies to hell. Who do you want dead? Just give me the names.” He clutches at her breasts, draws her closer to him. “This is madness,” he whispers, “I never understood it, this delirium,” and there is wonder in his voice. “Tell me what you want, beloved,” he pleads.

*I want my parents back. I want to go home but I don’t know where home is except that it is where you are.* “Teach me how to be uncomplicated,” she says. *I want your delirium.*

He stills. His hands grow less frantic, more comforting. He breathes, and she knows he breathes in all of her sorrow, and she feels like shit for dispelling his euphoria.

“Uncomplicated, is it?” he asks thoughtfully. Then, he begins to speak:

“She always played a son for pay.
Till all her dreaming came undone
And all the world was washed away”

Slowly, Arya sags against him, each word falling in her ears like a single droplet of water, ringing into solitary place.

“Children lived in cabins, tall timid and fay
There were three, and two, and then just one
Come away, come away, ’twas all just a mummer’s play.”

His voice is light, rueful.

“She crafted a ship in a sheltered bay
Then scuttled the craft when it was done
And all the world was washed away.

She swelled and grew on summer’s say
Then bled, and walked and two were one
Come away! Come away! ‘tis not a mummer’s play.”

He trades me a sorrow for a proxy, she thinks. A poison to counter poison.

“He trades me a sorrow for a proxy, she thinks. A poison to counter poison.

“Two watched each other sail astray
He mimed a woman for she was none
And with all the world, they washed away

And everyone died at the close of day
When wooded waves were made undone
And all the world was washed away.
Come away, come away, ’twas all but a mummer’s play”

It is melancholy, the silence between breaths, and she leans back against him and lets it wash through her. She watches it, and it does not belong to her, and so she can let it go, and when it is gone she realizes it has washed away the detritus of pain that had stifled her without her knowing.

“Huh,” she says.

She can feel him grinning against her neck.

“Where is that from?” she asks. “I have not found it in your saddlebags before.”

He doesn’t reply, and she twists around. “It’s yours, isn’t it? Tell me.”

He gives her a slow smile, indolent and sensual. “First,” he says quietly, “I want your delirium.”

Just the thought is enough to send her into a frenzy of want. It rises in her, like fear, but warm.
“Yours,” she says. “Yours, always, yours.”

She realizes her madness is a taking madness, a wanting madness.

“I want another of your poems,” she says. “And another, and another. Cersei can keep her head until her brother takes it off her, I want your poetry until I weep from it.” She pauses. “And I want a Valyrian steel sword,” she says, just for good measure, because she is who she is; because he is who he is, she asks “And a talking parrot, with blue and red plumes.”
He grins against her. “Done, done, done. A man does not control the timing of it--Valyrian steel is rare these days, there should be no talking parrots in Winterfell. But done, and done. What else?”

She is greedy, but not for things. “I want to ride you, for hours.” She stretches against him. “I want to know what you want.”

“You.”

And how his hands under her shirt move with intent, circling her nipples, pinching gently. She squirms, grabs his hand, drags it lower.

“Behave,” he says, his voice dark. He lifts his chin to the cart in front of them. Rebellious, she moves her hips, grinds into him. He shifts back.

“If a girl is very good,” he murmurs, “she will get a reward later, when we get to an inn in Cerwyn.”

“What reward?” she demands.

“The thing I had to teach you how to do?” he asks, mockery threaded through his words.

“You did not have to teach me anything,” she snarls.

“Mmm. That thing I did not have to teach you?” his voice drops an octave, it seems. His tongue traces a spiral behind her ear. “That, but with my mouth.”

Both of their breathing is a little faster, uneven, and it’s his turn to start undoing the ties at the front of her britches.

She presses her hand over his. “Behave,” she says. “A girl will not have her reward compromised due to lack of control from Jaqen H’ghar, of all people.”

It is late, the sun long set, when they ride up to the town clinging to the skirts of Castle Cerwyn. Winterfell lies a half-day’s ride north.

The town lies blanketed in snow, the streets drowning in the muddy slush made by horses, and carts, feet.

“What now?” asks Sandor. His voice is weary, and he has been shivering for a while.

“Now, an inn,” says Jaqen.

Sandor clears his throat. “Got no silver for inns. Find us a stable somewhere, if you can, war’s probably got more than half the horses here killed, there’ll be room.”

She exchanges a glance with Jaqen, and they draw off to a side.

“Can I borrow from the House?” she asks in Braavosi cant, and quickly. “I will pay it back, with interest--Jon will redeem my word.”

Jaqen blinks at her. “You have a sack of coin in your pack, why do you need to ask my permission?”
She shakes her head. “That’s for faceless expenses, not ‘ale and whores’ money, as our Braavosi brother calls it. If I report I used it for another’s room and board...”

Jaqen gives her an incredulous look. “You give a reporting of your expenses?”

“You don’t?” she asks, appalled. “Love, we’re hemorrhaging coin, none of the budget estimates are ever right, how are we supposed to--”

He is laughing at her.

“Jaqen! I’m serious.”

He realizes she is, but he cannot help mock her. “You bought me a present from your blacksmith, with guild coin.”

“A blacksmith. A knife,” she says. “Weapons, poisons, clothes and bribes, these are perfectly legitimate uses.”

His eyes are twinkling. “And ale and whores only when they are part of your cover. Does the brothel’s payment-scheme have to be explained?”

She glares at him.

He raises his hand. “I surrender--you report, and budget, and allocate as you see fit, I’ll keep on...not doing any of it. Fair enough?”

She sighs. “Fair enough.”

They turn back to the cart. “Sandor!” she calls. “Inn, town-center.”

“Fucking wolf-bitch, I got no silver, won’t take your charity.”

“You’re a Stark man now, Clegane,” she says. “Roof and salt and shield,” she reminds him, the words of the ancient obligations of the First Men. “Come on, it’s freezing.”

She chivvies Sandor, and they ride through the twisty winding streets, up to the town square.

Jaqen is thinking. “Why is the guild hemorrhaging money?” he asks.

*Because Him of the Many Faces doesn’t give a shit about coin, or how much of it it takes to run one of the most important guilds in Braavos?* It’s a complaint she’s heard before, from their brother who manages the books...of course, it’s not a complaint in his mouth, more of a curse, and she has always taken it to be a sort of generic professional hazard, like a sailor cursing the weather...

“Because our brothers don’t understand thrift. And that they shouldn’t buy things for themselves with guild coin.”

Jaqen’s eyes narrow. “So thrift is what got us woolen cloaks instead of fur...and, beloved, I don’t disrespect our brothers back at the House--they take on burdens I wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole--but I must disagree with them. All our brothers have given their lives to the order, they have given their deaths to the order. If someone wants to buy something--ale and whores, if it so pleases them--it seems...trivial, and petty, to ask an accounting of it.”

She cocks her head to a side, her thoughts brought to a halt. “I don’t disagree with you,” she says finally. “But...there must be limits.”
Jaqen’s mouth curls. “And who is one brother, to set a limit on another?”

*Oh, my beloved Lorathi love, you’ve created an order of anarchists.* “The god doesn’t care about the gold price at all, does he?” she asks softly.

He grins. “But now that I know where your ideas of *thrift* are coming from,” he says, “tomorrow we will get proper clothing for the weather, and clothing appropriate your station—a daughter of the Starks, returning home.”

She opens her mouth to object, asks instead, “where did you *think* my thrift was coming from?”

A smile curves his lips upwards, a little sheepish. “An extrapolation gone wrong—I did not recognize it as thrift...didn’t find it in your memories, I thought it was a more recent character trait...a rejection of material things, to go along with the stone bed.”

*Wishful thinking, that I was further on the Lorathi path than I ever will be...*How can you be wrong about such a small thing?* Being wrong about the nature of godhood, about prophecies and traps, that was...understandable.

He’s looking at her, his smile wry. That night, her horribly failed confession... *Would it surprise you to know that I have no idea what I am doing either?*

“Only ever lied to you about the dying,“ he murmurs. “Only ever manipulated you with the truth.”

His words pierce her, driving home the thing that she knows, and yet has trouble believing sometimes... he loves me. Truth, for ones whose lives hang upon lies... he loves me. He would have taken the world apart, stone by stone, to make me his.

“Furs,” she says. “And I will wear something befitting my station, as you say.” She smiles at him, unfurled and unfettered; he places a hand over his heart, his gaze unbearably...gentle, lost. “But you forget, my lord,” she says softly, “a daughter’s station is not measured by the house of her birth, but by the extent of her husband’s domain.” *And my husband’s domain is without end.* “I have left the robes of my order in Braavos, but I have a shirt that is the right shade of grey. It will do.”

His answering smile is...another thing she does not know she craves of his, this joyous thing. She looks down, overcome; their horses have stopped, he reaches across the distance between them, places a curled finger beneath her chin, raises her eyes to his.

“Our only love, husband mine,” she says sweetly, “we should stop blocking the road.”

He roars with laughter; they continue on.

She has a thought. “We need to agree on the details of our wedding,” she says. “They will ask.” She thinks. “Maybe not Jon—but Sansa definitely.”

He looks at her, raises an eyebrow. “What did you have in mind?” he asks.

“You, my husband mine,” she says thoughtfully.

A temple marriage is governed by ecclesiastical law in Braavos, and by definition such laws are couched as edicts from whatever god the temple is dedicated to. Him of the Many Faces dictated, at the time of her death, that he would take Arya Stark as his bride.
"As is yours," he says.

A guild marriage is governed by guild law. The guild of Faceless Men have no law, save one, that the word of one of their own is absolute, and irreversible, and inviolable. Arya Stark gave Him her word, in no uncertain terms, the moment she became faceless.

How does one explain that to Sansa, of all people?

She grins. “We can just make up anything. Vows...drinking from a poisoned chalice…” her imagination is carrying her away. “Daggers, thrust into each others’ hearts, binding us beyond life…”

He chuckles, but there is an edge to it.

“Love?” she asks.

“I would prefer not to lie about my own marriage,” he says, “not when there are so many other truths we are planning to offer your family. We say the ritual is a secret of the temple of the Many-Faced God, and leave it at that. If you agree.”

She snorts. “You are a romantic. But I shall agree with you this time.” She cocks her head to a side.

“Can I at least allude to poisoned daggers being involved?”

“Allude as much as you like,” he says, and his smile is mischievous. “I’ll corroborate.”

As Sandor predicted, the inn’s stables are bare and they can back the cart into a double stall. A handful of coins gets them two rooms, and a cold supper.

Sandor eats, downs two flagons of ale, grunts, and stomps off to his room.

Their retreat is...controlled.

The moment the door closes behind them, they are upon each other. There is no talk of rewards, or waiting, just a frantic tearing at each others’ clothes.

He takes her on the floor, harsh, exactly as harshly as she wants him to, and when she is sated she fights him, but he takes her slowly, torturously, exactly as he wants to.

They lie on the rough wooden planks beside each other, the thundering of their heartbeats, matched, slowing to a more seemly rhythm.

They rise, and look at each other, and the ground, at their clothes strewn everywhere, at the bed that was just an arm's length away.

“This is ridiculous,” she says, then giggles, and he is grinning.

They spend some time picking out splinters from each others’ backs. She gets to the curve of his buttocks and leans down, bites. His intake of breath, so un controlled, drives her to push against him, turn him onto his back with sheer force and straddle him.

It is an approximation of the position of their first coupling, but this time he is very much alive and the candlelight that plays around their skin is far softer than the flickering torchlight of the barrow.
He cups his hands behind the curve of her buttocks, and draws her forward. She rises, onto her knees, and allows herself to be led until his face is below her. She throws her head back; she cannot bear the look of him, his eyes, black-in-black, as he fastens his mouth on her sex.

His tongue is sweeping maddening circles over her nub, his fingers dipping into her in rhythm with his tongue. The sensation is utterly unlike anything she has ever felt before; she feels like she is unbalanced, poised on some great height. She falls into air, and she is descending, descending, drawn by the inexorable force of his mouth, insistent upon her.

She trembles around his tongue, a long, slow trembling.

He grazes her clit with his teeth, lightly.

She crashes.

JAQEN

She lies with her head pillowed on his chest, his arm around her.

“A sovereign for your thoughts,” she murmurs.

“That much, lovely girl?”

“Inflation,” she says, “in the wake of the wars.”

He chuckles, then tries to put his scattered impressions into words. “Your...response to me. To everything.” He takes a deep breath. “Our Lorathi brother offered you a choice, when you were but new in the House. I saw this in your memory.”

“To be a courtesan, in a brothel,” she says.

“That,” he says. “Regardless of my personal response to that offer--”

“Jealously?” she asks.

“Fury,” he says, and his voice is flat.

She puts her leg over him, draws closer. “Mmm.”

“Regardless,” Jaqen continues, taking a moment to run his hand up the thigh she has so conveniently presented him with, “he was not wrong. This kind of effortless arousal…” his hand hovers over her breast, and both of them watch her areola pucker. “You have no idea how much thinking, how much deliberation I have put into the times I must lie with someone--a target, an informant, a cover...I lie with you and I forget all skill--”

“This is you forgetting skill?” she asks.

He smiles down at her. “There is not much skill behind it, other than the very basic...I don’t have to arouse myself, I don’t have to think...very Braavosi, my coupling with you. And yet you respond to me, I ask you to beg and you beg, I beg you to come and you come...love, had you been a courtesan, princes would have laid their kingdoms at your doorstep for but a night in your arms.”
She considers his statement. “There is a common thread, in all the things you say I do…” she is amused. “What is the common thread, beloved mine?”

“A man has not the slightest idea, lovely girl, for if he did we could bottle it and sell it, and the House of Black and White would be richer than the Iron Bank.”

“*You*,” she says. “You, always you. It is you I have thought of since the first time I ever thought of anything even remotely of desire, and coupling. You killed me, and took me into the darkness.”

He cannot help but bend down, capture her lips. She strokes his tongue with her own, softly, and he groans.

“Jaqen,” she says, when they pull apart, “I am a creature of winter, of cold thought and cold spite.”

His breathing stills.

“*Princes*?” she asks, the word imbued with disdain. “Do you think anything less than my god could have awakened me?”

He shifts, pulls his arm out from under her, and their positions reverse, as he lies with his head pillowed upon her breast. He breathes her in, the death she breaths out, and says nothing.

They drowse, half-aware, half-asleep.

“So this…,” she says softly after a while, “between us…this is not the way it is for everyone?”

He exhales against her skin.

“I know there is violence and violation,” she says, “but even with people that love each other it is not like this…?”

“I have no idea, beloved,” he says, and smiles. “I’ve never loved anyone before. So to find out, first we would have to find two people that love each other, which, in this land may be a bit of a stretch…and then how would you broach the conversation?”

He raises his head, looks her in the eye, “Hello goodsir, we would like to know, when you sheathe yourself in your wife, does it feel like the world is ending, that every joy a man should ever know is wrapped around your cock?”

She grins. “Every joy a man should ever know?” she asks.

In response, his hands start caressing her skin, heading lower, and she sees the intent--the intent she *thinks* he has, and spreads her legs for him.

His fingers drift lower, dip momentarily into her wet cunt, and then reach further.

She looks at him, eyes suddenly wide.

“All my depraved desires, remember?” he murmurs.

Her eyes flutter, as a wave of naked hunger takes her, and had it been anyone else, he would have marveled at the artful mummery, then, on a second pass, criticized the intensity of the response as too much to be real.

*She doesn’t even know she’s doing it.*
“If you agree,” he murmurs, and stills the fingers that circle her puckered, virgin entrance.

“Did a girl tell you she disagreed?” she asks.

_A man thinks his lovely girl is mistaken about being a creature of ice and spite._ “No.”

“Then a man should do what he wants,” she says, and lies back, opening herself wider.

He traces a path between her breasts with his tongue, _trying_ to concentrate on what he is doing. It is difficult; he is almost painfully hard, and the vision of her, lying spread before him, it is something far more lewd than any dream he has ever had of her.

“_Arya_,” he breathes, and her breath that hitches in response.

He moistens his fingers in her sex, then circles her entrance. She relaxes against his hand; she knows the theory, his beautiful girl.

They watch each other’s faces as he slowly inserts one finger into her; then he slides down, fastens his mouth around her clit, and suckles. He stretches her, working his finger in and out of her rear, trailing saliva and her juices over his hands to lubricate her.

“This feels so strange,” she murmurs.

He raises his head. “Bad, lovely girl?”

She shakes her head. “Just...strange.”

He grins, and, looking into her eyes, he inserts another finger. She bites her lip, and it is not pain she feels.

“Still strange?” he asks, as he uses his other hand to insert two fingers into her cunny.

Involuntarily, her eyes close for a moment. “Good.”

He scissors his fingers against each other until she is panting, and her cunt is overflowing, and her clit is engorged and begging to be touched. Then he moves up, positioning his cock at her rear.

He pushes. Instinctively, she knows what to do--she pushes back. Slowly, his cockhead breaches her sphincter, and he has never felt anything this tight, this depraved around him ever before.

He groans, and pushes further, bit by bit, till he is buried to the hilt in her ass. He fingers her cunt, rubs her clit, until she relaxes against him again. Then he rocks against her, gentle. Gentle is all he can take, the feel of her clit under his fingers...

“_Fuck_ me, Jaqen, _please_,” she begs.

He groans, flips her on her stomach, still in her, and starts pulling out of her, then pushing back in. He angles himself slightly differently, and she gasps, the walls of her cunt trembling around his fingers.

“Jaqen...that...”

He grins into the back of her neck. “From the other side, love.” He pauses. “More?” he asks.

“More,” she moans.
He gives her more; he grabs her hair, draws her head up, fastens his mouth on her throat as he fucks her.

Without warning, she screams, and she clamps down around him like a vice, and that triggers him, and he spills into her.

“Definitely lost my virginity,” she says, and stretches, like a cat.

What are you thinking about, beloved, hmm? A coin, if I do not miss my guess.

He chuckles.

She turns to look at him, eyes narrowed.

She is starting to understand.

“Is a coin ever going to be earned?” she demands.

He smirks. “Ask me again in a hundred years.”

ARYA

They rise before dawn, and are bathed and breaking their fast in the inn’s common-room when Sandor shuffles in. His skin is pallid, his eyes puffy and swollen. He takes a seat right next to the fire, and his arms are wrapped around himself.

“Not a hangover,” Jaqen mutters. “He grumbles all the time...I think we may have gotten a bit too used to it.”

She feels guilty, doubly so because it was her thrift that outfitted them in wool. “I have been...inattentive, the past few days.”

Jaqen rises from the table, heading to Sandor.

She signals the barmaid, asks for a cup of hot water.

On the other side of the room, Jaqen is crouching beside Sandor. Sandor mutters something, hunches further into himself.

Him of the Many Faces stands, pats Sandor on the shoulder. Then, with what seems like a casual, almost-accidental motion, His hand brushes over Sandor’s head.

She is stirring the bitter leaves into the cup of hot water.

“An infection, last night maybe. Lungs,” says Jaqen. It relieves her, that they were not so wrapped up in each other that they became blind to a companion’s illness. “It will pass.” He looks at the tea she’s brewing, and gives her an amused smile. “A tisane is probably not necessary.”

She chortles. “Not for Sandor, love.”
She raises the cup to her lips; his brow is furrowed.

“The chances are small,” she explains. “The death masks...still better not to risk it.”

He understands, and then she catches a brief, brief flicker of something on his face.

Stunned, she puts down the cup. “You want it,” she whispers.

He shakes his head, sits down at the bench across her. “No, of course not.”

“What would we do, Jaqen,” she pleads, “dump it on the Kindly Man in the House of Corpses?”

He smiles. It is a weak thing. “That would earn the both of us a beating, and rightly so. You are far too young, beloved, and it is impractical and untenable.” His smile is stronger now. “Drink the tea, love. ‘No’ can be undone any time between now and eternity. A mistaken ‘yes’...it is hard to undo, without the possibility of unconscionable harm to you before the birth.” Darkness overtakes his eyes. “And after...even I might balk at strangling my own newborn child.”

She looks down and away.

“You don’t want it, love,” he says gently.

“You want it,” she mutters.

He shakes his head. “How can it be a true want if I did not know I wanted it till but a few moments ago? It was the momentary--a very momentary--stupidity of a romantic.”

_Wanting to hold something you and I made together._

“Disregard it,” he says, voice hard. “Drink the tea.”

_Oh my beloved, what did you just do to me?_

She upends the cup on the floor. “What happens, happens,” she mutters.

They find themselves leaning forward on the table, forehead to forehead, breaths mingled. She does not know how, but she has gone from panic to euphoria in the space of a few heartbeats; they wear matching grins.

“Madness has taken us,” he whispers.

“We are _so_ stupid,” she agrees. “But the chance is remote.”

“The death masks,” he murmurs, “the chance is remote.”

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JAQEN

Sandor’s lung infection seems to have cleared up a watch or so after dawn; the man seems to be _irritated_ , that he missed out on a chance to grumble. Him of the Many Faces smirks, and wraps his arms around his bride, sitting in the saddle of his horse in front of him.
Winterfell looms in the distance.

“Eddard Stark-H’ghar?” she asks.

If something happens, and if that something is a girl, then Niobe . Eddard , if it’s a boy.

It’s the second half of the names that is a problem.

“The H’ghar name needs to die,” he says.

“Eddard Faceless?” she teases.

He grins. “Eddard Morghul?”

“Snow,” she decides in the end.

He is naught but amused at this. “You’d make a god’s very much legitimate child a bastard?”

“It’s that or Stark-H’ghar,” she says with some asperity. “Or,” she says, mischievous, “uth-Braavos.”

“My child is not a Braavosi ,” he says with mock-disdain. “But Storm sounds better than Snow .”

*It would help, if there was not quite so much lying around in the country of her birth.*

“Don’t disparage the bastards of my homeland,” she says. “It could be worse, I could be from Dorne.”

He sighs. “Stark, just by itself, it would not work.”

“Too many political ramifications,” she agrees. “And when they become faceless...not good, the parental connection; it sets up an aristocracy, of a sorts.”

He twists, draws her face up to him. “You would have our baby join the order?” he asks. “To be faceless...there is a lot of darkness needed, beloved, to become who we are. To be born to it…” he shakes his head. “That would be no choice at all.”

She looks lost. “You would lose our child to old age?” she asks, and her voice trembles.

His arms tighten around her. “Valar morghulis,” he says.

She looks down. Death is absolute; they are united in principle, if not specifics. “Valar dohaeris,” she whispers.

“But questions of profession aside,” he says, “the order does have experience in dealing with foundlings...fosterage…”

“You’d make my baby an orphan while both of us live?”

He shakes his head. “I am at a loss, love.”

“What does a child need?” she asks, does not wait for an answer. “Food, shelter, security. Love. All of that she will have in the House of Black and White.”

“Yes,” he says, “and corpses as well.”

“Nevertheless,” she says, “it is her father’s house.”
“Mmm.”

We are so stupid. And yet, and yet... We’ll make it work, if something happens. Somehow. He is not above bending rules, especially rules that are no more than custom. A small house, for a few years, by the sea. If she agrees.

“Love, we’re close,” she says.

“Not yet,” he whispers into her hair.

“We are here, love, the sentries will have seen us already.”

He sighs, and leans back, and she shortens Steel’s reins until the horse is right beside them, and then twists onto the mare’s back.

“You’re getting very good at that,” he says.

She grins at him. “Practice makes perfect.”

In unspoken unison, they drop back. They are flanking the cart, the two riders. The wind whips the snow around their horses’ feet, and the gates of Winterfell rise before them.

Chapter End Notes

What did you think? It’s actually my second time writing explicitly, and I know people have high standards of this story...please tell me if it worked!

Note: gul and I are going on vacation/work-obligation-break for the next couple of weeks, will return on August 15th with the next chapters!

Thank you, thank you, thank you so much for your support, and for reading, and for making this such a fucking awesome experience!
ARYA

The ground, even a few hundred paces away from the gate, is violently uneven—the mud underneath the freshly fallen snow is furrowed and cratered, then frozen solid by winter’s chill. She can feel the unease of the soldiers watching from the battlements.

Sparse, she thinks. There are fewer men than there should be.

The familiar shape of Winterfell, a shape derived from one last look over her shoulder, years ago, as her father’s retinue followed Fat Robert’s around the bend in the Moat Caelyn road...the shape of Winterfell is different. The tops of the towers, the keeps, they still trace a staggered majesty against the bleak winter sky, but...as they come closer she realizes the First Keep is lopsided. The soaring Bell Tower bridge is simply...gone.

A fist clenches around her throat, and she must control her breath.

How many times must I mourn the same thing?

The question of how much to reveal to her family, and when, it is...unanswered. Her and Jaqen, they’ve worn circular paths through the fields of their reasonings, but all they can decide upon is responses to scenarios, from heartfelt welcome to violence, and a dozen contingencies for each.

They had included Sandor in the last of the discussions.

“A word in you ear, Sandor,” Jaqen had murmured during supper, the night before. “Arya Stark knew Jon Snow in a time when they were both children. He is a king, now, and kingship does...strange things to men.”

Sandor had snorted, “Don’t need to tell me that.”

“We don’t know how Jon will react to my being an assassin,” she had said bluntly. Clegane could be a subtle man if he wished it, she supposed, but Jaqen’s murmured subtleties irritated more than enlightened Sandor. “We don’t know if we can trust my brother; he will not know if he can trust us, either. All we have to go on is that he is my brother.”

Sandor had shook his head. “You trust someone just because they’re your brother, you’re going to get a foot of steel in your gut sooner rather than later.”

Despite the wars, despite Braavos and Walder Frey and Mother...if I can still be Arya after all of that, surely you can still be the Jon I used to know.

“I want your word, Clegane,” she had demanded, steel in her voice.

“And what will you give me for that, wolf bitch?”

“My gratitude,” she had said, serious.
“What’s your gratitude worth now?” Sandor had said, bitter. “You don’t even know if the king will recognize you, let alone let you spend a night in his hall.”

“I’d take it if I were you,” Jaqen had interjected, amused. “The last time you came here, you were Joffrey’s sworn hand, were you not? Not remembered fondly in the North, Joffrey’s people. An assassin’s gratitude could come in handy, should the North press the issue...”

“Pah!” Sandor had paused, to drain his ale. “If Lady Sansa asks me...”

“I’ll tell her before you have to,” Arya promised, and then it had hit her. “You’re in love with my sister!” She hadn’t known how to feel about that.

Sandor had glared at her, and at Jaqen. But he hadn’t denied it. “Too old for her,” he’d muttered, finally, and then groused some more when Arya couldn’t help but laugh and laugh at that.

“I’ll promise not to tell her,” she’d said, seeing the shape of the thing in Sandor--the silent knight, in love with the queen he served, never saying a word (stupid romantics). “If you promise not to tell her about us.”

Sandor had grunted, and then reluctantly given his word, as was inevitable.

They are within reach of the crossbows trained upon them by her brother’s sentries.

“Ho the gate!” calls Jaqen.

“State your business!” shouts down a sentry.

“News, for the King of the North,” calls Jaqen. “News of Arya Stark.”

Eventually, the gates are opened.

The horses walk through, followed by the cart, she passes under the outer bailey, and the whole world...shifts.

She sways in her saddle, uncomprehending, unseeing, and waves of emotion batter against her defenses, sweep them aside like so much kindling.

Oh...oh I was so wrong, so, so wrong. I have a home. I am home. Home is Winterfell.

There is just enough of a Faceless Man in her (that part of her sits, compressed within her, within the darkness, watching...just in case) to ensure that the hood of her cloak is drawn deep over her face.

Stark banners hang over the walls, their direwolf sigil, her direwolf sigil...how can you miss a symbol so much that you hurt when you see it again?

The stones are ancient; they feel eternal, as if nothing can touch them, as if nothing can take them away from her. Winterfell is permanence.

Tears make trails down her travel-begrimed face, and she feels such joy...no kill, no vengeance, nothing compares to this, this coming home.

Except Jaqen.
She sobers, and trembles, and guilt twists her insides till she thinks she might vomit from it. *I gave my oath; I am a Faceless Man. I am wedded to Him of the Many Faces.*

They reach the inner courtyard, dismount. She keeps her face hidden. And with all the guilty furtiveness of an inexperienced, desperate thief, she draws upon the years of training lavished on her in good faith, and pretends that she is no-one.

His hand is at her elbow, and she buries her head in his chest, and then his arm is around her. *Nothing* feels as good as being held in Jaqen’s arms.

*Except Winterfell.*

“Help me,” she whispers into his chest. “Jaqen, Jaqen, I’m rooting here…”

His heart stutters under her cheek. “I was a choice for you,” he says. “This is, as well.”

She wants him to tell her that the permanence is an illusion, that Winterfell can fall, it did fall, that even stones crumble to dust in time. She wants Him of the Many Faces to say *Valar morghulis* in her ear, so that she may respond: *Valar dohaeris*.

And what does he give her? *A choice*.

Angry, she pushes him away, and then, then she feels the wind beating against her thoughts. Startled, she looks up. Black clouds blow across the heavens, driven by a ferocious gale, far too high, far too deep in the sky to yet be felt on the ground.

“Steady now,” he murmurs. “The King in the North is being summoned.”

Even as she betrays him in her heart, he holds her to her course.

She breathes, and refuses to see the sorrow in him, and then a fat man in a Maester’s robes is trundling down the steps to meet them.

Arya and Sandor keep their hoods lowered over their face; Jaqen does all the talking. He has a silver tongue, especially when he plays “the Lorathi” to the hilt--in Jaqen H’ghar’s mouth, even the most outrageous demands appear *reasonable.*

She sees an opportunity, to build a makeshift rope-bridge and claw her way over to his side again. “There is much a girl has yet to learn from her husband,” she murmurs in Lorathi.

He turns around and has the temerity to wink at her.

Maester Samwell himself leads them to a private sitting room, though they have to divest themselves of their weapons--all the ones in plain sight, anyways.

The sitting room...her mother and their ladies used to weave here, she remembers; the loom is dusty, its frame loose and shoved into a corner, the spinning wheels are missing. The Maester keeps up a steady patter of inconsequential, one-sided conversation, and Arya oscillates between wanting to strangle him and thank him for the blanket of normalcy he spreads over them.

Impatient, and terrified, and eager and wanting to run away all at once, the world doesn’t seem quite real, it feels *thin*, like the colors in a dream, too intense and too watered down by turn.

She concentrates on the room. The panelling on the walls is darker than it should be; candleblack and hearth-soot, yes, but there are far too many signs of smoke in the lower panels, in the stone
around the windows.

Winterfell burned.

Soot can be cleaned from the walls, but the portion of the burning that has soaked into the wood and the stone, that portion remains.

The home she knew, the home she longed for at King’s Landing, in Braavos, during the journey North...it is gone, scoured by much more than fire. Even if she had returned to a Winterfell that was pristine, untouched by the ravages of the Ironborn and the Boltons, it could never have been the same. “You cannot cross the same river twice”--a Lorathi saying.

Time is a river.

And yet, the bones of Winterfell stand true, unbowed. Its roots bore deep into the ground, into the center of her world, and the Starks of old slumber not just in the crypts below the Keep but in every breath of air she takes in this place.

Outside the window, the godswood beckons.

What does Jaqen see here, she wonders. Finally she dares to look at him head-on--he is staring out the casement window. As if absently, his hand rises and comes to rest over his heart, over their secret pocket. “The wind,” he murmurs in Braavosi cant, as if to himself, his gaze locked on the godswood, half-glimpsed beyond the old stablewall… “the wind was born here.”

“Has old age finally caught up with the great Jaqen H’ghar,” she mocks, to blindly cover the disquiet his words rouse in her. “Does he forget how the wind was born in a barrow but a week ago?”

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JAQEN

He did not count on the power of Winterfell.

It says “home” and “safe” and “mine”, it tries to claim even Him --to his eyes the godswood rises like a pillar of black fire behind the walls, tendrils of untapped power whispering a name into the air. The name is as familiar to him as his own face; he cannot tell if the name is His, or hers.

He can tip the balance, present her with a false choice that, on the surface, looks far too real. Me, or Winterfell, choose, bride of Death. This weight their union has, to tip all balances in its favor… false choices lead to false decisions.

“The wind,” he murmurs absently, his attention fixed on the godswood. “The wind was born here.”

“Has old age finally caught up with the great Jaqen H’ghar,” she asks. “Does he forget how the wind was born in a barrow but a week ago?”

He is grateful for her attempts at jest; it means the wind still sleeps.

“A girl needs to return to the schoolroom,” he mocks. “A man will come, by and by, and explain ‘wind’ to her--when she is old enough for such explanations.”

He hears strident footsteps, striding towards them across a stone floor. Booted feet, a warrior’s
tread. Behind them there is a second set of footsteps, a whispering of velvet against the floor.

**ARYA**

The door is thrown open, and a man strides through. Maester Samwell’s patter trails off. The newcomer is tall, wearing rich black furs, bearded…

*Jon.*

She notices the sword at his belt, the assurance in his stride. He is a warrior grown, a dangerous warrior, not the half-trained boy she had so looked up to.

He looks over the two hooded figures flanking the cold hearth, Maester Samwell next to the door, and his gaze comes to rest on Jaqen.

“You have news of my sister?” Jon asks. *His voice* ...it is deeper, more commanding. Raw, like her father’s was when things were at their most chaotic.

*I am listening to a ghost.*

She reaches, throws back the hood of her robe.

Jon’s gaze snaps to the movement; a trained fighter, trained to register motion out of the corner of his eye.

For a few moments, Jon just stares at her. His mouth twists, sorrow and disbelief and heartbreak written across his features as it they are a book. Her vision blurs, and the next thing she knows he has covered the distance between them in a single stride and she is crushed to his chest.

She realizes she is weeping, and so is he, and it is far too hot, engulfed in his furs, but this is *Jon* and she will not let him go, and then another pair of arms surround them, and she realizes Sansa is in the room too, and crying into Arya’s hair.

She is gasping. It is hard to breathe, she wants to speak and she does not know what to say, she wants to cry, but she is already crying, and her heart *hurts* with half-remembered happiness.

But something...something holds her back, holds a part of her in a state detached from the turmoil.

It is the *smell: m* old, and winterdamp, and rot. It must be his furs, left to molder too long in some box somewhere, but it reminds her far too much of her mother’s death-smell.

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**JAQEN**

The King wears a familiar weariness around his shoulders--the weariness of one who has had kingship thrust upon him, and has accepted out of necessity, not a desire for power.

Every rumor churning about him in the south is patently false.

*We will hold our secrets, until we can determine how flexible his code is.* A man who bends only to
necessity is a dangerous one, here in the seat of his power.

Tarly is playing at affability, but his eyes don’t miss much. Jaqen dismisses him; the Maester is uncommonly intelligent, and uncommonly _good_, and he dances at the end of Pate’s puppet-strings still.

Jaqen watches, impassive, as Arya throws back her hood, as Jon Snow crosses the room and falls upon her, as Sansa Stark, in a black fur-trimmed dress as severe as any he has seen on noble widows in the House, enters, sees Arya, recognizes Arya, and _hesitates_, before she forces herself across the floor to throw her arms around her brother and sister.

Sandor has been forgotten, poor dog.

Tarly is dashing tears from his own eyes by the time the three Starks step back from each other, and breathe.

“I’m so sorry--”

“I’m sorry--”

“Forgive me--”

They look at each other, their apologies spoken at the same instant, and then burst out laughing. Hysteria follows in the wake of joy, and Sansa leans against the wall, one hand on her stomach as she laughs, and Jon and Arya are slapping each other on the back and laughing harder and harder; the laughers peters off, and then one of them catches the look on the others’ face, and the giggles bubble up anew.

Sandor grunts, throws back his hood. Jon sobers, immediately, and it is as if some unspoken message has passed between the siblings, for the girls, too, sober.

“Sandor...” Sansa whispers, her eyes wide.

“Hello, little bird,” says Sandor, his voice more gravelly than usual. He ventures a smile at her, a weak and uncertain thing.

She echoes his smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. Sansa Stark’s emotions are all of the surface; her _reserve_ goes deep, down and down. His bride is cutting ice, the ice of storm and wind, spiteful, and bold. Sansa...Sansa is the black ice that forms, invisible and treacherous, over a river’s mouth, that drowns unsuspecting men who cannot see the edges of it.

_The boy_...Jaqen cannot call him King in the North, or man, or fighter, not in this moment when he looks so much like an older, male incarnation of his lovely girl... _the boy is not ice at all, but coalfire smothered under a snowdrift, blackening, melting the snow in its hunger for air._

The boy looks at the two in the room that are strangers to him, and seems to remember himself. He straightens. “You have brought my sister home to me,” he says, “Both of you...Ser Sandor, and--forgive me,” he makes a half-bow towards Jaqen, “I do not know your name. But both of you, you have the eternal gratitude of the Starks.”

Tears glimmer in the King’s eyes, still. _Good_, Jaqen thinks. _Even without plots, R’hllor, choices to be made, she had to come back here. To receive and give the love that was due._

Him of the Many Faces exchanges a slight smile with his bride. She takes the lead.
“Jaqen, may I introduce my brother, Jon Stark, and Lady Sansa, my elder sister. Jon, Sansa, this is my husband, Jaqen H’ghar.”

Jon chokes on air. The “Jon Stark” has caught him solidly in the solar plexus, he is in no shape to respond to the unexpected left-hook of “my husband”.

*My lovely girl times her punches well.*

Tarly’s eyes are wide, his mouth a little open.

Sansa’s eyes are narrowed. She has missed neither the “Stark” nor the “husband”, but is fixated instead on that introduction...slowly her tight-lipped disapproval slips into mere exasperation when she looks at Arya. It is Not Done, introducing a King and a Lady to a nobody.

Sansa thinks the order of introduction, it is a mistake.

There are many levels of truth at play here, and Arya treats each of them as absolute and yet somehow manages to dance on their bones. Jaqen allows himself to feel a moment of appreciation for his bride.

*Manipulated you only with the truth.*

She has caught the gleam in his eye, and it is her turn to wink at him.

Jaqen bows deeply to Jon Stark, to Sansa. “Your Grace,” he says, “My Lady.”

“Husband?” Jon’s brain has finally caught up with the conversation.


Jaqen’s lips twitch. “A man claims neither title nor properties, Lady Sansa. He was born a citizen of the Free City of Lorath.”

Jon is also looking between Jaqen and Arya--titles are not this bastard’s concern; the age-difference is far less apparent by now, by appearance there is but a decade or so between the two of them. But it is hard, for a man who has seen his sister as a child to see her as anything but.

The group stands around in uncomfortable silence. Jon eventually remembers himself again.

“Sit, please, all of you,” he says, and then looks helplessly at Sansa. She is the lady of the house, and she unbends, putting on an invisible mantle of graciousness. It is a learned habit; it is the Catelyn Stark in her.

“May we offer you some refreshment? There is bread and ale,” she says, and hesitates, “and a boar roasting for...a feast, tonight, if your hunger will keep till then. Or I can send for some cold meats.”

Sandor, predictably, speaks first. “Some bread and ale would be mighty fine, little bird,” he says.

Sansa gives Sandor another small smile, and this one almost, almost reaches her eyes. She goes to the door, issues some orders to a servant outside.

Sansa and Jon Stark...they are children, the both of them, despite the experiences that scour their souls, children forced to step into their parents’ shoes. His bride...she walks barefoot, clever girl that she is, and goes where she will.
He sits down on one of the chairs Jon Stark has indicated. A faint, acrid whiff of char rises from the chair as he sits, along with a puff of dust. Arya notices the dust, and a flicker of something—horror, dismay—passes over her face before it is gone.

_In her memories, Catelyn Stark rules this room._ Dust has no place here.

Arya takes a seat near, but not _too_ near Jaqen.

Jon turns to her. “What happened? After father, after...?”

Sansa returns.

Arya takes a deep breath. “I fled to Braavos.”

“_Braavos_?” asks Sansa. “You’ve been in _Braavos_ all this time?”

Arya looks to Jaqen, seeking consensus. They’ve rehearsed many versions of her story. He opens his hands. **Your choice, love.**

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**ARYA**

She oscillates, between wanting to just...just hold Jon and Sansa, and blurt out everything in one long exhalation—her escape, _Mother_, the letters, the plots, Braavos, Jaqen, _everything_.

She gulps in large breaths of air; apart from that very first instant, when instinct and the steel-strong (_Valyrian_ steel strong) bonds of siblinghood drew them together, there has been no moment where Jon and Sansa are not _watching_, weighing, judging.

_They need to be handled_ , she thinks sadly. _They will not trust us if the thing is not presented at the right moment, in the right way._

She turns her attention back to the question that was asked, takes another deep breath.

“I escaped with a wandering crow after Joffrey’s men took Father,” she says. Sansa face is a riot of emotion—shame, grief, guilt. “_Yoren._”

Arya looks down, then back up to Jon. “He was going to bring me to you. But Lannisters found us...then I found Jaqen.” She throws him a quick smile. “He told me there would be sanctuary for me, in Braavos, until I was old enough for vengeance.”

She shrugs. “Then he had to leave—he had duties, and I wanted to find Mother. I was heading north, heard rumors of Robb’s army in the Riverlands, and then Sandor found me.” A smile, thrown in Sandor’s direction, “he took me as far as the Twins...we arrived right after the Red Wedding.”

Sandor grunts.

“Then...” She will not take away his face, not now, when he needs to be accepted here. There will be no talk of ransoms. “Sandor was wounded. Left for dead.”

Sansa throws Sandor a sharp glance: concern.
“Then,” says Arya, “then I went to Braavos. Jaqen had given me a token, for safe passage.” She smiles again. “I found sanctuary, as he’d promised.”

Sansa looks at Jaqen, then back again at Arya. “Was your marrying him the price?” she asks, in a small voice.

“What? No!” says Arya. “I married him because he’s him, and he’s mine.”

The words, fiercely possessive, unrehearsed, just...explode out of her. She glances at Jaqen, suddenly anxious for the words not to be misinterpreted. They’ve played this game, “mine, yours” with each other, but never in front of anyone else.

“The sky belongs to the birds, salt belongs to the sea,” he murmurs, sotto voce, in Lorathi. She relaxes. There is no tradition of slavery in the North; the words, though unintentionally spoken, will be interpreted as the sentiment that they are.

I’m losing control. She tries to summon the blankness, and it eludes her.

Too much.

This place; Jon; Sansa; Jaqen beside her; her parents, cold, on the cart outside.

Too much.

Her mind keeps drifting to Jaqen, to their union, because it is the only anchor she has in the moment.

Where the hell is the bread and ale we were promised?

“Has the marriage been consummated?” Sansa’s voice is stronger.

Because her marriage to Tyrion…? Arya gives her sister a confused look. How is that relevant?

“If not, it must be dissolved,” states Sansa.

Arya is stunned. This, she did not expect. And then, then she sees the disdain on her sister’s face, in the slight flare of Sansa’s nostrils, the pulling of her lips to one side as she looks at Jaqen.

Commoner, Sansa’s face says.

Cold fury momentarily wipes away all uncertainty. Arya smiles a sardonic smile, a Jaqen H’ghar smile. “There are many differences between you and me, dear sister,” she says sweetly. “not the least of them is that if I find myself in the company of a worthy man, I fuck him.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Jaqen lower his face into his palm. Sansa is looking at her, stunned, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

Oh no, no, what did I just do?

Jon just looks distressed, and anxious, entirely uncertain whom he should shout at, but entirely certain he wants to shout at someone, anyone. Maester Samwell has backed up a pace.

Sandor, insensitive, blunt Sandor, who has not seen the look on Sansa’s face, he chuckles, because this is the kind of thing he expects from the “Wolf-Bitch”.

Sansa’s rounds on him with a glare. “What, did she bed you too?” she demands.
Sandor raises his hands defensively, before Arya can say anything. She’s not sure what she can say that will fix this. Halfway to panic, she looks at Jaqen.

JAQEN

“It has been a very difficult journey,” he says, his voice pitched to cut through whatever futile circles the others’ thoughts are treading.

Tarly is the first to drag his gaze away from watching the Stark women warily. The Maester clears his throat. “I’ll go see what’s keeping the ale, shall I?” he asks no one in particular.

Jon gives Tarly a grateful glance. They are comrades, these two. Bonds like that are useful levers, when playing a long game. *Pate’s strings, controlling Samwell...they will have to stay very, very well hidden.*

Jon turns back to Jaqen and Arya, and he sees something in his sister’s face, and Jaqen judges that the King in the North still knows her well enough to read the regret, and stubbornness and defiance and guilt all out on display there.

“Jaqen,” says Jon, dipping his head, “I apologize for the discourtesies offered to you under our roof.” The apology is sincere, and Jon casts a reproving glance towards Sansa, though her lips are pressed together tightly.

“No apologies are necessary, your Grace,” says Jaqen. “A man is aware of his bride’s high station, that her marrying one of low birth would be much disapproved of, in Westeros.” She will rage at him, when they are alone, if he plays at servility too much. “It was not considered a mismatch, in Braavos, when we were wed.”

“The guilds have far more power than nobles in Braavos,” snarls Arya. She is almost vibrating with impatience: *our parents’ bones are waiting, down below.*

Sansa opens her mouth, she will say something like “this is not Braavos”, but Jon speaks over her. “You are Lorathi, you said, Jaqen.” Jaqen nods. “When I thought Arya might come to the wall,” offers Jon, “I thought I might send her to Lorath, that she would be safe there.”

_Her brother extends an olive branch. We cannot rush this._

Amusement glitters in Jaqen’s eyes. “So the Starks would have ended up with a brother by marriage from Lorath in any event,” he says. Jon’s brows furrow, and Jaqen’s lips twitch as he answers the unasked question: “The accent, apparently,” he murmurs, giving Arya a sidelong look. In response, she smacks him on the arm, hard. He just grins wider.

Jon almost smiles. Almost. He has a far broader egalitarian streak in him than his red-headed sister. Arya’s safety, her happiness, her choice, these are the things important to Jon Stark.

Jaqen realizes that despite everything, despite the crown he wears, he is starting to like her brother...cousin...Gendry’s counterweight in the tangle...R’hlloër’s champion, whatever else this boy is.

Sansa...Sansa is a different story. She is glaring at him.

“What guild are you a part of, sir?” she demands.
“Arrgh!” says Arya. “Let it go, Sansa!”

Why the fixation with our marriage? Tyrion...Ramsay...?

And then Him of the Many Faces extrapolates the shadow standing behind Sansa Stark.

The Whoremaster. Petyr Baelish.

Arya, offered to either Highgarden’s heir, or the Vale’s...they would accept, even acclaim “Lady Arya Stark” as “Princess Arya Stark”.

How many houses have refused a Jon Snow’s envoys? How many have disdained a reply? How many houses could Arya Stark buy them?

Sansa Stark is trying to hold together an entire kingdom, threatened from all sides by implacable enemies, a kingdom with a bastard warrior at its helm, and all she knows is the game she herself was once a pawn in...a game she still thinks she is but a pawn in.

Sansa Stark deserves his pity.

But despite the calm and measured, amicable facade Jaqen H’ghar wears, the Many-Faced God is...irritated (it is not proportional, after all, for a god to be moved to anger by such small things as words).

“Lady Sansa forgives a man,” says Jaqen with all seriousness, “for this marriage cannot be undone.” He pauses to tuck a stray strand of Arya’s hair behind her ear. She is angry as well, his lovely girl, angry and exasperated and impatient.

There are two waiting on the cart below, and the sky darkens.

Arya takes a deep breath. “I bring Mother and Father home to rest.”

Jaqen watches the disbelief, the horror, the sudden breath of sorrow bloom on the faces of her siblings. But how could Arya have softened the blow, if she is not allowed the space to speak as she will instead of interjecting other agendas?

Jon and Sansa race to the window in tandem. There is silence, and nothing to see in the courtyard below but an unmanned cart with two large chests on it, one ornate and gilded, the other a simple wooden affair.

Silent tears are coursing down Sansa’s face; Jon Stark doesn’t seem to be able to weep for sorrow, only joy.

“Sansa,” says Arya, and there is longing and forgiveness and a plea wrapped up in his bride’s speaking of the name. She extends her hand, and Sansa gropes for it blindly. Sansa finds Arya’s fingers; their hands are clasped together, tightly.

“Jaqen and I,” says Arya, “also brought you the heads of Walder Frey. And his son, his grandson. I’d like them mounted on pikes somewhere...visible. The cold should keep them recognizable for a while.”

Jon whirls to look at his youngest sister, and Jaqen knows there will be no answers the King finds in her expression. He looks at Jaqen, questioning.

“Arya Stark has commanded significant resources, in her pursuit of Stark vengeance,” Jaqen
Sansa turns around. “We need…” she breathes, wipes her face, leaving ugly red blotches over her skin. “Funeral. I don’t know…Jon, what…?”

Jon Stark rocks back on his heels, thinking, then he shakes his head. “Sam?”

“Um.” Tarly seems at a loss, then he brightens. “Leave it to me, I’ll sort it out.” Jaqen recognizes the manic gleam of panic in Samwell Tarly’s eyes, from his time as a friend to Pate. Tarly has no idea what to do, but…the panic clears, a bit. “I’ll check the library, just to confirm,” his air of false confidence wavers, a bit. “Um. I think the records survived the leak. I’ll check, see what they did before.”

Tarly turns, leaves the room, his brow furrowed in thought. How long has it been, since Winterfell saw the funeral of a head of House Stark? The Mad King took care of the last two...

But Tarly’s assurances have taken some of the burden from Jon and Sansa.

The ale finally arrives, along with loaves of peasant bread... is the coarseness of the bread, is it austerity, in the King’s house, or necessity?

Sansa abandons the window to drag a chair over, and sit beside Arya. She has still not let go of her sister’s hand, but she serves herself a mug of ale with her free one. Jaqen gently wraps Arya’s hand around a half-filled tankard of ale.

And finally, finally, Jon turns to Sandor. The King’s posture is stiff. “Sansa told me how you saved her, in King’s Landing.”

Sandor’s jaw clenches.

Sansa looks down and away. Another story, here. Yes...why did Sandor Clegane leave King’s Landing when he did?

“What is your part in all of this now, Ser Sandor?” asks Jon, making an all-encompassing motion with his hand. “The last time I saw you, you were Joffrey’s ‘Hound’.”

“Fucking twat-king,” says Sandor, swirling the ale in his tankard. “I serve no one any more. But the She-Wolf needed someone to drive the cart.”

A whole world is contained in that response, and Jon Stark’s eyes focus into the distance. He doesn’t like Clegane, Jaqen realizes. And yet...

“I suppose she did,” Jon says finally.

Silence wraps around them like a shroud, though there is so much that his bride needs to speak of.

“I have letters for you,” says Arya. “I need to tell--”

Jon shakes his head. “It will have to keep, Arya, I’ve tarried too long as it is--I need to ride to Hommen’s Stead, they’ve rumors of wights.”

Hommen’s Stead...a small village, if Jaqen recalls clearly, a watch-and-a-half’s ride north of here.

Jon is staring at Arya, at Jaqen, watching for their response to his use of the world “wight”, and Jon is surprised to find no surprise (nor disbelief) on their faces.
“Hommen’s Stead is very far away from the Wall,” is all Jaqen says.

Arya says nothing at all.

“Surely it can wait another watch,” whispers Sansa. “I would listen to what Arya--”

“I cannot.” Jon cuts her off. “Not yet.” He lowers his head into his hands.

Both Sansa and Arya react on instinct, at the same moment. They’ve laid their hands on Jon’s back, reassuring.

“Go,” says Arya softly. “I’ll be here when you return.”

The King in the North raises his head, smiles wanly at his sisters. “I’ll be back by nightfall.” He rises, nods at Jaqen, and strides out of the room.

Sansa stares helplessly after him, then turns around, a smile plastered on her face. “I’ll have temporary chambers—guest chambers—prepared for you, until yours are readied, Arya, if we’d known you were coming…”

“Travel times are uncertain, these days,” says Jaqen.

Sansa’s lips thin. “Of course. Um... I can--”

Arya saves her sister from further uncertainty. “I would like to pray in the godswood. Then I’d like to mount Walder Frey over the bailey, if that’s all right.”

Sansa spreads her hands, and a real smile, one that touches her eyes, it flickers over her face. “Winterfell is your home. Do as you please. And I’ll watch, as you mount his head.”

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ARYA

Jaqen...Jaqen...Jaqen... the heart tree is whispering His name. She kneels under it, her hand touching the carved weirwood face.

“I would like to play a game,” she says, eyes still closed.

He is sitting beside her, leaning against the trunk of the tree. “The tree keeps whispering your name,” he says.

She looks up at him, startled. “To me it whispers yours.”

He raises an eyebrow. “How strange.” He cocks his head to a side. “A game, you said?”

She mirrors his posture, holds out her hands towards him. He understands—it is a Lorathi game (the Braavosi disdain this type of training, preferring bluff and mummery to the lie-becomes-truth internal shift of perspective the Lorathi way demands).

“I am Arya Stark,” she says. “I am a Faceless Man.” She hesitates. “I can be a Stark of Winterfell, and a Faceless Man at the same time.”

His hand reaches out, smacks hers, very, very lightly. The judgement does not come from the observer, in this game...the observer simply assesses her conviction, and points out the places
where it wavers.

She sighs, tries again.

“I belong to the House of Black and White.”

Smack.

“I belong to Winterfell.”

Smack.

“I belong to Jaqen H’ghar.”

His hand doesn’t move. She looks up at him, and he is amused. “That is what you doubted, of all things, beloved?”

She looks up at him, bewildered.

“A man thinks a girl really does belong in a schoolroom,” he says. “She needs to learn her nouns again--place, person, thing--and the differences between each.”

Her hands are trembling as she holds them out.

“I want to stay in Winterfell.”

There is no response from him.

“I want to go back to Braavos.”

Nothing.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Nothing.

She lowers her head into her hand. “Please,” she whispers. “Tell me what to do.”

“Focus,” he says, “on taking each moment as it comes. There will be a time for sorrow, and a time for joy, and a time for all the things in between. There will be a time for decision-making as well, and when that moment comes it will not catch you unaware.”

“Make me choose Braavos,” she says.

“No.”

She mock-glares at him.

“Come, love,” he says, “you’ve promised your sister some macabre decorations for her front gate.”

They rise to their feet with the customary fighter’s grace of a faceless one (none here to see, no need to feign imbalance, nor stiffness). Their arms encircle each other’s waists, and their stride, matched, makes matched imprints in the snow.
JAQEN

He watches as Arya spikes Walder Frey’s head, then Lothar’s, then Black Walder’s onto suitably useless pikes. He watches her climb up the steep staircase that leads to the platform above the bailey, plant the heads so their sightless eyes look out over the snowbound landscape outside the gates of Winterfell. Then she climbs back down.

“And so, it is done,” he says softly. Sansa watches, he can sense her, but from a spot beyond their line-of-sight. “Your family does not seem too impressed.”

“Arrgh!” She says, quietly, under her breath.

“Patience, my love,” he murmurs. Irritation is gathering in her--this is not exactly the homecoming she imagined.

“I wanted it to be simple,” she says.

“When is anything to do with Arya Stark ever simple?” he asks.

“I wanted to just...tell them. But they watch, they judge, and now we have to play stupid word games.”

He lays his hand upon her shoulder, draws her a bit closer to him. “We expected this,” he reminds her. “It is not the best of the scenarios, no, but not the worst, either.”

“And...I liked you from the first moment I heard you speak,” she says in a small voice. “I wanted them to like you like that.”

Levity has become ineffective on her, of late, but he tries nonetheless. He puts a hand over his heart. “Not exactly like that, I hope,” he murmurs.

She presses her lips together; she’s trying not to smile. So even gods can be granted miracles, sometimes.

Her homecoming would have been closer to what she wanted, had he not been here.

She...reads him, and the almost-smile vanishes. “No,” she says. “Without you, nothing would be as I wanted.”

“You misinterpret, beloved,” he says gently. “I will always be with you. But had I stayed, say, in Cerwyn, and you had come to Winterfell alone...”

Would you have considered staying in Winterfell? Sansa would have tried to marry you off, and you’d have fled straight back into my arms, and Braavos. The moment of choice would have come and gone, and you would never even know.

“You would have played the part of a Faceless Man playing Arya Stark,” he continues, “perhaps even without realizing it.” He can’t quite keep his gaze from wandering over her with a touch more lust than the day deserves. “Now...now a girl is Arya Stark.”

“They do not trust us,” she murmurs.

The problem, again, is him. “The lovely girl must realize,” he murmurs, “that the way she see a man, the way she has always seen him from the first, it is not how others see him. There is a reason Sandor nicknamed him ‘sly-blade’. A man does not inspire trust in most people.”
"A girl doesn’t give two fucks," she says savagely, then sighs. "I wanted them to like me, too."

*Jon Stark likes her, loves her. But it is Sansa’s approval, Sansa’s admiration she wants, a substitute for her mother’s.* He has seen the letter Lady Stoneheart wrote for Arya, the jagged tears in parchment.

Sansa loves her, yes, without question, but she makes Sansa uncomfortable, she would have made Sansa uncomfortable if she had come into her own even without becoming a Faceless Man.

His bride grows coy on him. "Do you like me?"

"A man does not know, lovely girl," he says. "He will have to see all of her to decide."

She grins, and the humor reaches her eyes this time; irritation has leached out of her, replaced by the softness they permit themselves with each other.

"See," she says, "that’s why I need you."

He takes her in his arms, regardless of all the eyes he can feel trained upon them. "To leer at you?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "To see all of me."

He longs to kiss her. But this, this will not be permitted in the moment. He must instead rely on words. "My lovely, beautiful, cunning, lethal, dangerous, wise…" he pauses. "Why is a girl giving a man a look?"

"Just wondering when you will run out of adjectives," she says.

"Mmm," he replies. "Never. A man has many languages to call upon."

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**SANSA**

Sansa watches the two in the courtyard below--the stranger, and her sister.

Arya has stuck a pike--bent and twisted, no use to anyone anymore--through the neck-stump of a desiccated, grey head. The head is crowned with wisps of white hair. The hair is a brittle, yellowing white.

*Walder Frey.*

Arya climbs to the top of the front bailey, and plants the pike, along with two others, into crumbling stone brackets made for just such a purpose. Her motions are followed by the uneasy eyes of the few sentries they *must* keep positioned along the battlements (though they are needed elsewhere) so as not to show the desperate weakness in the heart of Winterfell.

*Walder Frey will help, Sansa thinks.* *We look stronger, for avenging the Red Wedding in its entirety.*

Lithely, like a cat, Arya climbs back down to the courtyard, and bends her head for murmured conversation with her husband.
Sansa sighs, and takes a step back from the covered balcony; cold is seeping into her bones, even through the heavy furs.

This set of rooms, overlooking the gates, yet hidden from direct line-of-sight of those on the ground, Sansa has chosen for her own use. Heralds stayed here, slept here, practiced here, in the days of Winterfell past. Ramsay slaughtered the last of the heralds of Winterfell long before Sansa ever came back.

By some unspoken agreement (for lack of something for him to do), Sandor followed on her heels as she left the sitting room.

Now Sandor hovers behind her, silent. Watching.

She allows herself a little smile, allows herself to give him one. She notices that his lips tug at his scars when he smiles. She wonders if it hurts.

It’s been a long time since she’s been afraid of the Hound, since he has been “Sandor” in her head. She’s seen the real monsters now, the ones that never believe themselves to be monsters, and no mark of their monstrosity ever shows on their face.

“Are they actually in love?” Sansa asks, her gaze returning to Arya. Why does Arya get a choice, when I didn’t? But Sansa had had a choice, hadn’t she? She’d chosen Joffrey. And chosen him again, over Arya, over Lady, over the truth.

Everything bad that had happened to them...Petyr had told her of a Maester’s theory, about chaos--a butterfly flaps its wings in Leng, and one thing leads to another, and a hurricane breaks upon the Iron Islands. I was such a pretty little butterfly. “Love is a lie, isn’t it, Ser Sandor?”

“Not a Ser,” grunts Sandor.

“My brother will make you one,” she states. And this commoner Arya has married...

She is still smarting, a bit, from Arya’s comment about fucking worthy men...not least because Arya is right, of course--had Sansa bedded Tyrion, she wouldn’t have been married to Ramsay Bolton. Could have given Tywin Lannister an heir. The Lord of Casterly Rock would have done anything for a worthy heir...could have begged him for Robb’s life, for Mother’s life. But then Cersei and Joffrey would have had her baby murdered.

Jon will have to give this Jaqen H’ghar some substantial title, lands, to salvage what reputation we have left on the heels of Robb’s unsuitable choice... It is hard, to arrange a marriage for a Stark (or a Snow) these days. At least a marriage that would benefit them just a little bit; the other kind, where the Starks lose yet again, the other kind is easy enough to come by. Sansa can marry her cousin who inherited the Vale. Sansa can marry Petyr Baelish, who rules the Vale. Both of those things will help Petyr’s ambition, but the North not at all--once he has her, Littlefinger will not need to support Jon with anything other than honeyed words.

Winter is already here. We need more than honey, if we are to survive it.

At least Ellaria Sand replied : no daughter of hers would be forced to face the harsh winter in marriage to Winterfell.

Jon is gentle. Jon is kind. These are not qualities that endear themselves to anyone who plays the Game of Thrones.

“The King will give you lands, if you want them.” There they are, Sandor, stretching all the way to
the horizon, fields lying fallow beneath the snow. “A title.”

“No,” Sandor snarls.

Sansa looks over her shoulder, sees something dark in him. “As you wish,” she says.

He shakes his head and comes up beside her, looks out at the activity in the courtyard. The two down below are still talking to each other, as if the cold is of no consequence to them.

“Do you know what they want?” Sansa asks. Everyone wants something (all the better if it is something within your power to grant, or withhold. If not, you must acquire that power) this teaching of Petyr’s, to Alayne, it has served Sansa well in the past few months. For Arya, it’s safe enough to assume her wants include “family”, “Winterfell” (that’s what Sansa wanted, what Jon wanted, after all). But what does this Jaqen H’ghar want? Arya, clearly, but he already has her.

“Have no idea what they’re up to,” Sandor says thoughtfully. “Whatever game they’re playing, they’re playing it close to their chest.”

Sansa tilts her head to a side, considering the couple. “She didn’t even twitch, when she shoved the pike through her trophy.”

Sansa herself had vomited, and someone else --that Wildling of Jon’s, Giantsbane--he’d done the mounting of Ramsay’s head for her. But then, Walder Frey wasn’t quite as...mangled...as Sansa’s lord husband had been.

If Arya can do this and not twitch...maybe she won't look at me like I am a monster.

Jon gives her that look sometimes, worried and scared in equal measure.

But she also needs to know what Sandor wants. His motives have always been opaque to her, even in hindsight. At first she’d thought he’d wanted her, but clearly that wasn’t the case. To know what he wants, she needs to know who he is.

The Hound was not a decent man. Joffrey lost the Hound the night of the Blackwater. Joffrey lost the Hound because Joffrey was a coward. The Hound wants a banner to rally for.

“Why did you come to Winterfell?” she asks.

He looks at her, and again she cannot read his face--disgust, irritation, anger, these are his customary expressions. Septa Mordane’s admonishments may has well have come true, for Sandor: “Don’t frown, what if your face freezes like that?”

“Either of them could have driven the cart,” she prompts.

“Had nowhere else to go, little bird,” he says, and his voice is gentle, completely at odds with his mien. “Knew the Starks would take in someone that helped bring them home.” He nods to the courtyard below; she’s not sure if he means Arya and Jaqen, or her parents’ bones.

Does he want to be an honorable man, though he claims to disdain the concept? No, he did not disdain the concept--he disdained the hypocrites that claimed the honor of knighthood while violating its principles.

Serving a Stark guarantees a man honor, if not much else.

“Swear then,” she says. He blinks at her, his brows furrowed. Sansa has given Jon Winterfell (it
should have been his in the first place), she has given Jon the Dreadfort (she would have to call herself Lady Bolton, to claim it with some sort of legitimacy beyond slaughter). “Swear to me, and no other—not Jon, not Arya, not the Starks—swear to serve me.”

Sandor I will keep to myself.

He looks bewildered. Then, slowly, he kneels before her, bows his head.

It overwhelms her; she closes her eyes. She hums for a moment in accord with Joffrey, of all people (he is a part of her too, like Ramsey). There is power in it, exhilaration, to have this man kneel before you.

“Don’t have a sword, Lady Sansa,” says Sandor, looking at the ground, “give me one, I’ll do the oath proper.”

She reaches out, rests a hand on his head. “My Hound?” she whispers.

He shakes his head under her touch. His hair is coarse, matted. Have to arrange chambers for him...the barracks-commander’s quarters have been gutted...put him next to the Maester’s chambers, in the tutors’ wing...need to find clean clothes in his size, we have armor... “Not a dog anymore, little bird” he whispers. “Not even for you.”

The Hound is dead. And, just like that, Sansa knows. Sandor Clegane wants what every man who believes himself to be a monster wants. Sandor Clegane wants redemption.

“My shield,” she says, her voice firmer. “My sword.”

“Yours,” he says; his breath is white mist, in the air.

“Rise...you do not want ‘Ser Sandor’, nor ‘Lord Clegane’... What name would you have, my shield?”

He looks up at her. Even kneeling, his head is almost level with her chest. There is some unnamable emotion swimming in his eyes. “Pick something.”

Starks are wolves and direwolves, and yet he has named her ‘little bird’, in exchange for a song. What name does an oath buy, for a man who used to be a Lannister dog? Crows, eagles, wyverns, these are all taken up onto shields and pennants, by other houses.

Jaqen H’ghar’s strange accent, the edges of it that she can hear in Arya’s words, it pulls her mind east.

“Rise, then, Phoenix,” she says, her voice soft, rueful, entirely opposite his raw roughness when he had given her her name.

He rises, looks at her with narrowed eyes. “Fenix?” he asks. “Sounds like a dog.”

A giggle, entirely unexpected, escapes her. “It’s a bird, from a legend in the far east.”

“What kind of bird?” he asks, suspiciously.

“Something suitably ugly,” she reassures him.

He chuckles. “‘Ugly bird’, to guard ‘little bird’? Alright.” He looks entirely too satisfied at that. Then he thinks. “Better call me Clegane, just so as no one thinks...”
“Impropriety,” she agrees. He nods, steps back half a pace.

“Ugly bird,” he says, then snorts and shakes his head.

*Firebird, Sandor, that rises, reborn, from the ashes of its first life.*

“So,” she says, “What can you tell me of my sister?”

He hesitates.

“There’s more to her story than sanctuary in Braavos, isn’t there?” she asks. “And this marriage of hers...” To be fair, Arya said she had much more to tell them, but Jon...Jon can be immovable when he has his mind set on something.

“You gave her your word?” she guesses shrewdly.

Sandor spits over the balcony. “Didn’t mean to.”

“Then I will not have you forsworn quite so early in my service.” The motions of jest come easier to her now. She just has to pretend she’s Petyr, that she’s a mockingbird, mocking those around her just enough that they laugh but do not take offense. “What *can* you tell me?”

Sandor leans against one of the stone arches that separate the suite from the balcony. “They get up very early in the morning, I’m still abed, they go off a distance. I’ve heard blades clash, once or twice--she can use that sword of hers, if I had to guess, use it well, but I’ve never seen it.” He shakes his head. “One time I followed them, they may have heard me coming, blades were nowhere to be seen. He had his hand down her shirt and she was writhing against him like a dockyard whore.”

Disgust twists at Sansa’s face; she cannot help it.

“Dunno if that was real...” he hesitates again. “Heard a lot of dockyard whores, camp followers. Can tell when it’s fake, when it’s real. This time...I *couldn’t*. ’Bout the only thing I am certain of, though...they do love one another. Each will kill for the other.”

“Can she be trusted?” Sansa murmurs, almost to herself.

“Strange world, little bird,” says Sandor softly. “Stark asking a Clegane whether another Stark can be trusted.”

“The world has gone mad,” she agrees. *The world should burn, so it can be reborn as something cleaner.* “Can I trust my sister, ugly bird?”

He purses his lips. “Don’t know. I’d trust sly-blade over there if he gives me his word. Your sister...I don’t know. I *like* her, if that’s any use.”

“She’s changed so much,” says Sansa, and even as she says the words she knows them to be false. Sandor snorts. “She’s the wolf-bitch she’s always been. Just grown up.”

He is right. Arya has changed, and yet...she is just *more* Arya. The seeds of the child Sansa knew, her annoying, infuriating, defiant sister, those seeds have simply germinated, thrown up a riot of vegetation; whether the vegetation is useful (like apple trees) or poisonous (like the Tyrells), she cannot tell.

“Pity she grew up as much as she did,” says Sansa, thinking of the woman this Jaqen H’ghar has
made of her little sister. “We could have married her to Willas Tyrell, secured Highgarden’s support through her.”

Sandor looks at her, suddenly wary. “You have changed.”

The smile she wears is a cruel one, kind and hard at once—a Ramsay smile. She raises her hand, gently caresses the fire-ravaged side of his face.

He flinches.

“I’ve learned a lot,” she says. How strange, she thinks. I can touch him. Jon, now Sandor. That makes two. If there are two men in the world I can still touch, maybe there’s hope for the world yet.

Her tone changes to brisk as she begins to contemplate the work that must be finished today, despite all interruptions. “Come. I want your opinion on the levies we’ve managed to extract from Jon’s bannermen. We have to send back the ones that are not satisfactory—I will not feed a useless mouth.” She has Jon’s opinion already: Send them all back—Jon doesn’t have the time to train green youths. But she’s hoping something can be salvaged, especially under Sandor’s tutelage.

She casts one last look over her shoulder. Arya is heading out of the courtyard, towards the receiving hall, hand-in-hand with her husband. And if I can still feel envy...maybe, maybe there’s hope for me as well.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand I’m back.

Next chapter is in edits with gul, to be posted on Friday.

So, what do you think?
JON

He leads a half-score troop of borrowed men--not a one of them wears the Stark direwolf upon
their breast. He is grateful, deeply grateful, for the bear and the merman and the fist, but even
amongst his father’s people, a favour must be repaid in kind at some point.

Night has fallen, and each alternate rider carries a burning torch. It would be wiser to lead the
horses, but they’ve ridden this way just a few hours ago, and no fresh snowfall has obscured the
road since then.

He looks to the two riders than flank him on either side. House Mormont’s riders, who actually
take pride in guarding the bastard king. *House Mormont has done more to fight the winter than
anyone else, save the Starks.* Longclaw, another gift from a Mormont, hangs at Jon’s belt. It has
drunk deeply, tonight.

*Three wights*. In a village that lies fifteen days of hard riding from the wall…

Sigorn rides up to him, the bronze disc of House Thenn gleaming faintly green upon his breast.
The wights were men that were once Thenns, the bronze of their armor badly dented, with gaping
holes, but still identifiable.

“The witch confirms it,” he says to Jon. “All three of them were brought south by boat.”

The triangulation is easy: access to a sea harbor, access to Eastwatch, a burning hatred of Jon
Snow, who has made a wildling people into a House, a House with rights to Karhold. The North is
a superstitious land. It won’t take very many more incidents like this, to equate House Thenn, the
“wildling” house with undead from north of the Wall, wearing Thenn bronze.

“The Karstarks are trying to play politics using the undead.” Jon shakes his head in disbelief, in
despair. *How shortsighted are these people?*

Yannis, one of the Mormont knights, has been listening. “Something *must* be done, White Wolf.”

The cold, the weariness, it makes Jon’s bones ache. “They are ferrying wights south of the wall,”
he says, and his words have no inflection in them at all. “Something must be done.”

*The North must be purged of traitors.*

The thought piles more weariness onto his shoulders. He is tired of killing living men. “Can there
be peace at all?”

“Alys will know,” says Sigorn.

Jon smiles. In a way, the marriage of Alys Thenn, nee Karstark, it was the very first kinglike thing
he had done.

“How is she?” he asks.

Sigorn smiles, the befuddled and proud smile Jon has noticed new fathers often wear. “Well. Alys
rides already. The babe suckles all day, babbles all night.”

“Good,” Jon murmurs. “Good.” He would pray, but he doesn’t know who to pray to, R’hllor or the Old Gods, that all his decisions bear such fruit.

Up ahead, flickering lights mark the outlines of Winterfell. His gloom lifts, for a moment. Arya. The relief he felt, in the first hour or so of seeing her, he felt a hundred stone lighter, until all the North’s assorted troubles reminded him of themselves, one by one.

And she has brought a husband with her. A fighting man, from the way he moves, who does not lose his temper, and does not give ground. I can use a man like that. And she has brought them Sandor Clegane, the Hound, one of the most vicious killers the South ever whelped, who for some reason wants to become a Stark man. She has brought Father home to rest. And Catelyn Stark.

And Jon has noticed how Arya moves, too. He thinks of Wylla and Wynafryd Manderly. He chuckles.

“Wolf?” asks Yannis.

“A thought,” says Jon. “Train and arm all the women of the North.”

Yannis snorts. “If there’s any more like the little bear, your Night’s King is going to sorry he ever set his eyes south of the Wall.”

“My wife, she has started carrying a spear,” says Sigorn. “She is learning the Thenn way, as I learn hers.”

A shaft of remembered sorrow pierces Jon’s breast for a moment. Ygritte. Not all wildling women are like her, but many, many of them are fighters.

“If Lady Sansa would take control the Dreadfort...,” murmurs Yannis.

Sansa will not. Jon understands why, and sometimes he thinks he is the only one. “I need her at Winterfell.”

“You need a wife,” says Sigorn, blunt as ever. “Your sister cannot run your household forever.”

Sansa has said so herself. But every strong woman in the North, every woman who can tolerate him and who he can tolerate in return, who he can lean on, he already holds their fealty; a marriage is not needed to bind their houses closer to the Starks.

And what woman would take a man to bed who wears open wounds upon his body, wounds that do not bleed but do not heal either?

“First,” he says, “I need an army. Know you any women that can bring an army as dowry?”

Yannis purses his lips, thinks. “Cersei Lannister?”

Jon is surprised into a burst of laughter, despite himself; every man in earshot is. It is in a storm of laughter that they ride up to the gates, and he notices the addition to three new pikes upon the bailey. His mood lightens further.

Arya doesn’t do anything by halves.

She has brought laughter back into his life, somehow.
Sansa comes down the front steps to greet them; she holds a horn of mead—the horn of welcome. Many of the customs of the First Men, customs fallen slowly into disuse when the North bent knee to the Targaryens—Sam and Sansa are working together to revive them, to re-create the identity of the North under its new king.

Jon accepts the horn, still mounted, swallows, and passes it on to Sigorn. As the horn makes its way amongst the riders, they dismount, one by one. The two lone grooms (that are all Winterfall has at the moment), they come to make a train of the horses and lead them away. Horseflesh is more valuable than its weight in gold these days; he would have preferred to unsaddle and curry his own steed, but it is apparently not done, for a King and his riders to do this for themselves.

“Arya?” he asks.

Sansa sighs. “She’s changing, for the banquet. She refused to wear a gown, even one of Mother’s good ones.”

“Are you surprised?”

“Her husband was no help,” says Sansa. “All he kept saying was ‘if she wants to’. If Arya says jump, he’ll be ten feet in the air before he thinks to ask ‘how high’.”

Jon considers this. He’s seen wildling “marriages” beyond the Wall, where both man and woman are fighters. Dresses are not common, at all. It makes sense to him—no man would want his wife to wear something that could tangle in her legs, impede her blade. It wouldn’t be safe. But he’s not going to say this to Sansa—antagonizing his sister is the last thing he wants to do.

Sansa sighs again. “I finally got her into one of my riding dresses.”

Jon nods, then turns to his riders and raises his voice. “Feast, tonight. Arya Stark has returned to Winterfell,” he says. “But I want all of you out at first light, riding the circuit from the mouth of the Weeping Water to the Long Lake. Where there are three wights…”

“There may be more,” mutters Yannis. “Fucking Karstarks.”

Sansa’s eyes are wide, trained on Jon. “Not rumor… she whispers.

Jon shakes his head, grim. Together, trailed by the riders, they ascend the steps to the Great Hall.

Jon entersthe brightly-lit space, and cannot help but marvel at its transformation. They had planned a feast, but for the next sevenday, when all the heads of houses still loyal to the Starks would be gathered here to discuss riding against the Umbers.

Arya coming home is a much better reason to celebrate. For the houses...we’ll figure something out.

Somehow, Sansa and her much-reduced bevy of servants have managed to vanquish the desperation of their straits for tonight. A hundred candles illuminate the Stark banners behind the throne; the direwolf gleams a silver-white. The banners of the other houses are vibrant, somehow making the missing banners (the flayed man, the sunburst) into a thing of pride, not weakness: the traitors are shamed, outnumbered, banished from the light of this hall forevermore. Long trestle tables gleam with fresh polish, arranged in a “U” shape around the throne.

Again, Jon feels the keen bite of sorrow. The last banquet, in this hall...King Robert was here, and
Jon was outside, most of the time, but the world was still a better place, with Eddard Stark in it. He looks over to his left, and meets Sansa’s gaze. Her eyes glimmer with unshed tears—she remembers that banquet as well, he thinks.

*She was going to be a princess in a story.*

They smile at each other, half part sad, half part grateful for the other’s existence.

The hall starts filling, behind them, and Arya bursts through the doors. She *is* wearing one of Sansa’s old riding dresses, in pale blue, with silver threaded embroidery, the divided skirts swirling around her legs.

“Jon!” she calls. “Was it really wights?”

He nods, then tilts his head to the hall. No use fueling the gossip, there will be enough rumors by morning as it is. Jaqen enters, hands clasped behind his back, a longsword at one hip, a curved scimitar on the other. *Two blades? Is he actually competent with both?* Arthur Dayne was a two-blade fighter. Belatedly, Jon notices that Arya’s husband is dressed in a clean linen shirt and trews, with no embroidery—a twin to Jon’s own attire, without the furs. Apparently Sansa doesn’t think the men need to dress up.

The House minstrel—and the title is both a kindness (the position pays a pittance every sixmoon) and a joke, for the boy is the houndskeeper’s dim-witted, youngest son, with a facility for the pan flute—the minstrel starts up a merry tune.

Jon offers his arm to Arya. She looks confused, then realizes what is going on. *She is the guest of honor,* tonight. Her eyes widen a bit before her expression settles into one of graciousness (did Sansa teach her that, too?) and she places her hand gently upon his arm.

He watches, out of the corner of his eye, as Sansa hesitates, then steps towards Jaqen, who holds out his arm. *He claims to be a commoner, but he is no stranger to courtly graces.* Jon thinks, and he grows uneasy. Fighters, he can understand (even if they betray him in the end), but men with courtly graces... *What guild is he a member of? An influential one, and he has significant rank in it, if his marriage to a Stark was not looked at askance. If he is telling the truth.* Jon also worries for Sansa; he knows she cannot touch a man (even Davos, even Samwell) save herself without feeling nauseous. Any extended physical contact, and she will have to excuse herself to vomit somewhere.

His helplessness threatens to overwhelm him for a moment, when she places her hand on Jaqen’s arm. But then her eyes widen. She looks up at Jon, and smiles reassuringly, and there is no trace of unease about her.

Arya has noticed the direction of his gaze. “Jon?” she asks. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says, relief making him grin, “but it seems Sansa has softened towards your husband.” *Sister’s husband...so family is safe, others are not?* Sansa calls it a woman’s weakness, but he’s seen similar reactions before, in fighting men who have come out on the other side of horrific traumas. He, himself, is a little unreasonable about naked daggers near his person.

He gives Arya a wide smile, only half feigned, and starts walking down the center of the room, towards the throne. Sansa and Jaqen follow a step behind.

The two guests of honor are seated to the right of the throne, Sansa to his left, and he is not surprised to see the space left for Sandor Clegane, to her left. Sandor Clegane, Tyrion Lannister, Samwell Tarly, Davos Seaworth, Tormund Giantsbane, Jon Snow...and now perhaps Jaqen
H’ghar...Sansa’s list of trustworthy men is a short one, shorter than his own, and Jon can abide by it.

The fare is richer than he expects. The boar is stringy, but there is more than enough sauce to ladle over it, and there are potatoes, roasted in their skin, and greens, and fish. The hall has filled by the time the first course is served (they do not hold to the formalities of the South; people in the hall of a king of the First Men come and eat when they please...most of them please early, and often). Barrels of last year’s spring ale have been breached as well.

The toasting begins.

Halfway through an already-inebriated Hornwood bannerman’s speech, Jon leans over to Sansa. “How are we affording this?” he murmurs. Food is scarce, and getting scarcer--everything has to be brought up from the South, or by ship into White Harbor--prices have escalated, and House Stark has no reserve of coin left, not even enough to hire a team of stonemasons to repair the damage the Boltons did to Winterfell.

“White silk brocade,” she says. “From my wedding gown, and gold thread and seed pearls from Fat Walda’s.” A cold smile twists at her mouth. “Every time someone slices into the boar, it feels like victory.”

Jon exhales. “Thank you,” he says. “The riders will go on their circuits well-fed.” What else can he say?

He leans over to Arya and Jaqen, seeking a happier tale. “Tell me of your wedding feast, in Braavos. A lot of fish, I assume?”

Arya chuckles. “Not a feast, for me. A wedding fast.” She turns to her husband. “And one must meditate for a very long time beforehand, so one is certain one wants what one is getting into.”

Jon raises an eyebrow. “There would be far fewer weddings,” he says wryly, “if that custom was introduced here. Fasting and meditations for the groom as well?” he asks Jaqen.

Jaqen hesitates, looks at Arya.

“Oh oh,” thinks Jon. Alehouse or whorehouse or both... it seems some pre-wedding customs are followed in Braavos as much as in Westeros.


He told her? More likely that Arya found out, somehow. Jon doesn’t know whether to feel sympathy for his brother-by-marriage, or annoyance, that he was with another woman while Arya was fasting...It seems they didn’t fall in love until after they were wed. Like Father and Catelyn.

Not that love after marriage guarantees fidelity, even for the greatest of men. His own birth is testament to that.

Arya laughs, pats her husband on the head. “Poor Jaqen,” she says.

“Is this a story I want to understand?” Jon asks.

“A man would be grateful if you didn’t,” Jaqen murmurs. “Suffice to say...had a man been...fully aware, of the timing of things, your sister would not have been disrespected so.”

should meet?”

Jon looks down at his plate. “Brothers of the Night’s Watch are celibate,” he says. Let her assume he does not yet know a woman’s touch...he has enough open wounds as it is without opening another.

Arya taps her fork on the table. “Do you have the liking of other men?”

“Arya!” he gasps at her, at the same time as Jaqen murmurs “Arya” in a tone of admonishment.

“What?” she exclaims, looking back and forth between her husband and brother. “It is common, in fraternal orders, especially ones that don’t allow women!”

“It is not done, talking about such things, openly, when a Westerosi king is involved,” murmurs Jaqen.

“I don’t like other men!” says Jon in a strangled whisper.

Arya pats him on the arm. “I was pretty sure, but it had to be asked.”

No, it didn’t, Arya!

“Are you betrothed?” she asks.

He looks towards Sansa, hoping for rescue, but Sansa is deep in conversation with the Hound What are they talking about? All the people they hate in King’s Landing? It would be a more comfortable conversation than this one.

“Are you?” asks Arya again.

He sighs. The weight of the crown--he doesn’t have a real one, they don’t have the money to commission a smith for a crown, not when swords are needed more--a metaphorical crown, that comes with real burdens, it presses upon him again. “No,” he says.

“Good,” Arya responds.

He looks up at her. “Why, have you a Braavosi woman that will fast for me?” He tries to recapture his lighter mood, from before.

But Arya is looking deathly serious. “A Targaryen,” she says.

Jon blinks. “The dragon queen?” Rumors of dragons, of vast armies on the march, they are distantly heard, like thunder over the horizon. He has not paid attention to these things, focused as he is upon an army of undead and Others marching down upon them, a winter that does not end, traitors and Lannisters...

Arya looks at Jaqen, who shakes his head, opens his hand as if to say “as you will”. Arya looks down at her dress, frustrated, as if she would have been able to magic up something useful if she’d been wearing men’s clothing. She looks up at Jon, at Sansa. “Is now a good time to talk?”

Sansa lifts her head from her conversation with Sandor. “Talk about what?” she asks.

“Important things. Stark things.”

“Not here,” says Sansa.
“Of course not,” replies Arya. “Let’s leave.”

“You’re the guest of honor!”

The bickering will escalate. Jon rubs at his brow, then speaks. “No. Not tonight. Tomorrow, we lay Father, your mother, to rest. Then we can talk.”

“Why are you avoiding this?” asks Arya.

He closes his eyes. “Because every time I talk of something of import to anyone, it creates ten new problems that have to be solved.”

“It has been a very long day,” says Jaqen. Gratefully, Jon opens his eyes to see Arya’s husband considering him. “It is important, but it can wait another day.”

Arya subsides. “Sorry,” she mutters.

No, he doesn’t jump at her command. It may be the other way around, with these two.

“Arya, I want to hear,” says Jon gently. “I know it is important.” I just need...time.

She nods. “I promise I’ll solve problems for you,” she says.

He smiles. “You already have,” he says.

The toasting is finally winding down, and Sam rushes into the hall, holding a sheaf of papers. He approaches the high table, plops down into the chair at Jaqen’s right with a groan.

“Figured out the funeral,” he says.

Jon raises his tankard towards Sam, who follows suit, then gulps down half the contents. He’s become a heavier drinker than he was, in his time at the Citadel.

“Where is Gilly?” Jon asks. “I thought she’d be here.”

“Sam has a sore throat,” says Samwell. “She wants to stay with him, in case the fever rises.”

“I’ll have a plate sent down,” says Sansa, and returns to her conversation with Sandor.

Arya looks back and forth between the Maester and Jon. “Who is Gilly?” she asks.

“Um.” Sam pulls at his collar. “Um.”

Jon grins. “Samwell’s lady,” he says.

Arya’s mouth forms an “o”. “And Sam is your son,” she says to the Maester.

“Um.”

Jaqen makes an abortive hand motion towards Arya. Tutoring her on acceptable social conversation again. He can imagine the Lorathi’s voice in his head: “it is not done, asking about a woman and child, openly, when a Maester is involved.”

The truth, of course, is far stranger. “Not his,” says Jon in an undertone. Sam looks up, startled. “Arya is family,” says Jon. “So’s Jaqen, now.”

Arya leans back, Jaqen rests an elbow on the table, sips from his tankard...interesting, that. Their
posture speaks of nonchalance, exactly the opposite of what most people do when secrets are
spoken of in public view (though not public hearing--the hall is far too loud, especially when half
the contingent is inebriated wildlings. Soon, someone’s going to start fucking in a corner
somewhere. Not very different, “savage” wildlings, from King Robert’s courtly retinue. Ironic,
that).

Samwell takes a deep breath. “The babe was Craster's...a nasty man, held Craster's keep north of
the Wall. It’s Gilly’s story to tell, but Craster sacrificed his sons to the Others...just... gave them.
Kept the daughters.” He looks up. “Had to do something, didn’t I?”

Arya is absorbing this, impassive. Her husband, on the other hand…

“Fascinating, truly,” says Jaqen, and shakes his head. Then he leans over and pats Samwell on the
shoulder. “Well done, Maester. Very well-played.” Then he raises his tankard, and confused, Jon
and Sam and Arya follow suit. “To equality by infiltration,” he says.

Arya giggles.

Samwell is giving Arya’s husband a very strange look.

Jon shrugs, drinks.

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**ARYA**

The feast has gotten rowdier and rowdier as time passes, and the boar has finally been reduced to
bone and innards.

“Better?” asks Jaqen, in Braavosi. Not that anyone will hear them, the hall is far too loud. Jon and
Sansa are arguing about something--resettlement of wildlings, it sounds like, and Sandor is
providing his customary disheartening commentary. On their other side, Samwell Tarly is deep in
his third tankard of ale, and utterly focused on the food.

She leans into his shoulder. “So much better. You like Jon! He likes you!” That makes her very
happy. “Sansa’s warming to us, and all it took was me wearing a stupid dress.” She looks down at
his hip. He uses a longsword and a short when he uses two, the scimitar looks off, hanging from
his belt. “Thank you for bringing my blade for me,” she says. “I’d have felt...naked without it.” No
throwing knives, no darts--she has given Sansa her word, after all.

Jaqen grins. “A lovely girl looks very lovely in the dress.”

She glares at him.

“Lovelier, when she stands in nothing but her skin, with daggers strapped to her thighs,” he says
quietly.

Better.

“Looks like Sandor’s officially a Stark retainer now,” Jaqen observes.

Arya saws at the slice of boar on her plate. “Good for him,” she says. “He’s a capable man, he just
needs to be used right.”

Jaqen puts down his knife. “Used?” he murmurs. “Like a piece of silverware? And what happens when he loses his edge, as all things must?”

The hall, the feast, the banners...it makes her forgetful. She gives Jaqen a sidelong glance, contrite. “Sorry,” she mutters. “It’s the dress.” Yes, please, blame the dress. Makes me look like a damn noblewoman, must make me think like one too.

He shakes his head--he’s not buying it. “Wicked child,” he murmurs, “what am I going to do with you?”

“Teach me the error of my ways?” she asks sweetly.

He looks serious. “And how is a man to do that?”

“Put some more of your Lorathi sensibilities into me,” she says.

The facade of seriousness gives way. “You mean, fuck some egalitarianism into your noble-born cunt?” he asks dryly.

She bites her lip; her eyes are wide, greedy. “Yes, please,” she breathes.

One side of his lips draw up into a cruel smile; he drinks from his tankard without taking his eyes off her. “And how is that done here, in the North?” he asks. “Should a man hoist his bride over his shoulder and carry her out, like that red-bearded man did with the serving wench but a moment ago?”

“We’re the guests of honor,” she murmurs. “It would be rude to leave so early.” Yes, what will you do, Jaqen, hmm?

He leans forward, and there is quite a lot of intent in his posture. “Perhaps I will bare your breasts right here.” His eyes are dark--not God-dark, lust-dark.

Maester Samwell leans over. “Are you going to eat that?” he asks, pointing at her almost untouched slice of boar. Arya glares at him for the interruption.

“Please, help yourself,” says Jaqen and passes her plate over to the Maester. Then he turns back to Arya. “Where were we?”

She glares at him, too--he’s back in control of himself now, no inappropriateness will be forthcoming. Vengeful, she turns her expression wide-eyed and trains it on Maester Samwell. “You studied at the Citadel?” she asks him.

Samwell waves his fork at her. “Can’t be a Maester without going to the Citadel, little lady.”

“What was it like?” she asks.

“Just...wonderful,” he says, an enraptured expression on his face. “The library …”

Jaqen grimaces.

“I’ve heard Oldtown is very big,” she says. “It must have been hard, making friends.”

“I had friends!” says Samwell. “There was this man, we used to be friends, until…she knows the story--until Pate blackmailed Samwell. “...actually,” and Samwell looks at her, quite serious. “He
was pretty hung up on you, as it happens…”

“Was he now?” asks Arya. “Tell me more about him.”

“Scary smart. But it took him seven years to earn his links—he thought about girls far too much, I think.”

Jaqen is looking at her reproachfully. She’s going to pay for this anyhow, might as well milk it for all it’s worth.

“Smart, you say?” she asks. “Maybe I made the wrong choice with Jaqen here.”

Samwell gets quiet. “I thought he was a good man,” he says sadly, then brightens. “But this girl, Rosey—she left him for a pig merchant.”

“He was not very good in bed then?” Arya asks.

Samwell thinks about it. “Too much in his head, I think, too embroiled in plots. Hung up on you, as I said. Not you, of course…he’d never met you. Just the idea of Arya Stark.” Samwell shakes his head. “Strange man, Pate. Murdered, I heard, just a couple of months ago.”

Samwell has turned morose, it appears—he refills his tankard, says nothing more. Jaqen, too, looks…sad.

My fault, the blackmail, probably, I kept asking Him for news of Jon, of the North. It falls to her, then, to fix it. But first she has to distract Jaqen with something, anything.

“So,” she murmurs to him. “How many days…weeks…must you be chastised for, before the pig merchant entered the picture?” she asks.

Jaqen smiles at her—he sees what she tries to do. “The pig merchant’s wife-to-be was encouraged to leave a scholar’s bed the night you entered the darkness.” His voice is quiet. “I was not aware. But your god is a monogamous one—he was quite insistent on getting rid of her immediately.”

She runs a hand over his thigh, under the table. “Not very Lorathi of you,” she says.

He raises an eyebrow. Her hand has found an…interesting…location to rest.

“You know,” she says. “Our Lorathi brothers have a reputation…being ‘no one’ is very liberating, apparently.”

“A man does not know,” he says, and looks at her with narrowed eyes. “He should spend more time at the House, it seems—this sounds like gossip to him.”

The serving wench has, indeed, disappeared along with the ale, and Arya’s tankard is empty. She reaches for Jaqen’s, brings to to her mouth. Hidden from view by the tankard itself, her tongue flicks out, licks at the rim. He’s watching her, and his eyes are darkening again.

“Standards have fallen, since your times,” she says, putting the tankard down on the table. She notices he picks it up, puts his mouth where her tongue had been; he doesn’t drink, either. She shakes her head mournfully. “The order takes in all kinds of riff-raff these days, ones who gossip and make mischief. Though…” she thinks. “The older brothers—especially the Braavosi—they gamble, along with the gossiping. I’ve lost four matched daggers and a silk cummerbund this year.”
“And have you ever won anything?”

She grins. “I didn’t get a chance...but there’s a huge pot on right now, about me.”

He leans towards her, now actually engrossed. Just by chance, of course, the motion draws her hand further into his lap. “And what about a lovely girl are our brothers betting on?”

“Who is going to take my virginity.”

“I did not expect something quite so crass from Faceless Men,” he says, and she realizes he’s not quite sure if this is fact, or facetious seduction. Her hand, which is lightly exploring the extent of the bulge under it, that doesn’t help his concentration any, she supposes.

“I started the pot myself,” she replies. Reluctantly, she stills her motion, pulls her hand back into her own lap. It’s out now, better get it over with.

“Arya, love…” he says.

“I don’t play games I don’t already know I’m going to win,” she says. “I lost twice, good things, so they’d feel sorry for me and teach me how to game the system.”

“And betting on your deflowering was really the best way to take advantage of this knowledge?”

“I’d have only one chance, before the rest figured it out.” She shrugs. “I knew who I was married to.” She smirks at him. “I put a small...large... flutter on the side on having to use a gold coin, just in case you proved recalcitrant for some reason...or if Him of the Many Faces was just a recurring dream, a lingering hallucination from the poison I drank when I died.”

“The dream of Arya Stark...to know, and yet not know that she was real ...” he agrees, rueful. He puts his arm around her shoulder, draws her close to him, rests his forehead on hers.

Greatly daring she reaches forward again, finds him as hard as he had been before she told him. Oh, good. Not angry.

“Never with you,” he murmurs. “So, my cold-blooded, avaricious love, how much money are you going to make off of your bedding?”

“Nothing,” she says. “Placed the bet in the God’s name. Brothers do that, when they’re betting just to prove a point, winnings go straight to the House’s coffers. Pot’s up in the tens of thousands now, I think, and nobody else would have dared bet on ‘Jaqen H’ghar’, even if they suspected...” She grins. “It is not done, evoking your name in association with such crass things...”

“It is just a game to you,” he murmurs, thoughtful. “Arya Stark doesn’t give a shit about gold either, does she?”

“She’s spent the last coin she ever will, on her own behalf,” she says. Honesty prompts her to add, “I do care about the Guild’s finances, though. Where do our Braavosi brothers get the money they’re bidding with, hmm? And our coffers run dry...”

He leans back, considers her very, very carefully. “I’ve had about as much of this banquet as I can take,” he says. “I will excuse us, and take you to bed--”

“To teach me how to be more egalitarian?” she asks.

“No,” he says. “To worship you.”
They’ve been assigned a small, somewhat bare chamber for the night, off the main courtyard. It has a small hearth, and someone’s lit it already. The bed is small, and there are only two pillows, but the fabrics are rich, and there is actual eiderdown in the mattress. The sleeping arrangements are altogether more luxurious than they have had in the entirety of the time since they started sleeping together.

He draws the curtains, locks the door behind them. She is standing beside the bed, still dressed in the sweeping blue silk dress. It does change her, the dress, he thinks. She stands with a woman’s grace, not a fighter’s. Her hair is growing out again—it becomes ragged, short, every time she returns to her own face after wearing a brother’s. Her body, too, returns to that of a girl of five-and-ten, to the form she had when she died beside a pool...the last faceless face she wore was his, beside a stream. The month since then has changed much in her, though he cannot tell what changes belong to the body and what to the mind...a month is not enough, after all, to change the body quite so much...

“One day,” he says, “we will take a very, very long sabbatical, and wear no faces but our own, you and I, and we will see what it is like to grow old beside each other.”

She looks at him over her shoulder, eyes dark, unreadable. “What is the joy in growing old, beloved?”

He smiles. “I would see all the seasons of you.”

She turns away. The dress...the blue of it makes her look remote, aloof. Untouchable.

He strides forward, pulls a dagger from its sheath strapped to his chest under his shirt, and swiftly slices the sleeves of the dress, the bodice, slices it from her with quick, economical motions.

The fine, soft hairs on her skin rise as the sharp edge of the blade passes over them, touching, caressing; she shifts, giving him access to the front panels of the bodice, under her ribcage, writhes when the blade passes over her nipples--she doesn’t need to hold still to avoid injury, not when it is his hand that holds the blade.

“A girl has behaved very badly,” she murmurs.

He crouches, draws the last of the fabric, now cut to ribbons, away from her legs.

She wears nothing underneath, not even a shift.

His tongue traces a line up the outside of her leg, over her hip, up the side of her ribs. She moves forward, climbs onto the bed, kneels, still facing away from him.

“And what has a girl done?” he asks.

The look she casts him is dark. “Whatever it is she needs to be punished for.” She bends forward, onto all fours, arches her back.

Is she asking...
Thoughts of slow, *worshipful* lovemaking vanish from the fore of his mind.

His heartbeat is fast, too fast, as he kneels on the floor beside the bed, and his tongue traces the glistening folds of her sex, tasting her arousal.

She moans, softly.

His tongue sweeps higher; she gasps.

He rises, quickly strips himself of his clothes, his eyes trained on her form. She turns her head, watches him undress.

“Then a girl will pay for taking a man to the edge of his control at the banquet.” The threat in his voice is not feigned. *Had Samwell not interrupted...*

She smiles, challenging, mocking.

He looks around for their packs... *his* patience is being tested. “Where...” he spots her pack, finds the box of potions and unguents, finds the bandolier. He tosses both at her, for he has no idea where she keeps what.

“Prepare yourself,” he says roughly.

Her eyes widen, startled, uncertain. Aroused.

He watches as she reaches for a small jar in the box, opens it, and her fingers scoop up an off-white cream. She reaches between her legs, still looking at him.

He watches, impassive. His manhood is almost unbearably hard, jutting out from his body towards her, but he does not move.

She dabs the cream on the lips of her slit, circles her puckered opening. Stops, hesitates.

“Continue,” he says.

She takes up another daub of cream, coats her fingers with it generously this time, reaches behind herself again. She puts the tip of one finger inside her sopping cunt.

The room is far too hot. He can feel the heat building at the root of his cock, streaming out with every breath he exhales.

She is panting with the heat, and her finger pulls out of her cunny and then she pushes it, slick with oil and her own juices, into her anus. She pumps her fingers into herself, shallow, once, twice, then looks at him again questioningly.

“You’re not very good at this,” he says. “Do I have to do everything for you?”

She shakes her head, pushes deeper, stretches herself wider for him.

“Enough,” he says. He steps up to her, but she rises quickly, moves forward on the bed, out of his reach.

His jaw clenches.

He moves.
He is kneeling on the bed behind her, his left hand clamped around a tit, and he is holding her painfully against his chest. The dagger, still in his right hand, presses lightly against her throat.

“Not wise,” he whispers.

She rubs herself against his hardness, wanton.

He shifts, and presses forward, impaling her inch by inch on his cock. She sinks against him with a groan, and he pulls out, and pushes back in.

The knife has dropped away from her throat, she’s cooperating now.

“More,” she moans.

He doesn’t change his pace, slow, inexorable.

“Please,” she begs.

He teeters on the edge of giving in. She is his undoing; her mouth is her most dangerous weapon. “My bride will be silent,” he warns, “if she wants anything at all.”

Of course she disobedys. “Jaqen.”

He stops moving, his left arm holds her harder against himself, not letting her move either. His every sense is filled with her, he drinks in the feel of her around his cock, her tightness, gripping him.

“Forgive...,” she gasps. “Please, love, I won’t speak again.”

She throbs with need; the madness of her pleading is far too potent a lure for him. He circles one nipple, then another with the tip of the dagger. “I will allow you to beg.”

“Please, please, Jaqen, I need...”

He is pounding into her, somewhere in there his left hand has made its way to her cunt, he is fingering her as she pleads, incoherent, for more, her knees spread wide apart, open to him.

More... her cunt is needy, it needs to be filled, but he’s already filling her ass and he will not stop until he is satisfied...the dagger in his right hand, he reverses it in his grip, holds the blade between his fingers.

Slowly, he inserts the hilt into her.

He fucks her with it.

Her head is thrown back against his chest. She is moving back and forth, moving herself onto the knife-hilt, onto him. He drives into her, harder and harder. Drives her higher.

She is thrashing against him.

The pleasure of it...he is a creature of rage and lust and fire. The need.

Heat.

Time passes.
“Jaqen,” she moans.

She has crested, somewhere in between, his seed leaks around the tight seal of her entrance, and still he moves in her, and she moves on him.

“Arya,” he murmurs. The sound of his own voice, the sound of her name, it begins to draw him down from the fugue state his lust has driven him to.

“Jaqen,” she whispers.

There is no aggression left in him, she has taken all of it, drained him of everything; tenderness seeps into the hollows left behind. Slowly, bit by bit, they still against each other.

Sanity returns.

Their sweat, mingled, cools upon their bodies, and they look down. He is still gripping the blade of the knife, the hilt is still buried in her womanhood. Slowly, with a wet sucking sound, he draws it out of her, covered in her juices.

He stares at his dagger, disbelieving. “Did...did I just do that?”

“Yes, you did,” she says, and her tone is...smug. She senses something, twists around. “Jaqen, are you blushing?”

He buries his face in her neck.

He can feel her stifling her laughter.

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**ARYA**

She is back in Harrenhal, and she knows she is dreaming.

“Stay, Jaqen,” she says.

“Here?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “I want to go home.”

He cocks his head to a side. “And where is home, lovely girl?”

“Winterfell,” she whispers. “Take me to Winterfell.”

The gaze he turns on her is cold. He has never looked at her like that before, as if he doesn’t love her, as if he doesn’t care. “Very well,” he says. “To Winterfell. And then my debt will be discharged.”

*There is no debt between us, Jaqen, if anything I owe you! But he is already striding ahead, and she must run to follow. Her legs are too short! She is a child again, a child of eleven.*

He has stolen them a horse, and she rides in front of him.

There is something they should be doing, when they ride like this, she thinks, but she has forgotten what it is.
The whole world is silent, till they tether their horse on a small wooded dell overlooking the Twins. A small underground feeder-stream of the Green Fork bubbles out of the ground for a few lengths beside their stopping point.

“Where is home, lovely girl?” he asks again.

She hesitates. His mouth twists in a cruel smile. “Your brother, he is camped below. I will take you to him, and then my debt will be discharged.”

There is a wedding; she is to be married to a Frey.

The hall is too hot. Her mother dies, her brother dies, and there is so much blood on the floor...no, not blood.

Fire.

Molten stone, and a thousand spherical masses--dragon eggs--they rock in the heat of it. A figure towers over her, a monster made of a the fused flesh of a hundred people, and the thing’s eyes are open.

They are watching her.

Watching her all the time as she kneels, and women come and men come, and they cut strips into her.

She finds herself speaking. “Jaqen,” she says. “Jaqen, Jaqen.” And that is all she can say, but they draw his name from her lips like a thread being drawn from a spindle, and weave it into some strange, chaotic tapestry, strung upon a loom made of dragonbone.

“What is your name?” they keep asking her.

They peel apart the layers of her mind, layer upon layer. There is so much despair in her, she is drowning in it and all the world drowns with her, there is nothing she can count on; the world is a dream and there is nothing certain, except despair.

And the darkness, beckoning her, it promises nothing but she remembers it, and the darkness had been a peaceful thing, a thing beyond despair.

“What is your name?”

“I have no name,” she snarls, and the sound of her own voice propels her to wakefulness.

Her throat is hoarse, and someone is pounding on the door.

Jaqen thrashes beside her, in the grip of a nightmare of his own.

Fear chills the breath in her lungs.

The pounding intensifies, and she quickly draws the sheet around her, unlocks the door. Maester Samwell is standing there.

“Is everything alright?” he demands, though he averts his eyes from her dishevelled state. “I heard screaming.”

Arya shudders--no feigning here. “A nightmare. I’m sorry…” she looks over her shoulder. Jaqen is soaked with sweat, his eyes still move rapidly under his closed lids. She needs to draw him out of
“Sorry, Maester, we’ll just be going back to bed,” she says, then gives him her brightest smile. “Thank you, for checking on us. See you tomorrow! Have a good night!” She closes the door without waiting for a response, and the smile slips from her. She rushes over to Jaqen’s side.

“Beloved,” she murmurs. “Beloved, wake up.” Unwise, to touch him, if he has lost control of his sleeping, he may not have control when he wakes, and there are three knives within easy reach of his side of the bed. “Jaqen.”

He shifts, and slowly he stills. His eyes open. He is gasping for air now.

“Our brother,” he says, when he can speak again. “He has emerged from shadow; he passes through the Jade Gates.”

Him of the Many Faces shared a nightmare, with their brother, and she was dragged along with Him. “They...Jaqen, we need to help him!” How? I don’t know how. “He won’t last, not like this.” His mind...it’s been peeled apart. Unconscious, the back of her hand rises to her mouth in dismay.

“He is no one.” Jaqen is confident of it. “He can control his waking mind, if not his dreaming.”

She swallows her relief. “Can you reach him?” He must not be left alone! This she knows, in her bones--Jaqen, Jaqen is the darkness, he doesn’t see the allure of it, the desperate longing to just...let go.

“Sleep is a prelude to death,” he says. “Dreams border on my domain. But the distance... he reached out, and it was whatever residual sorcery of Asshai that still clung to him--I can taste it still, ash and rot--it powered the bridge.” Jaqen turns, and a bitter smile tugs at his face. “You bound me to this body.” He raises a hand to forestall her horrified response. “It was, is necessary. But I am not sure I can reach that far anymore.”

“The wind,” she says. She knows, and if she knows now then he has known the moment they crossed the gate--she can stand on the battlements of Winterfell, in her place, and she can summon winter to her. “The wind will carry you as far as you need to go.”

His smile becomes tinged with sadness. “I was afraid you would say that--let me try, without, first.”

She nods.

Eventually, they sleep again--dawn is still a ways away. There are no more nightmares for her, but she is still uneasy in her slumber. She sees, half-waking, threads of shadow and ash reaching out, weaving a tapestry into the sky, and the tapestry is woven with Jaqen’s name, and Jon’s and hers, and the names of a thousand, thousand others. Each name is a thread that, bit by bit, defines the monstrous image of R’hllor, splayed against the night sky.

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**JON**

He is awake, and yet there are shadows, all around him, and the shadows are alive, they press down upon him and he cannot move.

His wounds are seeping into his bedclothes, and the taste of ash chokes his mouth, fills his nostrils;
he cannot breathe.

His eyes are open, he can see the outline of the window, vague threatening shapes of shadow and light falling through the curtains, the pale, reflected snowlight giving shape to his formless fears.

A man’s shape, holding a knife, upraised. The man comes closer, and Jon struggles, tries to will his limbs to move, but he cannot. He is cold, and he aches, and he wants to gasp for breath but he cannot breathe.

The man... Jaqen H’ghar. Arya’s husband.

Why is Arya’s husband…

The man comes closer still, and his eyes burn red, and gold, like fire, and he plunges the knife into Jon, again and again and again, and Jon cannot move.

He shudders awake with a gasp.

A nightmare, nothing more.

But he has had no dreams since he was...resurrected. His sleep has been as quiet as death, the only peace he can get in a day.

Is it at an end, the peace?

He wipes sweat from his brow, and he remembers Jaqen H’ghar’s face, and his skin crawls.

Is he not to be trusted? Is his sleeping mind trying to tell him something? Will he betray me? Will Arya betray me?

No, never her.

Jon throws aside his covers, seeks the cooler air of the balcony running around the inside of the Lord’s Courtyard. The sweat chills upon his skin, but it is warmer than the cold that invaded his dreams. He finds Samwell out on the balcony as well, pacing up and down, muttering to himself.

“Can’t sleep?” asks Jon.

“Have to memorize this speech,” says Sam. “I’ve never done a funeral before.”

Jon sighs. “Just read it from the parchment, Sam, I don’t think anyone will care.” I don’t. What use are speeches to the dead? What solace can words give to the living? It is a custom, a ritual, nothing more.

“What’s wrong, your Grace?” asks Sam.

“You too?” Jon mutters.

“Only when you go off in your head like that,” says Sam. “Jolts you right out, all the ‘your Grace’s and ‘your Majesty’s’.”

Sam is his friend. Jon should smile. He tries. “What make you of this Jaqen H’ghar?” asks Jon.
“I should trust him,” says Jon. “I started trusting him, yesterday…” Sansa can touch him. But all that means is that she doesn’t think he’s a threat, to her.

Samwell thinks. “They got a message today, from Braavos…enciphered. Addressed to ‘Arya Stark’ anyways, not him. I went to give it, but Lady Arya was having a nightmare, poor thing, wasn’t really all there, thought I’d give it to them tomorrow. But I can send a raven back to where this one came from, if you like. Lady Sansa said something about a guild…what guild is he a part of?”

Jon shakes his head. “We...have not yet talked fully. The wights…” Arya keeps trying to tell me about...him, I suppose, and he keeps supporting my delay...if it is as important as she says it is, shouldn’t he be pushing as well?

Jon looks at Tarly. “Can you decipher the message?”

Samwell nods. “It may take some time, but...are you sure you want to read her letters?”

“I don’t want to,” he whispers, and he knows he should feel wretched, but all he can feel is weariness. “It is necessary...she will forgive me, later, I will beg her forgiveness on bended knee, if needed. But I need to know.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s nothing too bad, whatever it is that made you twitchy about him. I’m sure it’ll be cleared up soon.”

Jon finally smiles. “Your optimism, Tarly. Don’t lose it--keeps the rest of us sane.”

Inside, Jon shudders; the taste of blood in his mouth, the vivid glee on Jaqen H’ghar’s face as he stabbed Jon, again and again...paranoia creeps up on him, taps him on the shoulder.

What do we know about this man, really, except that he is Arya’s husband?

Chapter End Notes

So, inspired by the gul's stupendous A/J fic, and Liza_Radley's sensual AU J/A, and Ahma’s feedback about variety, I tried to be a bit more...detailed with the smut. It went in a direction I had not expected (seriously, I thought Jaqen would talk the talk, but get all mushy...apparently not).

What did you think?

Also of the rest of it, of course - your feedback and thoughts really shape the subtleties of this thing. Thank you for reading, for commenting :)
A Wake

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NO ONE

At the mouth of the Jade Gates there is a labyrinth-like scattering of small islands. Bays, sheltered from the sudden, violent storms that overtake the sea in this season. The Pirate King rules here--the House has received many offers, for the head of the king-beyond-law, but none of have been accepted because, of course, there is no such man.

The Pirate King is a fiction. The pirates are not.

He doesn’t quite remember the entirety of his journey out of shadow--there was a boat, and then a small ship. Slavers. A lot of blood.

He’s lost his knives, somewhere along the way, but he’s managed to make it to Merrytown, dressed in a tattered shirt and half-pants taken from some sailor...some slave, perhaps.

What structures there are in this place are built of wood, hovel-like, and the smell of salt and rotten fish is everywhere. He walks along the harbor, looking at ships. He avoids the ones that have that particular, peculiar stench that comes from slave-ships--human excrement and misery, it taints the water around slave-ships with a black bile; those trails make slave-ships easy to track.

The problem: no ship from these ports will ever go to Braavos. She cannot sell herself into slavery again, on a ship bound for Slaver’s Bay, because it seems the Dragon Queen has destroyed that particular trade west of Qarth. It’s...blasphemous, for one who has seen Valyria, to wish that she’d waited a month or so. But the reality of the matter is that any slave ship in Merrytown will be heading east, not west (with cargo--without, they may risk raids west).

He is attracting too much attention, emaciated and bloodless though he is, not a threat at first glance. He wears neither slave-collar nor ship’s tags--your captain’s tags are life, here in Merrytown, and any freeman without one is either a whore or a target. Or a customer. He has no gold for the latter.

Not yet.

He has no knives yet, either, and his muscles give out too often to rely on hand-to-hand fighting.

With a mental shrug, the one who is no one ducks behind a ramshackle collection of driftwood the locals call a rum-joint, and wears another face he is comfortable with. He raises his shirt, looks down at himself. Arya Stark’s ribs stick out of her skin--the changing of faces changes appearance, but one who is hungry will not suddenly be full, wounds will not suddenly heal. The self-made wound on his wrist, it is healing nicely--Jaqen saw it, infection is unlikely. Another scar, though, that will carry through any shape he wears. Another identifier.

So.

All he gets with Arya Stark’s face is a battered female body of ten-and-five, ragged, short black hair, dark shadows under the eyes, a look of one on the edge of starvation. Not a whore that will earn anything worth earning in a Free City.
The age, the Westerosi look (not rare, but not common either)...She will do just fine, here.

She finds a drunken sailor, in the rum-joint, but she’s run out before she can make a transaction--whores have to pay to ply their trade, it seems. But, as expected, the sailor follows after her, corners her against a rotten plywood screen that separates one “alley” from the next. She makes the appropriate noises, he lowers his stained britches, and her hand reaches out, grabs, twists. He doubles over, and she can reach around his neck now--it looks like she is embracing him, drawing his head down to her breast.

She snaps his neck.

Two silvers and a nicely serrated knife.

Excellent.

She dares not sleep, dares not dream, the tatters the sorcerers have left of her self... too many holes in dreams, too many holes to fall through. She had, at first, after using the dead sailor’s silver for the first hot meal she had had in...months, it seems (the sorcerers in Asshai fed her bread, cold slivers of fish, when they remembered to feed her at all).

But sleep had exacted a price...A terrific R’hllor inspired nightmare, one that seemed to stretch and spiral out of her, dragging in everything around it like a maelstrom...her Faceless Brothers had been there in the dream, and then further out, Jaqen, with a direwolf growling at his side, and the one who is no one couldn’t reach them. Then R’hllor cast a net, and the net was a bridge, and it was carved out of dragonbone...

There is a ship that will leave for Volantis in three days, carrying rare spices and wood from the jungles of Leng. Ostensibly.

In actuality they carry laudanum and varmium.

It is unpredictable, when she will find another ship that goes west, and the crew of this particular vessel is far too paranoid and far too well-versed in the hidden nooks and crannies of their ship to allow her onboard as a stowaway--she can kill quite a lot of them, but not all, and even if she does there needs to be some sort of crew to sail the vessel.

The payment for passage (the coin of the House of Black and White, she does not have it anymore) in the hold along with the rats, is ten gold sovereigns.

Ten gold sovereigns means a lot of dead sailors, and multiple deaths attract attention, even in Merrytown; already, one too many people have reported sighting a dark-haired girl out on the streets. She must move further away from the water, towards the more structurally sound buildings, she must pay to enter taverns and try to find marks with more gold than good sense, marks that will follow her into secluded rooms and alleyways, to be divested of their lives along with their purses.

It’s not that the one who is no one minds fucking, not at all, especially when it is in service to Him
of the Many Faces--when a kill rears at the end of it. She doesn’t mind fucking for survival either, but if it’s not for a contract then even one who is no one is allowed to have standards; everything here stinks of fish and slaves and seaweed.

She pays the last of her silver, sidles up to a morose Westeri nursing a watered-down tankard of ale.

“You look like you could do with a taste of home,” she says to him.

The man waves his hand. “Not interested.” He is older, with thinning yellow hair, but a fighter’s build. His left arm...it is covered, in much the same way that her own is. Momentarily, she wonders what wound he carries.

“You didn’t even look,” says the one who wears Arya Stark’s face, her tone modulated to get a reaction.

He looks up, irritated, and sees her face. The irritation drains out of him, leaving behind a vague discomfort. And the glimmerings of lust. He likes them just like this--just past their flowering, and vulnerable. And there is guilt, there too. Guilt, and lust...and a sudden flaring of protectiveness.

The one who is no one almost smirks. The motivations of all men have a pattern to them, and this man’s fits one of the classics--one who has transgressed, who sees an object he desires and believes all his transgressions will be forgiven, if only he can earn that object for himself...but that is a fallacy, of course, because his sins arose out of the nature of his desires in the first place.

Now let’s hope he’s got some gold on him.

“You don’t need to pay,” she says, quietly, in Westerosi. “I would just...will you speak with me, for a while, before I have to go work again?”

He blinks, gestures to the seat in front of him.

“What is a young girl from Westeros--from the North, if I don’t misread your accent--what are you doing here?”

A little bit of Arya Stark’s facade of courage... “My father was killed...my mother...I escaped...then I was taken by slavers.”

Guilt blooms anew on his face.

She shrugs. “The boat sank, before they got to Asshai, and I don’t...remember much, but somebody freed the slaves, and then...”

His lips are pressed together tightly...his hand is reaching for his purse. If he just gives her the gold...one less body to hide. It would be better for everyone, all around. But he hesitates, draws his hand back.

She leans forward, allowing her wide-necked shirt to fall open, and his eyes are drawn to the curve of her breast like a lodestone before they snap up to her face again.

“You’re very good,” he says, bitterly.

“I will take your coin,” she says. Arya Stark’s determination: “I’m going to go home.”

“And where is that?” he asks, sardonic.
There is only one place in Westeros I know well enough to call “home”, through Arya Stark’s memories--she doesn’t know much of King’s Landing beyond the Red Keep. “Winterfell,” she says.

His eyes widen, he’s about to ask more questions.

She forestalls him. “Enough about me,” she says. “Tell me why you won’t buy, even though we both know your body wants you to.”

Despair, and rage, and longing cloud his features.

“There is someone,” says one who is no one. “Someone you cannot have.”

He says nothing. Is he going to cry? The one who is no one almost rolls her eyes.

“You can’t have her, but you can have me,” she says. “You can close your eyes, and pretend I’m her, and it will be your good deed of the day--you can help me get back to what family I have left.”

He blinks, furiously, and the look he turns on her is hard, and hopeful all at once.

Got you.

Another tankard of ale for him, and she is on his lap, his hand is under her shirt, fondling her breasts. His eyes are closed, his face buried in her neck. He is getting hard; she doesn’t moan, doesn’t grind down on him, doesn’t act the whore--that would destroy his fantasy. Instead, she’s reaching for the purse he keeps--not the one at his hip, the one he’s got strapped to the inside of his shirt.

She caresses his throat, reaches for his chest. His other hand comes up, holds hers. She sighs. “What is your name?” she murmurs. Names are a distraction.

“Jorah,” he says. “Jorah Mormont.”

Mormont... the name triggers a memory. Another pattern. A new approach suggests itself: Mormonts bend knee to the Starks of Winterfell. Ours is a small world, it seems.

She imbues panic into her body; her muscles tighten, she pulls back, eyes wide.

He stops groping her, looks up at her, meets her gaze. Unease blooms. “What?”

“Say your name again,” she whispers.

He hesitates. “Why?”

“Say it!” she snarls, and leans further back from him, sliding away from his hardness.

“Jorah Mormont,” he spits out. “Why, what’s yours?”

She closes her eyes, feigns a desperate control over her breath. “Arya Stark,” she says.

She reacts with appropriate surprise when he dumps her on the ground, staggers back as if he’s been scalded.

“Stark,” he whispers. He is shaking with the force of his guilt, his desire--not desire for her (whatever lover he’s substituted her for, in his mind). His desire to be the sort of man he imagines he is. "Arya Stark died," he says, almost to himself.
Enslaved. It doesn't need to be said, he's thinking it.

“Get up,” he says roughly. “Get up!”

She complies.

He is looking down at his left hand. There is cloth wrapped around it, white cloth that has grimed to grey over time. “I need to go to Asshai,” he whispers.

She gives him every ounce of bitterness Arya Stark’s memories contain in them. “Then let’s finish, Jorah Mormont, and you can pay me, and I can go home.”

The look he turns on her is cold, remote, more an act of will than anything else. “I will take you as close to Winterfell as I can,” he says harshly. “And then my debt will be discharged.”

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SANSA

Everyone is awake before dawn, it seems, though Jon seems even less rested than when he went to bed.

“All able-bodied fighters...,” he is saying as he strides towards the hall table to break his fast, Ser Yannis in tow.

“Jon?” Sansa asks.

“We don’t know how many wights the Karstarks released,” says Jon. “I’m sending everyone we have on circuit, even the sentries…” She does not fight it; decoration is the sentries’ secondary purpose. “...I’d go myself--”

“No,” says Sansa. Our parents.

“No,” agrees Jon. “But everybody else that can be spared.”

“Do you want Sandor?” she asks. She hasn’t found time to find her newest (her only) sword any armor. But it can be done in a hurry.

“Not yet.”

Jon doesn’t trust quickly, she thinks. She approves. In principle. Sandor can be trusted. But just as Jon doesn’t dictate the recipients of her trust, she doesn’t dictate his.

It is surprising, startling, entirely unexpected, how much they rely on each other. The perfect sibling I always wanted. She’d looked for it in Arya, when they were too young to know any better... How much would have been different, if Jon and I had been this close when we were children?

Joffrey. Joffrey would never have happened--she had seen the disdain on the prince’s face, right when they’d first met, for the “Snow” in Jon’s name, and it had made her a bit uncomfortable, but not enough not to try and emulate it, later... Mother didn’t help. If Sansa and Jon had been as close as Arya and Jon...

Regret is a disease.
“Be careful,” says Jon, quietly. “We don’t know Jaqen H’ghar, for all that he is family now.”

“He is safe,” she says.

“Nevertheless.”

She nods.

Jon snags the heel of a loaf of bread, presses a slice of cheese onto it, and strides off again. Ser Yannis looks at the pot of hot porridge with longing, then shakes his head and follows after his king.

Ser Yannis’s departing form almost collides with Arya, who has not learned to walk at a measured pace. At least she’s wearing the dress—one of Septa Mordane’s plain black gowns, but finery is hardly appropriate. Arya is headstrong and tomboyish, but she will not dishonor Catelyn Stark’s memory by attending the funeral in travel-worn britches.

Arya smiles at her. “Thank you for sending up the bath this morning, Sansa.”

Sansa looks away. “Your husband was looking at you, at the banquet,” she murmurs. “He excused the two of you early...”

Sansa bathed a lot, while she was married to Ramsay Bolton. Even when there was no blood, she would end up in the bathtub, regardless of whether the water was freezing cold or not, scrubbing, scrubbing.

Jaqen, Arya’s husband, he is safe, she has to remind herself.

Arya’s hand glances over her shoulder. “Not his fault,” she says. “I made him.”

“Why?” Is that how she trained Jaqen to dance to her tune?

Arya gadgets at her in turn. “Um.” She blinks, looks down, then up again. “I hate wearing stupid dresses!” she blurs out. “I needed to get out of it. I cut it up. I’m sorry!”

Oh. An image forms, in Sansa’s mind...Arya, wielding her husband’s scimitar, slashing and stabbing at the poor, inoffensive riding dress: “Take that, you silken monstrosity!” Sansa giggles, and the giggle turns into full-blown laughter. “Did you really cut it up?” she asks, when she sobers again.

Arya looks sheepish, nods. She ladles herself a bit of porridge, grabs a chair, comes to sit beside Sansa.

“I’m sorry,” says Arya. “I’ll get you another.”

Sansa shakes her head. “I’d outgrown it anyways, and nobody wants to buy summer silks—” she bites off the rest of her words.

“I have eyes,” says Arya softly. She’s looking around the hall, at the pitiful board laid out for their morning’s repast, a lot of coarse bread, thin slices of cheese, porridge made with more husk than grain. “How bad is it?”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” says Sansa. “But we have to stretch what we have...food prices will go up, not down.”

Arya nods. “Thrift is good.”
The first shift of servants comes in, they take their morning ration of bread and cheese.

Another tale, to add to the annals of King Jon the Good: Once upon a time, in Winterfell, the servants ate as well as the King.

Alas, for all her trying he will still end up being called “The Bastard King”, for all that he is going to worry himself into an early grave on all our behalves, they will call him Jon the Oathbreaker. His resurrection is not known outside of Castle Black, to anyone other than a few trusted souls.

“It’s worse than it should be,” Sansa murmurs, for Arya’s ears alone. “The Ironborn were slaughtered, they didn’t get a chance to carry anything away. But all we found after we took Winterfell back from Ramsay was half a year’s worth of expense money, in his rooms. Fat Walda’s jewels—cut glass, most of them. Maester Samwell did the tallies—the Stark treasury should be reduced, but not empty. Thousands of dragons, just...gone.”

Arya looks up. “Dreadfort?”

Sansa shakes her head. “We took a hundred men, turned that place upside down, slaughtered all those loyal to the Flayed Man. Found a small chest of Bolton silver. Nothing else.” She smiles grimly. “Maester Samwell had the idea that they’d hidden it, in Winterfell somewhere.” We found more than a dozen secret passages, entire rooms no one had been in for centuries. Empty, all of them, save moldering bits of furniture. “Nothing.”

Arya purses her lips, her gaze focused on the distance. “There is a factor-house, of the Iron Bank, in White Harbor, is there not?”

Sansa looks at her, startled. “I don’t know.”

“There is,” says Arya. “They will not advertise it, but every port that does more than a hundred-thousand dragons a year in trade gets a factor-house.”

Sansa remembers Arya’s words: The guilds in Braavos have more power than the nobles. She also remembers Petyr’s words: Information is power.

Arya knows things.

Is her husband affiliated with the Iron Bank?

Sansa resolves to kiss the ground Jaqen H’ghar walks on, if he can arrange for a loan that can secure the North before the Long Night falls upon them for good—Davos Seaworth sent letters, in Jon’s name...the bank refused, and not courteously.

Arya spits upon the ground. “Fucking Bankers.”

Sansa’s suddenly soaring hopes falter, stutter to the ground.

“The Manderlys betrothed their daughters to the Freys,” says Arya.


“But they appeared to be loyal to Lannister allies,” says Arya, eyes narrowed, “so they wouldn’t have impeded a Bolton convoy going through White Harbor on mercantile business. Would they have inspected crates, to see if they carried coins instead of, say, wool?”

Sansa sees the direction of Arya’s insinuation, and is disturbed by it. “You believe the Boltons
deposited...our gold is sitting in the hands of the Iron Bank?” she asks.

“I...extrapolate,” says Arya, then sighs. “Pretend it’s been thrown into the sea--have more luck getting it back that way than to pry it from the Bank’s cold fingers...the Iron Bank doesn’t care who owns the gold, only who holds it, and that, in the end, is always the Iron Bank.”

Sansa looks down at the congealing porridge, says nothing. Arya is right--in the sea, or under the snow, or within a bank vault, the Stark gold is gone for good.

JAQEN

The sky is clear for the moment, though clouds gather in the north. The midmorning sun falls upon two biers, covered with black Stark banners, laid under the heart tree of their godswood.

It is to be less of a funeral than a laying-at-rest, in the end--the Starks have ever preferred simplicity, it seems. The bones, under the banners, have been arranged in a semblance of coherence by Tarly.

Less than a score of mourners are all that can be rounded up, and they stand under the snow-laden branches. Jaqen can see the black of the Night’s Watch (a wandering crow, trying desperately to round up “volunteers” for the Wall), some lords and ladies of the realm (whose population the wars have decimated). Farmers, who have been left with nothing by the winter. A few old servants. Wildlings. Sandor Clegane, he stands at the front of the crowd, dressed not in black but the simple peasant’s clothing he’s worn throughout their journey.

The chief mourners stand next to the biers upon the ground, flanking the Maester. Sansa Stark. Jon Snow (he doesn’t know he is a Stark, yet...no time has been allowed, for the further somber conversations that are required). Arya Stark, in an ill-fitting black dress that once belonged to a Septa, perhaps, going by its conservative cut. And Arya’s husband, in a pair of Robb Stark’s faded blacks.

For all her disapproval of him and his avowed common birth, Jaqen notes that Sansa Stark has assigned him a place to stand, and he holds the position rightfully owed to the spouse of a scion of Winterfell.

No one but Arya would have questioned it if Sansa had asked me to stand with the crowd, with Sandor. Jon Stark, perhaps. Probably.

But it didn’t come up. The Starks invariably take the high road, it seems. And then he remembers Robb Stark, and his suspicions regarding Lyanna Stark’s true relationship to Rhaegar Targaryen.

... the high road, unless they fall in love.

He supposes Sansa thinks Arya’s followed the same pattern. Sansa would not be entirely...wrong.

Arya walks the low road, with low company, with murderers and liars, and the god of all dead things who has fallen in love with her.

Tarly raises his voice. “Who will carry Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell?” he calls out over the gathered crowd. “Who will carry Catelyn Tully Stark, wife of Eddard Stark?”

An old, old man, vaguely remembered from Arya’s memories, a retainer of some sort, he steps out.
A man with House Mormont’s bear rampant upon his chest, he steps out. Two others follow, from other minor houses. The crow. A young soldier, too young to know much of the world.

They are two short.

Sansa exchanges a wide-eyed glance with Tarly—they did not expect this. There are no men left in the score, save Sandor Clegane and a few wildlings—the North will not allow a Clegane, a name that stands cheek-to-jowl with “Lannister”, to lift their lord upon his shoulders. The Wildlings suffer no lord to ride upon theirs.

It falls to them, then, the children of blood and oath.

Jon Snow steps out of the line of chief mourners, takes his place beside the pallbearers.

Arya Stark starts to move, and Sansa grabs her hand. “Women don’t lift biers,” Sansa whispers urgently.

“What sons do they have left?” Arya snarls. “I am as much as...as Rickon was. I’ve earned it.”

Sansa shakes her head, turns to Jaqen in mute appeal. Had they needed a third... But death himself cares nothing for propriety; he knows his bride must make this last journey. He holds his hand, palm outwards, towards Arya. As she wills it. Sansa’s jaws clench.

“Please, Arya,” she says and her voice is more panic than anything else. “I need you by my side. Please.”

Arya exchanges a look with him.

“We will discuss,” he says to Sansa, and draws Arya swiftly draw away to a side, behind some snow-covered bushes, hidden from view. Quickly, they strip, exchange faces, exchange clothing.

They return, and “Arya” says, “My husband will carry it.”

“That is appropriate,” says Sansa, giving “Jaqen” the very first grateful look he’s gotten from her.

Jon and Jaqen take up the handles of Eddard Stark’s bier. Uncoordinated but swift, the other pallbearers follow suit, and hoist their loads upon their shoulders.

There is no dirge, no prayers, nothing that marks this as a funeral except the silence weighing down upon the earth.

The sky has darkened.

The procession moves towards the keep, the Maester in the lead. Then Eddard Stark, upon the shoulders of his nephew and his daughter, a crow and a man of Bear-Island. Catelyn Stark, raised high by those that served her when she lived. Then Sansa, and Arya.

The rest of the score follow behind them.

The sky has started to shed, by the time they make it to the archways leading to the crypts below Winterfell. They pause, somewhat shielded from the snow, as Tarly delivers a speech from a now-soaking piece of parchment. The words waver, between the Old Gods and the New, between Eddard Stark as a loyal Hand of the King and his proud descent from the Kings of the North. Between Catelyn Stark’s love of her children, and the children she has lost.

The old man holding up one end of Catelyn Stark’s bier, his frame has started to tremble. Eddard
Stark’s bier is rock steady. Jon is steadfast, unwavering...the one who wears Arya Stark’s face allows herself a thought, appropriate to the role she plays: *Would that all men left a legacy such as this.* She looks at the one who wears Jaqen H’ghar’s face. *Would that all men had a daughter to shoulder them to their rest.*

Almost everyone, including Sansa, she realizes, cannot focus on Tarly’s meandering speech. But there *is* a method to Tarly’s madness...had there been no winter, had those that *should* be here been here...the houses, great and small, Howland Reed and the men of Eddard’s band, Catelyn’s Tully family...had all of those been here, Tarly’s speech would have been a masterfully crafted thing, combining religion, and memory, and politics into a subtle, subtle call to arms: *Bend knee to his son. Watch over the daughters she has left.*

Had there been no snow, to muffle his words…

Arya feels Sansa’s disquiet, standing beside her, and cannot help but sympathize: *Nothing is as it should be; the world is out of joint.*

“He loves you,” says Sansa in an undertone, her eyes fixed on the two at Eddard Stark’s head. “He is a commoner, and he speaks strangely, but he carries himself well. Are you happy?”

“I chose the mirror of my soul,” Arya replies.

Sansa looks at her, and her mouth twists. “So you still have a soul.” She looks away. “I’ve misplaced mine. Can’t even weep.”

*My bride didn’t either, until the faceless wept for her.* Sansa Stark...it costs nothing, to treat her as the sister-by-marriage she is.

“You haven’t misplaced anything,” says Him of the Many Faces, wearing Arya Stark’s. “Bodies change, minds change. So do souls. The change simply happened when you were not looking--the day you look in the mirror and recognize yourself, you will realize your soul has been here all along.”

Sansa’s mouth softens, a bit. “Who told you that?”

She does not reply.

“How old is he?” Sansa asks.

“Almost thirty.” The age he appears to be at the moment, his face freshly assumed as it was the day he died in Valyria.

“That is not too bad,” says Sansa. “Very handsome.”

“He keeps my interest,” says Arya, because some response seems to be expected.

“I’ve stopped trusting handsome men.”

*Ah.* He was rumored to be pleasing to the eye, Ramsay Bolton. So was Joffrey Baratheon.

Tarly’s speech winds down. The pallbearers move towards the crypts, followed by Sansa and Arya. Only family will go further; the rest of the mourners stand around uneasily for a bit, then disperse slowly.

They walk behind the biers, into torchlit darkness.
Through the winding tunnels of the catacombs, flanked by Stark kings of old, they come at last to two sarcophagi, with names engraved upon them. This place, too, has been prepared for some time.

Arya’s heart thunders in her chest as she catches a glimpse of a torchlit face—a statue, one of the very few down here. *Her* face, standing guard over a grave, dried flowers at her feet. She knows—and it is not a knowing drawn from Arya Stark’s memories—that there will be another grave, further down, a grave made in the months after Arya Stark’s birth, standing empty.

Waiting.

*Her bones belong here, beside her mother and her father, beside the statue that looks like her, beside her brother.* He is a thief, Him of the Many Faces. *If she allows me to steal her from them.*

The biers are lowered to the ground, the heavy stone lids manhandled to a side, opening up rectangle of darkness, cold stone, to receive cold bones.

Jaqen moves, nonchalantly, as if clearing off a spiderweb from inside Eddard Stark’s tomb. Arya sees a flash of something white in his hands, and then the cloths holding the bones are being lifted, one at a time, and lowered into their homes.

The lids are replaced, and the pallbearers bow and respectfully retreat down the corridor, back towards the weak winter light. All except for Jon and Jaqen, and the Maester.

Jaqen and Arya retreat to the shadows far beyond the torchlit path. and silently, silently exchange clothes and faces in the dark.

He reaches out, traces the line of her brow with a finger. He is more than the god the Faceless Men serve; he is the Stranger and the weirwood, and his touch is a benediction.

“Bravely done, Arya Stark,” He says.

She leans into his touch, accepting it as she would not have when she discharged her duty to Catelyn Stark under a hollow hill. Then she returns to her brother and sister. Jaqen leaves, with Tarly.

He finds Sandor, drinking, outside in the courtyard. Wordlessly, Sandor hands over the flask, and Jaqen takes a swig, then hands it back. The flask gets passed around, amongst the waiting pallbearers—there is one more ritual that must be completed.

The three Starks come out, after a while. Sansa is in the lead, and there is a small bag in her hands. The pallbearers’ due.

Symbolic, for family, actual wages for the others. Sansa hands out meagre handfuls of silver. The crow looks at his with bemusement—the man hasn’t had spending money for a while, Jaqen thinks. The man of House Mormont, the other noble, they are a bit more respectful, the old retainer is simply grateful. Everyone exchanges awkward nods, and then they leave.

Sansa reaches into the bag, and pulls out a silver coin—an old one—and hands it to Jon. Jaqen receives a similar.

He passes it to Arya. “Hold it for me, love,” he says, his eyes crinkling in a smile. “My pocket is
full.”

Arya considers the coin in her hand, then she simply gives it to Sandor.

“What’s this for, she-wolf?” asks Sandor. Both Sansa and Jon are looking at Arya.

“Jon and Jaqen carried them the last few paces,” says Arya, her voice grave. “You carried them for miles upon miles.”

Sansa looks at Sandor, and something passes over her face that is almost...regret. She bows her head, hands the bag of coin (pitifully thin, now) to Arya.

Delegation.

Arya hands the whole bag to Sandor. “And so my word is redeemed,” she says.

Sandor looks at the bag, fishes out a single coin for himself, then hands the bag back to Arya. “Lady Sansa’s accepted me into her service--means room, board, a fighter’s share of the spoils. Don’t need more.”

Arya accepts the bag and her own due, pockets her coin, then hands the bag back to Sansa.

And so the circle is complete.

“You said we needed to talk,” says Jon, to Jaqen. His voice is hard, but his eyes are utterly bewildered, and red, either from weeping or sleeplessness.

Jaqen shakes his head. “It can wait.”

“So what do we do now?” asks Jon, turning to Tarly.

Tarly opens his hands: I don’t know. Everyone seems at a loss.

“Now we drink,” says Jaqen H’ghar.

As night falls, he ends up on a long chaise in Jon’s sitting room. There is a fire roaring in the hearth, the ground is covered in soft Dornish carpets, and everyone has found a seat he or she is comfortable with.

Jaqen’s head in his bride’s lap as she plays with his hair. She rakes her fingers over his scalp, tugs his hair from time to time. It is...distracting.

“Keep that up,” he murmurs to her in Lorathi, “and a man will see all of a girl much sooner than anticipated.”

She smirks at him, returns to simply combing through his locks with her fingers. “Tempting,” she says, “but a girl is afraid it will scandalize people.”

“And here a man thought we were posed like this to for just that purpose.”

“To...needle,” she corrects. “To invite comment, discussion. But not scandalize. And so I will not kiss you, either, no matter how much I want to right now.”
There is wine, and ale when that is exhausted, and mouth-wrenchingly sweet mead. Tarly gives them a song he claims is bawdy. Arya snorts, quietly.

After a while, Jaqen rises, staggers outside the room. When he returns, Jon looks up.

“You were gone a while,” says the king.

The man has a keen sense of awareness, even when halfway to comatose with wine.

“There is a saying in Braavos,” smirks Jaqen. “You never buy ale, you simply rent it.”

This witticism is greeted by uproarious laughter from Samwell Tarly.

Sandor grunts. “Could have told you that without going to Braavos,” he says.

Jaqen resumes his place upon the chaise, his head once again in Arya’s lap. It is a very comfortable position, he thinks—he will have to negotiate something like this, the next time she takes all the pillows.

Jon keeps giving them troubled glances from time to time. “You met before the Red Wedding, you said?” he asks.

The answer should be a simple “yes”. “The Lannisters took their captives to Harrenhal,” says Jaqen. “Tywin Lannister had penetrated her outermost disguise, knew she was a highborn girl from the North.” He cranes his neck, looks up at her with a smile. “Eleven, and already a killer.” The approval in his tone should invite some question that leads to the House of Black and White.

The invitation is misdelivered.

“So you do like little girls,” says Sandor, voice disgusted. Thank you dear Hound, for your ever-helpful commentary. The man is drunk, but Jon does not like the direction Sandor’s insinuation points in.

Arya steps in. “Wish he did,” she says, and her tone is sad as she strokes Jaqen’s hair. “Left me at Harrenhal, left me in Braavos, then again for two years after we were wedded,” left me in the barrow, she doesn’t add. “Without even a kiss for remembrance, had something happened…”

Jon relaxes.

Mostly truth, one lie (kissed my bride a lot, even if it was in the dreaming) …Jaqen looks up at her face, deadly serious. “No more leaving,” he says.

“I will kill you if you do.” It is an endearment, coming from her lips.

If you must be the wind, he thinks, and Winterfell becomes your home, I will wait, beside you, till the very stones of this place turn to dust along with the bones they contain. The Many-Faced God will diminish, here in the North. It is only fair—the wind diminished for Him, after all.

Sandor guffaws. “Can’t kill him, little she wolf.” They both look up, startled…is Sandor a lot more perceptive than they give him credit for? “Little girl like you, big blade, but he got me disarmed before I could move. He’ll flatten you.”

“Tyrion Lannister was like that,” says Sansa, commenting on a moment that has come and gone, while she is wrapped in her thoughts. “He slept on the chaise, all the months that we were married.”
So this little tableau has needled Jon in exactly the wrong way (thank you Sandor) but Sansa has drawn a parallel with her first husband.

“Tyrion Lannister...I think, I think he was a good man,” concedes Jon.


_No, he slept on the chaise when he had the rights to bed your “little bird”, Sandor, you’d forgive him for stabbing your own mother right now._

Tarly proposes another “bawdy” song, and this his bride cannot bide—she starts humming. When Sansa asks, it turns out that Arya _does_ know all the words to “The Farmer’s Daughter”, and even humorless Jon Stark is reduced to tears of laughter by the end of it.

“Arya, I’m drunk,” says Sansa. Her words are slurred, her eyes far too bright.

“Me too.” Arya giggles.

“Come, I want to gossip with you.”

_Sansa’s voice..._ There is a hitch to it. Arya’s jaw clenches. She sees it too.

“You’ll have to teach me how to do this, this gossiping,” grumbles Arya, and he moves off her lap to let her go. She weaves to her sister’s side, unsteadily, and the two of them link arms and step out onto the balcony.

The doors close behind them.

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_Sansa_

With every caress Arya bestows upon her husband’s head, Sansa finds her own envy ebbing, to be replaced by curiosity. The touches are not debasing, like the ones Petyr teaches his whores (tried to teach Sansa); there is warmth between these two, affection, unfeigned. But the touches are calculated nonetheless.

_What do they want?_

She leans back in her chair, realizes her head is heavier than normal, though her limbs are lighter, somehow. “Clegane,” she murmurs, “pass the mead.”

Her shield grunts, hands over the bottle. Sansa puts her mouth to the top like she has seen the boyos do (she wipes the neck with her sleeve first, surreptitiously) and takes a swig. Sweet liquid fills her mouth, heavy and thick. It is smooth going down her throat, it burns only once it reaches her stomach, where it rests like a pool in the hot springs below the keep.

_The springs are still leaking into the library. Have to find a stonemason, somewhere._

She takes another swig, and listens—Arya is humming a tune.

“What’s that song?” she asks.

“An inappropriate one,” says Arya, mischief dancing with the firelight on her face. “Wanna hear?”
Arya’s husband groans, and she smacks him lightly on the arm.

“Hear, hear!” roars Maester Samwell.

Arya needs no further encouragement. She opens her mouth, and starts warbling.

“The farmer’s daughter is down at the docks
Got too many hens, she’s looking for cocks…”

Sansa chokes, and Arya’s husband has his hand over his eyes. Maester Samwell is alternating between goggling at Arya and frowning worriedly at Sansa.

Jon is laughing. By the seven, Jon is laughing.

Arya launches into another verse, and Sandor’s gaze brushes over Sansa—she smiles at him, entirely unoffended in the moment, and then he joins in!

“The farmer’s daughter is skirting a plough
Hands up and down like she’s milking a cow…”

Sandor and Arya’s voices are entirely unsuited to singing together and neither of them can seem to agree on the time signature.

“By the gods, Arya, stop, stop!” begs Jon, wiping his eyes. She doesn’t, of course, and continues through to the end, trailed by an off-key Sandor. The final verse ends with a shout:

“...grinds your pecker to BITS!”

It takes a long time for the groans and laughter to subside. Then Sansa realizes the bottle of mead in her lap is half empty. How much was in there when I started? She shrugs, then hiccoughs.

“Arya, I’m drunk,” Sansa says. Courage is so easy when you are drunk!

“Me too.” Arya giggles.

With effort, Sansa levers herself to her feet without upending the bottle. She gestures to the balcony doors. “Come, I want to gossip with you!”

Sansa closes the balcony door behind Arya. Those inside can see, but not hear, them. The cold wind is merely bracing, given the warmth pooled in her belly.

“Men aren't brave at all,” she says to Arya in a tone of wonder. “They're just drunk all the time!”

Arya laughs and laughs. She’s completely sozzled herself. Sozzled: another word Sansa has never had the courage to use, even in her own head… Sansa’s words are indisposed, inebriated, drunk, if she is feeling particularly crude.

She reaches out, trails her fingertips over Arya’s hair, untidy, short. “In my head, I imagined you escaping, having daring adventures…always imagined you with boy’s hair. Let me straighten the cut for you tomorrow.”

“I’m growing it out,” Arya says.
“To please your husband?” asks Sansa.

Arya shrugs. “He doesn't care either way, as long as it doesn't get in the way of my bladework.”

Bladework. Sandor had said...Sandor had said...Sansa begins to feel the cold at the end of her fingertips. Eleven, and already a killer. “They found the stable boy you’d stabbed through the heart when you escaped.” She can’t help but smile. “Joffrey turned pupe.”

Arya giggles again.

“Turned purple later,” says Sansa thoughtfully. “When he choked to death.”

“Purple is a very royal color,” says Arya.

Sansa takes a deep breath. “Arya, can I trust you?” She doesn’t like the plaintiveness in her voice; the mead is making her sway, too.

“I am an assassin,” Arya says, suddenly somber.

Sansa gives a very unladylike snort. “Please.” She looks at Arya, and suddenly, she wants to know what Arya really thinks of her. The story of Ramsay’s hounds has made it as far as King’s Landing, Petyr told her, so Arya knows. “Killing a man, or three…,” Sansa whispers, “it doesn’t make you an assassin, it makes you a murderer.”

Arya is looking out over the snow-covered hills that had once been moors, covered in heather and gorse. “Have you ever heard of the Faceless Men?” she asks.

“What, the magical killers from Braavos?” Sansa asks. “Joffrey tried to float a loan, when Robb took down the first Lannister army, tried to hire a Faceless Man to kill him...boasted about it, tried to frighten me...couldn’t raise enough gold.”


“I didn't go there for sanctuary,” Arya spits out, then sees the disbelief on Sansa’s face, and sighs. Slowly, casually, she sidles over to the corner of the balcony, out of sight of the sitting room’s inhabitants.

“Knew there was a reason,” Arya mutters. She pulls out something from within her borrowed dress’s bodice, much too big for Arya’s frame...too thin, for the weather. Have to find her clothes. Mother’s won’t do, they all smell of smoke...Arya is holding something. Flesh, and hair.

A mask.

Arya draws it over her head, and...she changes. Now a man stands in the corner of the balcony, middle-aged, with tight cropped-curls of reddish-yellow hair. Sansa’s mouth is gaping. How much did I drink?

“Arya,” she whispers.

“It's me.”

The voice...it’s a man’s, cultured, a bit too thin for his age. The man reaches over his head, and draws his flesh off, somehow, and it’s Arya underneath.

Sansa’s arms are clutching at the balustrade; she is off-balance, and it is not the mead’s fault, for her stomach feels leaden, cold. There is silence, and the howling of the wind, while she digests.
“Braavos,” Sansa says, finally.

“Braavos,” Arya whispers, and there is something in the way Arya utters the city’s name, something...Sansa doesn’t know what it means.

An assassin. A Faceless Man.

“How do you…” Sansa breathes. “How do you even go about joining …”

Arya glances towards the sitting room. “I got a good recommendation.”

Sansa blinks, looks over her shoulder. Jon is speaking to Jaqen H’ghar, and it looks like Jon is angry. Sudden panic rises in Sansa. “Jon...Jon, he’s...” she turns, starts towards the inside, and sees Jaqen H’ghar’s gaze following her.

Arya steps closer, gently draws Sansa back to the end of the balcony. “We are not here to fulfill a contract,” she says softly. “This is exactly what it looks like.” She sounds weary now, not drunk anymore. “Family business. He really is my husband, he came with me because I needed to come to Winterfell.”

To bring Father and Mother home... “You're not here to stay,” accuses Sansa, and she cannot quell the sudden panic. No, please, I can’t lose you, I’ve just found you... “You're going to go back to Braavos?”

Arya is silent for a long time. “I hadn’t decided, until just now,” she says, eventually. “I lived for vengeance for so long…” her voice is thoughtful, as deceptively calm as the snowdrifts beyond the walls. “Nursed my vengeance on the order’s teat, until...” she glances back at the room.

“Arya Stark, for the three deaths.” Sansa remembers her own words from yesterday: Was your marrying him the price?

“Until you fell in love?” Bitter disbelief makes Sansa’s voice sound harsh, ugly.

Arya gives her a look , in lieu of a snort, probably, then becomes serious. “Until Jaqen taught me how to make my enemies diminish, from the giants that loomed over my shoulder, that took up all the spaces in my mind, into something small, something petty. I learned how to see them as they are, flesh and blood and bone. Just men. And then...” Arya smiles, and it is a mysterious expression, “then he killed them for me.”

“Walder Frey?”


Sansa feels something--savage joy, a fraction, a shadow of what she felt after Ramsay. “ Meryn Trant ,” she says, and remembers the fist, driven into her solar plexus, the sound of ripping cloth. Illyn Payne. She remembers the threats, the fear, the sickening thud of her father’s head falling to the ground…

She wants to spit, like Sandor did, off the balcony, but she’s not sure she can manage that.

He killed them for Arya , she reminds herself, but Sansa must...she must do something...apologize to Jaqen H’ghar somehow…

“You were right, though,” says Arya. “There was a price, once he let me pay it. Arya Stark, for the three deaths.”

Sansa remembers her own words from yesterday: Was your marrying him the price?
“But you’re in love…” Sansa trails off.  *Maybe they’re not, maybe they just wanted me, wanted Jon to believe that she was happy.* Her stomach churns; she had been willing to trade Arya to secure the North, but to trade her sister for vengeance alone... *but the way they look at each other...*

“When I doubt who I am, when I doubt where I belong,” says Arya quietly, “when I doubt the existence of the very ground I walk upon...the one thing I *cannot* doubt is that he loves me, that I love him.”

Sansa exhales. Relief wars with envy--not of them (dreams of love are not for Sansa anymore) but for the unshakable foundation beneath Arya’s words. *To be so certain of something in your life...*  

“We do not keep count anymore between us, Jaqen and I,” says Arya. “Would have added a fourth name to the list--Ramsay Bolton.”

Sansa starts; that name is not spoken of in Winterfell these days. She has become unused to the sound of it outside her own head.  

She forces herself to look over, to meet the judgement in Arya’s eyes.

“But you took care of him first,” says Arya, and there is such *pride* in her voice, in her smile.

Sansa gulps in air, clenches her teeth against the desire to weep. “I *enjoyed* it.”

“Of course,” says Arya. “Who wouldn’t?”

“Jon.”

“What does he know,” mutters Arya, but she looks...uncertain. “Sansa...has something happened to him?” Her voice wavers.

Sansa avoids her sister’s gaze.

“Sansa ?”

“He is well now,” she says. She looks back at the room, her gaze crosses Jaqen’s. He is staring out at them on the balcony, looking entirely too casual. She turns back to Arya. “I am sorry.”

“For what?”

*For...everything.*  “For the things I said to your husband.” *For Joffrey. If I had cared more about you than about being a princess...*  “For the things I said to you when we were children.”

Arya steps closer to her, and their arms are entwined around each other’s. “You gave me something to rebel against,” says Arya. “Defiance is so much easier than submission, for a Stark.”

“Defiance felt impossible, to me,” murmurs Sansa. “In King’s Landing. I was terrified, and I submitted. To Joffrey, to Cersei, to anyone with any bit of power.”

“You survived,” whispers Arya.

Sansa bows her head.

“You survived,” says Arya again.

Sansa rubs at her eyes. They are too dry, the winter wind makes them drier still. “They hung Father’s head where I had to walk past it, every day. I imagined he was still there, his spirit,
watching over me.” She shakes her head. “I had Tyrion, for a while. He saved me from the worst of Joffrey...Sandor saved me too. He asked me to leave with him.”

Sansa cannot read Arya’s questioning glance, so she answers the question she thinks Arya is asking. “After Blackwater,” she says. “He was leaving, he asked me to come with him.”

Arya looks thoughtful. “He’d have taken you to Mother,” she says.

Sansa closes her eyes.

“All roads lead to the Red Wedding,” says Arya, and her voice is steel now. “Remember that, when you regret...I regretted, not getting to the Twins earlier. Regretted it for years. But you would have died, I would have died, and then there would have been no vengeance to be had.”

Sansa straightens; she opens her eyes, and the image of her mother’s face (Ramsay took great pleasure in explaining to her how Catelyn Stark gouged out her own flesh as Robb was killed), the image is replaced by the stark winter landscape. “We avenged.”

“Because we survived.” Arya takes a deep breath.

Sansa feels the weight of some terrible thing pressing down on her sister, something vast. Suddenly afraid, she clutches at Arya. “What are you not telling me?”

Arya shakes her head. “I have to tell Jon too,” she says. “And I can’t bear the telling twice.” They both look at the room behind them. Jon is deep in his cups, and he too is looking out at the balcony, wearing his truly troubled face.

Sansa feels a glimmer of resentment. “He thinks I’m a monster.”

“Jon would never,” says Arya, and Sansa thinks her sister has not lost her childlike faith in their oldest brother; not unjustified, this faith, Jon is so impossibly perfect (his courage, his sense of responsibility, his heartbreaking humanity) it is hard for Sansa not to resent him, a little.

Sansa puts her mouth to the bottle of mead, tips it back until she has drained it dry. She waits; they wait, in companionable silence. Eventually, the warmth reaches her hands, her neck. “There is something wrong with me,” she says, and she is proud of how utterly normal her voice sounds. She draws her hand back from Arya’s, places it over her lower stomach.

Arya’s head whips around. “Child…”

Sansa shakes her head no. “I can still feel it in me...something he did. It hurts. Below…bleeds, sometimes.”

Arya draws a breath. “Have you had it looked at?”

Sansa is amused at how much effort her sister has to expend to keep her voice steady. Out of sympathy, Sansa offers Arya the bottle, which Arya waves away. “Who would I ask?” she says.

“Maester Samwell…” Arya sounds uncertain; the Maester in question is sitting cross-legged on the floor, far worse off than even Jon. “A midwife?”

“There’s two left in Winterfell,” says Sansa. “One came with the Boltons, for Fat Walda. One...gossips.” All my humiliation, bared for wagging tongues? I will die from it before I let them see it.
“I’m here now,” says Arya. “I’ve had training.”

Sansa relaxes, grateful and...hopeful, at the confidence in Arya’s voice. Until she realizes Arya’s training is that of a Faceless Man.

“An assassin,” Sansa says, “offering healing?” Be a mockingbird; nobody can tell when a mockingbird is afraid. Her smile is sardonic, though she feels it pulling strangely at her face, coming out wider than intended. The mead’s influence.

They both leave it unsaid: what other options are there?

“I’m glad I didn’t get a chance to kill Ramsay Bolton,” says Arya, suddenly, savagely. “I wish I could have watched you killing him.”

Sansa grins, and she knows there’s too much Ramsay in that grin and she doesn’t care. “I’m glad I can’t sell you to the Tyrells.”

They draw closer, shoulders touching, like soldiers bracing each other in battle formation.

“Missed you, stupid Sansa,” whispers Arya.

“Missed you too, horseface.”

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**JAQEN**

The girls are not gone a few breaths, before Tarly and Sandor leave to find more bottles--they’ve almost exhausted the mead, too.

Jon launches into the words he’s obviously been considering for some time now.

“You let her carry a blade,” he says. The boy holds his ale well, but he is quite beyond pleasantly sloshed, and teetering into the realm of the unstable. The question is far too pointed, as if Jon wants Jaqen to get defensive about it.

Jaqen smirks. “She got a taste for it, after you gave her Needle.”

Jon deflates. “Suppose,” he mumbles.

“It was a part of the marriage contract,” says Jaqen. “No ‘let’ about it.” She kills, in My name. Weapons are a bit of a requirement, really.

“You let her keep her name,” says Jon.

Again, there is no ‘let’ about it--she has fought the faceless, bitterly, for the right to keep her name. It is hers, to do with what she pleases. And she will not impose “Stark” upon me, why would I impose anything in turn? But this reasoning is too Lorathi for this place. So let us manipulate with a different truth.

“My father, my grandfather…” He holds Jon’s gaze. “I would not taint her, with the name they bequeathed unto me.”

That resonates, for a man that hates his own last name, and yet bears it defiantly, like a shield (Jon
is king. Who can stop him from legitimizing himself? It may not be in good taste, but it is certainly in his power).

Jon looks at him, searching, as if he is searching for something but his eyes cannot focus on Jaqen’s face. “You are not motivated by what the Stark name can give you?” he asks, and the tone of his question is harsh. So Jaqen’s words resonated, but instead of putting Jon at ease, they have made him edgy.

Jaqen reaches for an unopened bottle of mead. “The things that come with the Stark name--they are what drew me to her in the first place.” He pulls out the cork with his teeth, spits it out. Jon’s eyes have widened, his surprise at the admission overruling his vague animosity. *Now, twist*. Jaqen smiles, sardonic. “The fierce loyalty of Eddard Stark,” he says, “the implacable focus of Catelyn Stark. The courage of fools and madmen both. All of these things I have in her. What more would I want?”

“A pretty speech,” Jon says, his lip almost curling with disdain. *Flattery...Jon took my words for flattery, not truth. Him of the Many Faces cannot but read another accurately...so why do my words not find their mark?*

A suspicion grows in him. *Our brother reached out last night, bridged the distance between us in his hour of need. What else crossed that bridge?*

Jaqen levers himself up to a sitting position, leans back casually while maintaining line-of-sight to the balcony outside. Sansa and Arya are not gossiping...not unless gossip involves blood-magic, anyways--he can smell it from here.

The smell...if Asshai is involved, Jaqen should smell the ash, the mold-rot. But he does not.

“You’ve lost most of your accent,” says Jon. The boy pays attention to people’s words.

Jaqen grins, briefly. “I’ve lived in Braavos a long time--the Lorathi accent makes an appearance but rarely. Mostly when Arya is around, for some reason.” He takes a sip of the mead, then passes the bottle to Jon.

Though the king takes the bottle, he is not mollified. His mental state is too far shifted from yesterday’s to find resonance with a thing that had made him almost smile the day before.

“Who are you, Jaqen H’ghar?” he asks. The question is worded to be a rhetorical, thoughtful one, but the tone is all *wrong*.

Jaqen blinks. *Is the problem not with his speaking, but with my listening? Am I reading hostility where none exists?*

Asshai’s spells should not find much purchase here, not in Jaqen, not in Jon (what the spells want--confrontation to no purpose--it is too far removed from both of their natures).

Jaqen ignores all tonal quality, turns his gaze to the King’s eyes. Him of the Many Faces *looks*, deep. There is too much suspicion in Jon, too much naked *fear*, fear of *Jaqen*, sudden, intense, and egged on by drink.

“Who are you?” Jon asks again.

*An assassin, and I made your sister one too-- that is not going to go down well in this state.*
“A man who is on your side,” he says instead, then adds, “Arya and Lady Sansa should be here, and we should all be sober when we speak, in detail.”

Jon closes his eyes, as if he is trying to remember something. He tries to remember what he wanted to speak of, before something redirected his attention. “If we ride against the Umbers, and win, I would make Arya Lady of the Last Hearth. Establish a new house, in her name.” And the hard-edged suspicion appears again as Jon opens his eyes. “You would not rule.”

“I mean no offense, your Grace, but I would not rule if you paid me a million gold dragons to do it. And she will not, either.”

Jon sighs. “Then you will have to make her.”

“I do not own her,” Jaqen says. Neither do you. “She is my wife, not my slave. I make her do nothing.” Bedroom games notwithstanding.

And then, then, he hears the arrogance in his own voice, and grows afraid. Not just Jon...

“She is a Stark of Winterfell,” Jon spits. “What kind of like will she have in Braavos, as a commoner's wife?” Then he passes a hand over his face. “Sorry,” he sighs. “Sorry. Didn’t mean that. Don’t know what’s come over me.” The last is mumbled, half to himself.

Jaqen waves his hand, as if to say, “pay it no mind”.

He cannot sense anything in Jon except for something faint...some darkness, and some resonance, with Arya...they know Jon has the warging gift, it could be that.

Jon’s mouth twists. “But she deserves better.”

Jaqen nods, seriously. He tries to find some glimmer of hope, for this boy who has had to face as much as his bride. “Arya was not wrong, when she said she came to solve problems--I will preempt her thunder, a little, but Cersei Lannister has made many enemies, and the City of Braavos is interested in making an alliance with the King in the North.”

Jon smiles, humorless. “You think Braavos would acknowledge me as king? Nobody else does.”

This is the moment Tarly chooses to return, Sandor and a half-crate of bottles in tow. “So,” says Tarly, “what’d I miss?”

Neither man answers him. Jon clams up, takes another swig of mead, glum. Jaqen lies back down on the chaise, and ignores whatever question the king mumbles at him next. On your side, Jon Stark—we’ll break out of this, somehow.

The balcony door opens again; Arya is unsteady on her feet, she burps. “I think I’ve had enough,” she mumbles. “Can we retire?” she asks Jaqen.

He staggers to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“Your chambers have been cleaned,” says Sansa. “Do you need anything else?”

“An extra pillow,” he slurs. “We have one, she takes it. We have two, she takes two. Let’s see what she does with three.”

Sansa looks directly at him; she teeters on the edge of drunkenness, held back from it by sheer
force of will. “Forgive me,” she says.

An apology. That must have been an interesting conversation, he thinks.

“I did not realize,” Sansa continues. “That Arya still has that habit,” she explains, lamely. Not that anyone else in the room will catch any nuance tonight. “I’ll have some more pillows sent up.”

Jaqen’s mouth twists. Mercy and forgiveness are not quite the same thing, after all. “Or you could give us separate chambers, if that makes you more comfortable.”

Arya looks worried. He waits.

Sansa smiles, finally, a weak thing, but there is genuine humor threaded through it. “I thought about it,” she says, honestly. “But Arya would skewer me.”

Arya snorts. “That may be preferable, to Jaqen getting sarcastic at you.”

“Point taken, love,” he murmurs at her, then bows to Sansa. “Sleep well, sister.” No mockery. “There is much that must be discussed on the morrow.”

Sansa smiles at him. Two miracles in as many days?

Then she falls into her chair, lets out a small squeal as the chair tips backwards. Sandor’s hand shoots out, instinctive, righting the chair before it falls over.

The other half of that bottle has hit her, it seems. The Maester is already snoring, Jon is not far behind, his gaze lost in his half-empty goblet. Sandor is the only one left with anything resembling coordination, but that man can drink.

Jaqen and Arya stagger out, supporting each other.

They straighten, once they’re away from the populated corridors. There were many more people, these corridors were bustling, in his (her) memories of this section of the keep.

“How was that?” she asks. Valyrian, high and low, has somehow become their lingua sub rosa. He understands this is the first time she’s had to act drunk.

“Less slurring, more high-pitched laughter,” he says, “unless you’re a man, in which case you should pause halfway and go piss on a wall somewhere.”

She grins. “I’m assuming that’s not why you went outside.”

“The ravenry is not well-populated,” he murmurs. “Even a bird or two will be missed. We will need to discuss the sending of messages with Tarly, openly, or we risk jeopardizing what little trust we’ve built here.”

“I saw it from the balcony...even without hearing what he was saying to you....” her voice is sad. “I don’t know what happened, between yesterday and today...”

Your husband and your brother have shadows wrapped around their tongues and ash in their eyes. His stomach roils, and not from the drink. He needs to tell her; she will not take it well. She has already seen the wind, the choice open to her in this place, offered to to Him on their faceless brother’s behalf...fear and fury are a powerful combination--if He is threatened, if Jon is threatened, she may not offer. And then I will lose her. And yet, she may be their only defense; prophecies can try to bind her, but they cannot anticipate her, they cannot predict her motion.
How do I say this to her without driving her to impulsive action?

Luckily, Arya’s focus has shifted. “Sansa is dealt with, though,” she says, and grins, a moment of pure happiness.

Did you find the real face of your sister to your liking, then, my love? It seems so--and she liked yours. Well and good.

“I smelled the mask,” he says. “Told you it might come in handy.” She’d given him a look as if he was mad, suggesting she take a death-mask with her to her parents’ funeral.

“I love you,” she sighs.

“Mmm. Remind a man to inform you of his half-baked intuitions more often, if it earns him such declarations,” he says.


The words trigger something… “It feels like I know him,” he says. “As if from a dream…” He shakes his head; the thought vanishes, leaving behind a certainty. “Something has happened to him.”

“He smells like mother,” she says, face troubled. “Cold mildew, that grows in winterdamp places.”


“The Prince that was Promised?” she says. “I do not know.”

“There was a red priestess,” says Jaqen, his voice hard, “with Stannis Baratheon’s army. We need to find out what happened to her.”

Arya nods.

They turn, in unison, up a small, curving stone staircase--a shortcut, to the children’s wings. They both know the way through her memory.

The room, when they enter, is entirely...the same, yet different. Candles are lit, the hearth is laid. The furniture is all wrong, but it’s placed in all the right places.

She sighs. “Time is a river.”

He looks around, and does not voice his dark suspicions--that a certain Jayne Poole was kept in this room, for a while, before the Boltons found a real Stark to wed. The children’s rooms are the furthest from the key points of the sacking, in his calculation--fire wouldn’t have reached here, not unless Sansa had the furniture dragged out and burned.

Arya falls into the canopied bed, and he must fall into it beside her. They don’t bother with the fire. There are more than two pillows already, he is glad to find. There is a pattern of daisies, on the canopy overhead.

He snorts. “Very sweet.”

She hits him with a pillow. He grabs it out of her hand, refuses to give it back. “You promised me one,” he says.
She stretches out, then recoils, whipcord, as if her foot has touched a snake. She wrenches back the covers, and finds heated bricks at the foot of the bed.

“This lordship thing has some benefits, I see,” he says, amused.

She glares at the bricks. “This is nice,” she says. “Too nice,” she adds darkly. “We stay here too long, we’ll be as out of shape as...as Samwell Tarly.” She considers. “Jon’s not bad--he trains, Sansa says.”

“Most northerners I’ve seen are fitter than people in the south,” he agrees. Speaking of Jon. “Be careful...Jon wants to establish a new house in your name. He might try to make you lead an army for him, as...inducement.” When he’s sober and thinks of it.

Arya’s eyes shine, for a moment. “All hail the Marshall General Commander of the Armies of the North, Arya Stark the Fearless,” she says, then giggles. “Thank you for the warning...temptation, by itself, it is easier to nullify than unexpected temptation.”

He looks over at her. “Is this something you’d want to do? Lead armies?”

She snorts. “You know the evolution of my martial ambitions.”

A knight-errant, when she was five and heard the tales of Duncan and Egg for the first time. A brother of the Night’s Watch, when she was seven and her uncle Benjen came to recruit new crows. “Marshall General Commander of the Armies of the North, Arya Stark the Fearless” the day she learned the story of Robert’s Rebellion at the age of nine.

Jaqen H’ghar, after Harrenhal.

“Killing a man when he knows you’re coming at him...” She makes a face, then shifts, goes on her side, propping up her head with her elbow. “Our way is better.” She grows serious, twists around until she is on her knees on the bed.

Discomfort pulls at him...and then his suspicion is confirmed--she bows her head.

Arya..., ” warns Him of the Many Faces.

She looks at him through her lashes, grins. “One, you would abide, you said.”

“Hmm.”

“Aōhon,” she says, ‘yours’, in the High Valyrian, “in case it was not clear. Winterfell, and comfortable beds because we must help Jon, he is drowning, and because we are at war with the Red God. Then, a stone bed in Braavos--you will share it with me, though it is narrow--and an eternity of service to the Many-Faced God.”

“Ñuhor,” he says, ‘mine’ in its darkest form. Beloved, you know as well as I though you seek to deny it as I once did, “Winterfell” against “Braavos” is a false choosing. Still, it cannot help but give him some hope. “Only the acolyte beds are narrow--it discourages sharing. Why did you not move to the faceless wing?”

She looks sheepish. “Didn’t know if you’d know where to find my dreams, if I moved.”

He thinks. “Have I told you I love you?” he asks.
“Not today.”

“I love you.”

She unwinds, stretches out beside him. “Sansa was pouring liquid courage down her throat to speak of it,” she says. “Something’s wrong with her, she doesn’t know what, doesn’t want the midwife…”

He stills. “Ramsay Bolton?”

She doesn’t answer.

*He would have been hanged long before he reached adulthood, had he been born to a common father. The North is no better than anywhere else.*


“If Valyria does not exist, then a dragonlord does not either,” he says firmly. “So give the word, I’ll take my Stark and flee to more democratic shores, tonight, if it so pleases you.”

“You didn’t have to burn down an entire civilization,” she says reasonably, “you could have simply changed your name.” They joke about these things now: *You could have changed your name. You could have gelded Joffrey right at the start.* “And we can leave whenever you want,” she adds. “After I’ve seen what’s wrong with Sansa. And Jon.”

*Reasonable.*

He looks at her face for a while. “I think you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he says.

Her lips part--a soft “o” of surprise; he has disarmed her, if only for a moment. Then she remembers to glare at him--he takes it as an invitation. He rolls on top of her, straddles her, pins her hands down on the bed on either side of her head. She shifts her hips, arches into him. But she does not say his name, nor plead...he can take his time, then, exert some control over himself (A “Jaqen” or two from her mouth, and he would have to bend her over the side of the bed and sheathe himself in her cunt, and it would be fucking, whereas he wants to make love to her, and she knows it).

This dress business...he doubts if he can get away with cutting a second borrowed dress to ribbons. *Much harder to get at her when she’s not wearing a simple shirt...men’s clothing seems to be designed to facilitate access, women’s to impede it.* He undoes the buttons on her bodice with his teeth, uses his mouth to draw aside the cloth. His tongue pauses from time to time, to lick at her skin over her collarbone, her throat, until he exposes her breasts themselves. The candlelight--tallow, but plenty of it--gives her skin an ethereal glow, her rosy nipples dark with arousal.

She twists out of his grasp.

“My one weakness,” he murmurs, the great Jaqen H’ghar, invariably put off-guard by his bride’s tits, because now she’s on top and pinning his hands to the bed.

As recompense, she dangles her breast near his mouth, and he closes his lips around a nipple, sucks, as she moans and grinds down on him.

Piece by piece, they undress each other, passing the lead on the dance back and forth until they both lie naked on top of the covers.
“Beloved,” he says, “I need to tell you something. Will you...postpone your reaction?”

For a moment her muscles tense, and then she nips at the base of his throat, deliberately, carefully playful. “As long as you are in me while you speak…”

His hand meanders, between them, slides between her legs, to her wet, impatient core, a match to his eager hardness. Life, he thinks, out of madness. 

This will hold her to me.


SANDOR

The little bird seeks her bed shortly after the she-wolf, but her brother the king and his Maester don’t seem to be going anywhere. With a sigh, Sandor levers himself to his feet.

“Leaving already?” slurs the Maester. “We’ve two more bottles left!”

“Too old for drinking all night,” Sandor mutters. He thinks he remembers how to get to the rooms the little bird has assigned to him, on the other side of the courtyard to his left. He snags the empty bottle of mead she has left behind, on the way out. Nobody notices.

He falls through the door of his rooms, locks it behind him. There is a single candle burning on a table, an empty rack for armor and weapons. Another room branches off from this one--a sleeping chamber, with a wide bed and a hearth. The fire in the hearth has burned down to embers, but the room still retains a pleasant warmth.

Sandor loosens his cloak, remembers to take off his boots before falling into the bed. His is still clutching the empty bottle in his hand. He raises it above his head, looks at the candlelight playing about its ceramic shape. Bottles are shaped like women, he thinks.

He brings the neck of the bottle near his mouth, tastes the sweet residue of the mead.

She put her lips on it.

He groans, and fumbles open his britches, takes himself in hand. His strokes are rough, fast, and his release comes soon; he wipes his hand on the bed cover.

Can’t let her know, is his last thought, before he falls asleep. I’m disgusting. She likes clean.


JON

Sandor’s been gone but a few minutes, but neither Jon nor Sam have the fortitude to attack the last two bottles. Some dim part of him is already dreading the hangover tomorrow--nothing quite like a mead hangover.

“There’s that passage we found, when we were looking for the gold,” he mumbles, then rises to his feet. “It goes behind Arya’s room. Come on Sam, let’s go find out what he is hiding from me.”

Sam has to bend forward, get on his knees before he manages to stand up. “What’s gotten into you,
Jon? This isn’t like you.”

“I am king here, am I not? I need to know why Jaqen H’ghar is going to stab me.”

“He’s not going to stab you!”

“He carries a blade strapped to his chest,” Jon snarls. “Saw the shape of it...he lay down...I know what daggers look like under clothes.” He trails off. “Daggers everywhere,” he whispers. He can taste ash in his mouth, ash and rot. The gleeful cruelty on Jaqen H’ghar’s face, from the nightmare last night...it overrides, overrules the friendly, almost kind look Arya’s husband gave him as he left for the night.

Sam sighs. “This is a bad idea. A bad, bad idea.” But he still follows Jon out the door.

The corridor is too long, but they make it to the end, and down a short flight of stairs without slipping too often. The entrance to the passageway is an alcove that had been bricked up when this wing of Winterfell was repaired, more than two hundred years ago. They’ve put in a solid door, and Sam holds the key.

It takes a few tries, but they get the key in the lock, and turn it. Jon grabs a covered glass lantern from a holder beside the door, and they push through.

The passage was probably a servant’s corridor, leading from the Lord’s wing to the nurseries. It passes behind each of the rooms they’d had, the Stark children. There is wood panelling separating the passage from the rooms, termite-eaten in places during some long-ago spring. The holes can’t be seen from the room-side, but the entire section behind Arya and Bran’s rooms is porous; sound, air, warmth--the rooms leak.

They don’t need to count doors to find Arya’s room...they can hear her.

Sam’s eyes are wide, he’s shaking his head at Jon.

Jon’s jaw clenches.

Arya’s moans again, the sound of flesh meeting flesh...it’s quite obvious what they’re up to. Rage, irrational, rises in him. Get your hands off my sister!

“But hiding anything, Jon,” Sam whispers furiously, “leave them be.”

The rage ebbs as fast as it had risen. Jon closes his eyes. What the hell am I doing? He feels deeply ashamed, and not a little unsteady. Why am I here?

“Aōhon,” Jaqen says, his breathing harsh. “Aōhon.”

It sounds like a name...a love-name, for Arya?

Jon shakes his head. Not my business, what he calls her in bed! What in the seven hells am I doing here?

Then she says something in a language he cannot understand--he catches something that sounds like his own name, “Jon”... what?

Jaqen replies, and his tone is far, far too serious for a man in the midst of swiving his wife.

Not my business, whatever it is. “Jon” probably means something crude, with my luck.
Jon turns around to leave, almost chokes on the sudden taste of mold at the back of his mouth. He trips on a loose stone underfoot, catches himself on the wall. The lantern falls to the ground, shatters.

The lights go out.

All sound ceases.

Jaqen’s voice is cold, absolutely calm; he says something. Then Arya replies, and she is right up against the wood paneling that leads to the corridor.

*I didn’t hear her move! How did she get from the bed to the panel without me hearing her move?*

More conversation he doesn't understand. Then there is a creak--someone is climbing back into bed. *Only one, or both of them?*

“My watch,” says Arya, in the common tongue. She’s further away now...near the leaded-glass doors that lead to the balcony overlooking the courtyard.

They hear Jaqen sigh.

Jon and Sam are frozen in place; he doesn’t know how long they stand there...till his legs cramp, at least, and Sam’s frame is trembling.

There is nothing but silence from Arya’s room.

Slowly, as quietly as they can, Jon and Sam make their way back down the passage.

They close and lock the passage-door behind them, and Jon leans against the wall, breathing heavily. His heart is still thumping, imagining the sheer *embarrassment* of having been caught spying on his sister and her husband.

*I’m a grown man, a fighter. I’ve ranged beyond the Wall, I’ve killed and died ...I’m acting like a prepubescent boy! What the hell was wrong with me? Man’s a fighter, of course he’s not going to go unarmed, can’t carry swords to a funeral, he took a dagger. That’s all. I had a nightmare; he’s had lots of opportunities to stab me, and I’m still here. He tries a chuckle on for size, at the absurdity of his paranoia.*

“You were right,” says Samwell, when he gets his breath back. “By the old gods, Jon, you were right.”

Jon whips around, looks at the Maester. “*What?*”

Sam is still drunk, but sobering fast, from the way he stands. “They want to kill you!”

Jon just blinks at him in bewilderment.

Sam’s lower lip is trembling. “Arya...she was talking in High Valyrian! *Nobody* talks in High Valyrian!”

Jon is utterly, utterly still. “What did she say?” his voice is almost a whisper; he doesn’t want the answer to his question.

“She said…” Sam passes a hand over his eyes. “She said, ‘you are supposed to kill Jon’.”

Jon slides to the ground. Sam joins him, closes his eyes, lays his head back against the wall.
“Nothing good ever comes from someone who speaks High Valyrian,” Sam says. “Maesters can read it, I understand some, but I can’t speak it they way these two were speaking. The way Pate spoke it, fluent…”

“Who is Pate?”

Sam ignores the question. “When you dropped the lantern...he asked about secrets--secret passages, I think. She said...she said she didn’t know any more than he did. She was angry, Jon. He said stone carries sound if there is...an arch, maybe? That you can hear from one side of a...crypt, I think...to another in a house of black and white. Then she snarled ‘I know’ at him, and refused to come back to bed.”

Jon’s thoughts churn, and he tries to make them focus. “What is a house of black and white?”

“I have no idea.”

The King in the North lowers his head into his hands. “I didn’t want to be right,” he whispers bitterly. “No. I refuse it. I refuse, you understand. This is Arya. You said you don’t speak High Valyrian well...maybe you misinterpreted. Maybe they said someone is supposed to kill me--we have so many enemies. I will not allow myself to believe that Arya is one of them.”

“Don’t let yourself be alone with Jaqen H’ghar,” says Sam, then thinks. “Or Arya.” He looks over at Jon. “I’m sorry.” Jon acknowledges the sentiment. “But you have to keep at least two guards,” Sam continues. “Your people. With you at all times.” Sam means wildlings, Jon knows. The only people that are his, though they bend knee to no lord.

“Yes,” says Jon. “Guards.” He thinks. “Sam, send a raven to Davos, tonight --”

“Still in Cerwyn, isn’t he?”

Jon nods. “Send a raven, and ask him what he knows of a black and white house.”

A part of him just wants to curl up on the floor, and sleep for a week. Instead, he rises to his feet--Sam makes of point of seeing him right to the door of his chambers.

Chapter End Notes

Your feedback and your comments are what keep me going, when monster chapters like this need to be put out. Thank you all so, so much!
ARYA

She stands by the window until her legs ache from the strain and her heart aches from the distance between her and Jaqen.

No. It will not be allowed.

Still furious, still terrified, she stalks back to the bed. His breathing is even, soft, and she knows he is awake. She crawls under the covers, crawls over to him, crawls into his arms. They close, tight around her, and he is murmuring her name into her hair. It eases, some of the turmoil, but not enough. She winds herself around him, legs between his, arms around his torso, head on his chest.

Not enough.

She raises a hand to her face, prays to him with his name on her lips.

The darkness rises, and lays his body, his memory, his...his serenity over hers. And now there are two Jaqen H’ghars in the bed, entwined.

“How can you, how can anyone stand to wear Arya Stark?” he asks. “She is... a cauldron, a vat, a... sewer of seething emotion. “She has no control at all. What use is her face to the Faceless Men, apart from the politicking?”

The question is sincere; it will not be handled with levity.

Him of the Many Faces sighs, turns so they face each other. They breathe, together. “One wears Arya Stark,” He says finally, his breath a whisper against Jaqen’s lips, “when having control, when being no one--when these things are not enough. When one stands at the edge of a precipice.” Jaqen inhales, closes his eyes. “When one stands at the edge of the precipice,” He says, “one wears Arya Stark, because Arya Stark never permits despair.”

Jaqen lets out his breath, ragged. “Arya Stark is our last line of defense.” His lips descend upon Jaqen’s in a gentle kiss.

Jaqen opens his mouth, but He draws away.

“This is very odd,” murmurs Him of the Many Faces.

Jaqen smirks. “Think of the possibilities…”

“Oh, I am,” He says, and Jaqen can feel himself growing hard. But neither of them is in a mood for play at the moment, despite what his body may be telling them.

“You need to dream?” says Jaqen. Our brother is lost.
“Mmm.”

“Let the wind help you.” *Arya Stark is good for something. Arya Stark can help.*

He shakes his head. “Let me try, without it. Just...lay in my arms, love--you need to sleep, too.”

“I need less sleep than you.”

“No in *that* body you don’t.”

Jaqen sighs, turns, so his back rests against His chest, and He curls around Jaqen, drawing him closer. Jaqen no longer fits into the hollows of His shape, He cannot tuck Jaqen’s head under His chin.

“Very odd,” says Jaqen.

“Here...” He draws Jaqen down, a bit, His arm around Jaqen’s chest instead of his stomach, and then Jaqen pulls his head back, till His face is buried in the crook of Jaqen’s neck; a new balance is found.

“Arya Stark had better be stable tomorrow,”Jaqen murmurs, drowsiness rising at the base of his throat, his limbs growing heavier. “Can’t wear you during the day.”

“You can, for as long and as often as you need...I will wear you. It is enlivening, this Arya Stark out-of-control business.”

“Enlivening? Oh, the possibilities...”

Him of the Many Faces snorts, places a small kiss on Jaqen’s shoulder. “Your *focus*, beloved, is a thing of wonder.”

A shout, outside, far away. He looks up. A creak... *the gates of Winterfell* ...hooves pounding upon the stone flagstones of the courtyard.

*Riders, returning from their circuit?* A bit early, if that is the case--unless they found more wights? He looks over and realizes Jaqen is asleep.

*It can wait. It can all wait.* Him of the Many Faces must look for a brother, again.

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**JON**

He has not slept, nor undressed, so when he hears the distant thunder of horse-hooves, he is ready to meet them at the base of “his” tower, in the war-room, along with Samwell Tarly.

Not his riders. Davos Seaworth. The man looks exhausted, there is sweat on his brow, and grime on his face, and his eyes are frantic until they land on Jon.

“You rode all night?” Jon asks.

“*Show me your wounds* ,” Davos commands, and there is something so urgent in his voice, so desperate, Jon cannot help but respond--he draws his shirt above his torso, and exposes the unhealing, black gashes on his skin to the chill air.
Davos sags in relief.
Jon lowers his shirt. “What is...”

“Where are they?” Davos asks.

Samwell nods towards the central part of the keep. “Sleeping, in Arya’s room.”

Davos shakes his head. “That is not Arya.”

Jon closes his eyes, opens them again, and gestures to a seat around the massive table of war. There are maps and papers strewn over its surface, little markers representing troops: his own, his enemies.

Mostly enemies.

He rests his elbows on the surface of the table. “Tell me.”

Davos swallows. Inhales. “The House of Black and White is the name given to the guildhouse of the Faceless Men in Braavos.”

There is a sharp intake of breath from Samwell. Jon, himself, is numb. “The assassins.”

“When you said...they are supposed to kill Jon–they’ve come here to fulfil a contract on your Grace.”

Jon’s jaw clenches. “Why did you ask to see my wounds?”

Davos passes a hand over his face. “It is rumored that a Faceless Man can take on the face of one he has killed. That they have magic, and they can look like anyone, anyone at all.” He looks up at the frozen expression on Jon’s face. “Your Grace...I am sorry.” Davos is a straightforward man. He does not mince his words. “Your sister is dead. Murdered. By whoever it is that is pretending to be her.”

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**HIM OF THE MANY FACES**

The landscape of dreams shifts, but it is most often a vast, dark plane and the line that splits the ground from the sky, a bright slash, the faint slit of light under an eyelid just about to open. He walks; there is no one else on this plane, there cannot be, but the shapes of dreams bloom in the air all around him.

*Brother, where are you?*

A faint resonance, to the east. His faceless brother does not sleep, he...drifts. In and out of wakefulness.

“Brother,” whispers Him of the Many Faces, “where are you?”

*Ship.*

His voice is diseased, tattered. *Too far away, brother, I cannot help you...I cannot help you...* He puts aside his frustration. “Ship going where?”
“What is your next port of call?” Too complex...he will not be able to answer it.

But, from some well of coherence, and Jaqen does not know how, but his brother understands, and answers: Volantis.

The god’s sudden relief is too much...the dream pops, like the surface of a soap-bubble, and the plane is silent again. But it is enough. Volantis.

Him of the Many Faces turns back, draws himself towards more familiar territory...an image blooms, behind His eyes, and the flavor of it he knows as well as he knows his own face.

His bride has been dragged into the dreaming in his wake, it seems. He smiles, and walks into her.

Arya is on her knees, deliciously naked, in the throes of orgasm...and not the first one--he knows that mewling sound...there is a man behind her, working his meat in and out of her. *I should spy on my bride’s dreams more often...only ever kissed her before.* Lust surrounds him, warm. *Mmm.* *Watching myself fuck her in her dreams...* the voyeuristic aspect of it intrigues him.

He walks forward. As he comes closer the face of the man riding Arya resolves, and it is not his own. The taste of betrayal gathers; a caldera, waiting to erupt. Dark hair, but curled, eyes the storm gray of a Stark, a man they both know…

She opens her eyes, meets the gaze of her god. She looks confused, she turns her head, looks at the man fucking her, and she screams.

She awakens with a scream, awakens the both of them, she rolls away from the bed, falls to the ground.

He rises as well, slowly, deliberately. He rises to his full height, and she crawls backwards, away from him. “Is *that* what you want?” he asks, cold, silken, a blade drawn quietly over a throat. “Is *he* why you came to Winterfell?”

She stops crawling. She straightens, rises to her feet. He expects denial--how can she deny that?

“No faces don’t dream,” she says. “No Faceless Man ever dreams of his own accord.”

*No Faceless Man ever dreams* ...the words penetrate the rage in him. He hears his own breath, harsh, uncontrolled. The dim light of dawn, she is silhouetted against it, and there is *no* fear in the lines of her form.

“No nightmares,” she says, bitterly. “No terror, no tears, nothing but peace while I slept, for months, until you came back into my life. And then you sent me wolf dreams. The first one--I thought I was going back on my word to you, to be a Faceless Man, that my commitment to the Many-Faced God was not deep enough…” she laughs, harsh. “I was in the crypt, below the Hall, and it took two Lorathi brothers and a Braavosi, to stop me from slitting my wrists.”

Slowly, slowly, he sinks to his knees. “I...I did not know.”

There is scorn in her voice. “The great Jaqen H’ghar, not knowing a thing? I thought it was a test,” she spits at him. “Because the kissing dreams started right after.”
“Arya…” shadows are gathering, at the edge of his vision. She looks around the room, and he realizes it is not just in his vision...darkness is rising out of the ground, of the stones, and what it touches, it is turning to dust.

She turns to him again. “No Faceless Man dreams, unless the dreams come from you. Our brothers explained it. They taught me how to balance myself, how to ground myself into the world each time you left me.”

The darkness...it has a relenting in it. It recedes; it has eaten away the surface of the stones at the corners of the room, the edges of the massive wooden wardrobe.

“So the thing that you made me do,” she says, “That was not me, Lord of Endless Night. That was you. Your dream. Your fantasy...terror. Nobody can draw someone into the dreaming unless you do it-- you drew Jon into me. So fuck you.”

She turns on her heel, throws open the balcony doors, steps out into the winter air. Naked.

He kneels. He battles with his rage, the taste of it, it sickens him, and he knows, he knows she is right, has always known, understanding a thing annihilates it, there should be no anger in him. And yet it rages. There is no mastery to be had; sick to his stomach his rises, gathers a sheet off the bed, follows her out the door.

She is looking away from him. He drapes the sheet over her shoulders.

She is weeping.

“I have memories,” she says, “but I did not know what it was like to have anyone other than you inside me,” she covers her eyes, every line of her body screaming at Him, “and now I do.” The helplessness, the hurt in her voice...He walks forward, wraps his arms around her. She struggles, claws at him, but this time He does not let go.

The betrayal at the back of his mouth, it shrinks, to nothing, to less than nothing, in the face of her distress. And in their absence, he knows... the feel of her, around me, driving into her from behind, looking up, meeting my own eyes, when it comes to himself, when it comes to her, truth can be denied but it cannot be unknown.

“Beloved,” he says, “beloved, none but me walk in the dreaming.”

She stills, in the circle of his arms.

“And I can draw none into it save those that belong to me,” he says. “Jon is not mine, he is not even asleep, it seems. It was all me. A projection...shaped. I wear many faces.” He bends, breathes in the scent of her hair, the feel of her. “Forgive me. Forgive me.” He does not know what he should say, only what he can. “Only me, in you, only ever me. But I...I am choking on ash, beloved, I have turned against myself, against you, I--”

“Fuck you,” she says, and then she rounds on him, and she is still furious but no longer hurting. “Magic amplifies, it twists, but it cannot create. Even what I did to bring you back...it found what was in me already, and it found Nymeria, and it amplified us. This shit you're doing--it's exactly what you did at the inn, throwing me at Gendry.”

His eyes are closed; he sways. “Yes,” he murmurs. Again, “Forgive me.”

“Well, your only other option was a very ugly man from Asshai, so there is that.”

She laughs, and then she bites his nipple, hard. “There is that,” she says, her hand pressing gentle circles into his chest, to soothe the hurt. The hurt, the betrayal...it is soothed, it is melted in the heat of her fury.

She opens the sheet, gathers him in it, draws it close around the both of them.

But His anger...it lurks, below the surface of his thoughts, and it is a vast thing. “The Red God sleeps, and he dreams...he found a seed, in me, but it has grown.” Black bile, at the back of his throat. “There are spells,” he says. Protections. A vial full of a mother’s tears, tied around a soldier’s neck. Blood, from a wife who loves without measure, smeared upon a sailor’s brow. “A drop of your blood,” he begs, “upon my brow.”

“No,” she says. “Control yourself.”

A test. He exhaled. “That is fair.”

“Was it all worth something at least?” she asks. “Did you find our brother?”

Oh, my practical one. Volantis. He is on a ship...heading--”

“Our sister from Vaes Dothrak, she will be close. We need to contact her.”

He does not want to dream again.

“Ravens, Jaqen,” she says, impatient, knowing exactly what is going through his head. “Now.”

He would have liked to stand here, begging her forgiveness, for a while longer. But it seems she has already forgiven Him.

“Let’s go wake Samwell Tarly.”

---

ARYA

She is angry enough that she is ready to feed all her emotions to the wind, and then tie Jaqen down to the bed and fuck him while she wears every single fucking face that she knows. And he’s obviously feeling guilty enough that he’d let her.

Stupid fucking Many-Faced God! The words are...an echo, she realizes. Brothers--the theistic ones, the ones that believe, or know --they curse the god all the time. She’s never done it before...apparently she’s not any more devout than the others, she just hadn’t had proper cause so far.

She throws her head back and laughs.

They are clattering down the stone stairwell to the Maester’s quarters, Jaqen two steps behind her.

“Love?” he asks.

She stops, arches backwards, meets his lips for a quick kiss. He looks baffled. She shakes her head, continues descending.
They’re crossing the inner courtyard--it’s the shortest way to reach the other side of the keep, when Jon emerges from the lord’s tower, his new Valyrian Steel sword in hand. There is a sudden urge to vomit; her mind has dismissed the dream, *it was stupid fucking Many-Faced God playing fucking stupid games*, but her body still reacts with revulsion. In the next moment she has mastered it. *I am no one.*

“Jon!” she calls. “Is Maester Samwell--”

Jon breaks into a run, his sword is raised above his head...he’s coming for her, and her training has been far too complete not to recognize the commitment to kill when she sees it.

Arya freezes in place, utterly, utterly bewildered. “Jon?” she whispers.

And then Jaqen is in front of her. He did not bring his sword; he deflects Jon’s blade with his dagger. *Jon was aiming for my head*. The Valyrian steel is deflected, it swings wide, but it shears Jaqen’s dagger in half in the process.

Arya still cannot move. Her thoughts are slow, so slow, remote. *Jaqen is going to kill Jon*. But with Jaqen unarmed, with Jon wielding Valyrian Steel--and Jon is a far, far better fighter than she has expected him to be, better than anyone she’s seen outside the House of Black and White--it is not entirely certain who will kill whom.

*Jaqen asked me to spare him a drop of my blood. Should have bled myself dry, made the both of them bathe in my blood...would have kept them safe.*

*Why did Jon attack me?*

She blinks, and realizes only a single breath has passed; Jon is still recovering from his strike, Jaqen is sliding to the side.

Jon’s reach is too long, and disarming him will be nigh impossible without...Jaqen is moving in an unexpected pattern, weaving, ducking down...she has never seen him do that before. *My move*, she realizes. The one she uses to slide inside Jaqen’s reach, deliver the killing slash with her own, shorter blade.

*Jaqen has another knife*. The poisoned one, at his back.

Arya explodes into motion. She knows how this attack will end--she slides around Jaqen’s back, weaves *under* his elbow--and she intersperses herself between Jaqen’s blade, and Jon.

The world suddenly roars back to life. Harsh breaths surround her. Both fighters have...paused, confused at this interloper to their momentum.

“You will not kill my brother,” she says to Jaqen.

Jaqen...Jaqen *smiles*. She looks at his hand--his *empty* hand. No knife. His palm has come to rest on her shoulder. He wasn’t aiming for Jon’s throat.

She looks up.

Jon wears an expression of utter bewilderment, it changes to dismay, but the tip of his sword wavers. “I am *not* your brother,” he spits.

Jaqen moves, backwards, drags Arya with him, and she allows it up until the moment that Jaqen draws her *behind* himself, shielding her with his body. She paws at his grip, but it is inflexible.
“I am not your brother,” Jon says, but his bewilderment only grows.

Arya looks over his shoulder. Samwell Tarly, and a man she doesn’t know, an old man, they are racing towards them. Tears of frustration, of hurt have gathered at the corner of her eyes. She holds his eyes, willing him to believe her. “You are,” she says, and hates the brokenness in her voice.

“Get away from them Jon!” Samwell shouts.

“One thinks the proverbial cat has been let out of the bag,” Jaqen murmurs.

“Aarrgh!” she says. “Jon, I told you we needed to talk!”

The old man pushes Jon to a side, stands half in front of him.

“Assassins,” he rasps, raises his voice. “Assassins! Guards!”

Samwell Tarly takes up position on the other side of the old man. “No guards,” he gasps. “Went...wights.”

“This is ridiculous,” Arya says. “Jon, put the damn blade away. Jaqen, stop trying to protect me!”

Both men look at her as if she is mad. “He wants to kill you,” Jaqen says.

The old man speaks. “We know what you are,” he growls. “You are not Arya Stark.”

“Aarrgh!” A part of Arya thinks that a Faceless Man should be more articulate than her at the moment, but all she wants to do is garrote the old man; she has pinpointed him as the cause of all this. And she is going to strangle Jon as well, just for good measure.

“You can look like anyone, act like anyone!” The tip of Jon’s blade is cutting figure-eights in the air; it has shifted, it is aimed at her throat.

Arya draws a deep breath. I am no one. “Jaqen,” she says, then in Lorathi. “A man will release his bride, to do what she must.” Another test, for Him, to let her go. Hasn’t He been tested enough?

Jaqen releases her hand.

Arya rises her arms in the air, to show that they are empty. Then she steps forward, around Jaqen, and walks towards Jon. Everyone tenses; no one moves. She keeps walking, she does not stop until the edge of Jon’s Valyrian steel sword rests on her shoulder. She tilts her head away, presents her neck to him, and looks her brother...brother, regardless of what your blood might say...she looks him in the eyes.

She can feel the darkness gathering behind her, the sheer force of will Jaqen exerts to stay motionless. Her cruelty to him in this moment, it is worthy of the wind. We are even, Jaqen H’ghar. Even now, you and I.

“She slice, Jon,” she says, “if you think I am not Arya.”

“Don’t believe her,” the old man growls.

“I want to believe,” Jon says, and his eyes are welling, though his blade is rock steady. “I want to believe,” he whispers.

She grins. Going to make Jaqen tell the Kindly Man I am always right. No other Arya Stark would have sufficed, in this moment. “Where is Ghost?” she asks. “Look through Ghost’s senses--a
direwolf is never wrong about blood.”

Jon’s eyes furrow. “Ghost…?”

She blinks. *Oh no.* “Are you not warging into him yet? Is it just the dreams still?” Panic is rising. *If he doesn’t know…*

“How did you…” Jon’s blade drops away.

“Wait, what?” asks Samwell Tarly. “Jon?”

“How did you know?” asks Jon.

“Nymeria,” she says, and cannot quite control the blurring of her vision. “I dreamed, until…”

Jon has broken out in a sweat. The sword goes back in its sheath. And then she is in his arms again, and he is crushing her to him, and she is grips him just as tightly. “I was going to kill you,” he whispers. “I was going to kill you.”

“Yes, you were,” says Jaqen, and his voice is…indecipherable. “So you will step away from my wife now.”

*Oh oh.* She lets go of Jon, retreats quickly into Jaqen’s arms.

“A man passed, yes?” Jaqen murmurs into her hair, in Lorathi, still looking out over her head.

In response, she reaches for the one knife she’s brought with her, strapped to her upper arm. She draws it out, and Samwell Tarly and the old man tense yet again, but Jon doesn’t. She nicks her finger, draws blood, gropes blindly for Jaqen’s face.

“Better late than never,” he jests, once she anoints him with her blood. He lowers his voice, it is a growl in her ear. “But if you ever do something like that again, I will excavate another chamber from the rock under the crypt, and I will chain you down in it, and you will not see the light of day for a millennium.”

“As long as you are in there with me,” she says. “Now let go, I need to protect him, too.”

“Tears,” he says. “Tears for sons and brothers.”

She nods, wipes at her eyes with her other hand, and walks forward again. She realizes still holds the knife, she puts it on the ground, then reaches up and makes a line across Jon’s forehead with the meagre moisture her eyes have yielded up to her.

*Salt, and sorrow.*

Jon blinks. “The smell…it’s gone…”

“Ash?” asks Jaqen.

Jon looks wildly over her shoulder at him, sees something in Jaqen’s face, doesn’t ask anything further.

“Now,” says Arya, “we are going to go wake up Sansa--and Sandor, if she wants--and we’re going to have that talk I’ve been wanting to for *two fucking days*, Jon!”

Jon nods, grim. Regretful.
“Anyone care to explain what is going on?” asks Samwell Tarly.

“Now, before you come any closer,” says the old man.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are,” Arya rounds on him, “and I don’t care. How dare you try to turn my brother against me?”

Jon and Samwell exchange a look. “Um,” says Samwell, “I... mistranslated something. Um. We thought you were Faceless Men, assassins, from Braavos.”

Arya deflates. And realizes she is exhausted of this dance, of knowing and unknowing, of handling and managing. “I am a Faceless Man,” she says. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Both the old man and Samwell Tarly’s mouths gape, and they don’t know whether to step in front of Jon or back away. Jon looks bewildered all over again.

“I joined the order after I fled Westeros,” she says. “I’m back, because there’s a lot more going on than just the fucking Lannisters.”

Jon rubs a hand over his hair, that gesture she knows so, so well… “Nothing is ever simple,” he mumbles.

Sansa chooses that moment to come into the courtyard. She is impeccably dressed, in a severe black dress, her hair braided and coiled upon her head, not a strand out of place. It is a striking contrast to the disheveled, sleepless state of the others in the courtyard.

“What is going on?” Sansa demands. “Davos? What are you doing back?”

Davos. Davos Seaworth, then. Damn, he’s loyal to Jon, if what Samwell told Pate is true, I can’t kill him. “Maester Samwell and this old man here, they found out, and they told Jon I was a Faceless Man.”

Davos Seaworth tries to say something, Arya talks over him. “Jon tried to kill me!” And now he’s not going to live it down till the end of time, she thinks with satisfaction.

Sure enough, “Jon!” gasps Sansa. “How could you?”

“You knew?” Jon asks.

Samwell Tarly is shaking his head, muttering to himself.

Sansa ignores the question. “Tea is ready,” she says. “We will go to mother’s bower, and we will talk. Now.” She looks over Arya’s head, at Jaqen. “You intervened, didn’t you?” she asks him.

“Naturally,” Jaqen replies.

“Good,” says Sansa. “Arya wouldn’t have defended herself.” Sansa delivers a flat glare to the others in the courtyard, including Arya. Then Sansa turns on her heel and stalks towards the Lady’s wing, the skirts of her dress swirling around her feet.

Everyone follows.

Her mother’s favourite color--blue, with orange embroidery--is everywhere in this room. The
chairs, arranged just so, even the small bowl of stones from the river that came with her mother when she married into the North. This room, it is how it has always been, and Arya finds herself hiding her face into Jaqen’s shirt while everyone gets settled.

He trembles, under her touch, not enough to show...but too much to control entirely.

Valar morghulis. There should be no fear of death, between the two of them. “The darkness would have held me,” she murmurs.

“And who would have held the darkness?” he asks.

And an image forms in her mind’s eye: a vista of uncountable years, grey, stretching out before Him, punctuated by duty, by mercy, and nothing else.

Alone. He would have faced all of eternity alone.

She chokes on her fear; the fear, it evokes her fight or flight response, and Arya Stark always fights. “Then I will become wind, for you,” she whispers. “The wind never dies.”

“My beautiful, lovely, brave Arya, my mercy, my faith, my lethal Arya, my true,” he is murmuring into her hair in Lorathi, and when he runs out of adjectives in that tongue, he switches to cruder things, suggestions only, but...they heat her blood, distract her from the sudden urge to resonate with the cold, cold rivers of air far overhead, to wrap him in ice, to keep him safe.

She is listening to him, and adding each word out of his mouth to the secret chamber of her heart where she keeps such things. They are on the ground, upon the soft carpet, because all the chairs are made for one person.

They both notice at the same time that Samwell Tarly is looking...constipated. He, too, sits on the floor, as if worried that his bulk will be too much for the spindly-legged Southern-style chairs to handle.

They stop, draw away from each other, she wipes angrily at her eyes.

“What?” she demands of the Maester.

“Um.” Samwell Tarly avoids her gaze. “Low Valyrian...it’s just a little...uncomfortable, listening to that. Is all.”

Maester. They study High Valyrian at the Citadel, some words are common in all the Low dialects.

“If you are uncomfortable, I will switch to Dothraki,” says Jaqen coldly, “and if you understand that, I will speak in Lhazareen, and if that upsets you, then Lengenese. But I will speak.” He draws her to him again, and murmurs darkly sexual things into her ear until Jon takes a seat.

“How many languages do you know?” asks Jon. His swordbelt is unbuckled, the Valyrian steel sword placed near the door, far out of reach.

“All of them,” says Jaqen, flat.

She caresses his arm, and then, defiant, she actually crawls into his lap and buries her head in his chest. “You talk,” she says, as he cradles her to him. “I’m tired.”

She senses everyone is waiting with bated breath.

“We are Faceless Men,” he says.
Not that we look like it at the moment, cuddling on the ground, but Jon...Jon has assessed some of Jaqen’s skill, and my speed, outside...non-threatening is better, for everyone else.

“Our order accepted a contract, for your life,” Jaqen continues. “We did not know it was targeted at you, specifically, we were not given your true name. But I was supposed to kill you.”

Davos is muttering.

“Obviously,” says Jaqen, and she feels his arms tighten around her, “I am not going to kill you. The contract would never have been accepted, had its true nature been known. We were deceived.”

“You said you were on my side,” says Jon, quietly. “The ash…”

She feels Jaqen nod. “R’hllor. The contract for your life came from Asshai, from R’hllor’s sorcerers. They use their sorceries-- suggestions, dreams--in an attempt to...fabricate a confrontation, open, armed conflict, between you and me.”

“But that doesn’t work,” says Tarly, “If you’re fighting out in the open, not poisoning him in the dark or something, then Jon will win.”

Neither Jon, nor Jaqen say anything; their silence speaks volumes. Davos swears.


Arya looks up. “The one with Stannis Baratheon’s army? We will kill her. Where is she? Jon, give me her name, and something...um...Jaqen, we can concur on a price, I’ll go kill her right now.”

Jon shakes his head. “I gave her my word...banished her.”

Davos is rubbing at his eyes. “She burned a little girl alive. Burned her. Princess Shireen.”

She can hear the disgust in Jaqen’s voice. “R’hllor demands such sacrifices.” Arya twists around, now she wants to be part of the discussion. Casually, deliberately not looking at Sansa (and Sansa’s sense of propriety), she climbs off Jaqen’s lap and sits to his left; he draws her close, and his arm is a bar of iron around her midsection.

She thinks about it for a moment, then shrugs, and settles against his side.

“Why do these priestesses want me dead?” asks Jon, his eyes dark and troubled.

“Some stupid prophecy,” says Arya. “And their spells-the ash you smelled--their spells are real, even of their god is false.”

“Not false,” says Samwell. “Um. We’ve...they’ve resurrected --” Jon cuts Samwell off with one hand.

“Beric Dondarrion?” asks Jaqen. None of the others say anything.

“Sorcery,” spits Arya. “That’s all it is. It’s been done by others, too.” Me, for starters. “As for gods...there is only one god that is real, and his name is Death!”

And “Jaqen H’ghar” and “The Lion of Night” and “The Weeping Woman” and “please, please do that again with your tongue...”.

“Behave,” he murmurs.
The others look a bit uncomfortable. She ratchets her...religious fervor...down a notch. “Or so we are taught, in the House of Black and White.”

“Resurrections,” says Jaqen. She stills. “There is no easy way to say this, but...Thoros of Myr resurrected Beric Dondarrion, as you all seem to be aware. What you may not be aware of--I certainly was not--Beric Dondarrion gave his gift of resurrection to another.”

Arya sighs, bows her head.

“To Catelyn Stark.”

Mother...Mother... Arya can still smell the water weeds, and it wars with the smell of this room, with the smells of her mother in her memories. She loses the thread of the discussion, the arguments, the rapt silence as Jaqen elaborates.

There is a pause, and Samwell Tarly is dispatched to their rooms, to bring back Arya’s pack. The letters.

Couldn’t have done this, had I came alone, she thinks.

“Of course you would have,” says Jaqen, and the confidence in his voice--no feigning, not for her--it gives her the courage to sit up straight, assess the room.

Sansa’s face is twisted, frozen, as if she wants to weep but has forgotten how.

Arya makes to go to her sister, but Sansa waves her down, slowly, slowly, regaining control of herself.

“Thank you,” she says to Arya. “I couldn’t have. She was suffering, but I couldn’t have…” she looks at Jaqen, back at Arya, shakes her head. She means the poison, Arya realizes. Jaqen told them, of the end.

“Of course you would have,” she says, echoing Jaqen’s earlier words. Sansa looks at her, and firms, and there is steel in her spine again.

Huh. So that’s how it works--all it takes to remind you of who you are is someone else seeing you for what you are.

Arya looks at Jon. “You’re a Stark, by the way--Jaqen was just about to get to that--but Robb legitimized you, before…”

Jon lowers his head into his hands, and his posture seems to be a mirror of hers, from before.

Tarly arrives, along with their packs. The Maester is far fitter than he appears to be, she realizes--he’s not really breathing too hard.

She places Jon’s letter on his lap, then hands Sansa’s to her. “There’s one for Bran as well, we’ll give it to him as soon as we see him.”

Jon looks up. “Bran…”

“Alive,” says Jaqen. “Beyond the wall--he’s got the same talent you and Arya have, he’s...from what I...extrapolate, he’s been training it.”

A stray thought: There is a heart tree, in the House of Black and White. I dreamed...thought I dreamed, of Bran, in the barrow. Where does he fit into this?
“And what talent is this?” asks Davos. Sansa, too, raises an eyebrow.

“Sansa may have it too,” says Arya, then shrugs. “We’ll have to find out. Jon?” She invites his speaking...she doesn’t know this Seaworth, maybe he is averse to all magic, not just the Red God’s....

“It is an old thing,” says Jon. “Carries in the Stark bloodline--the direwolves...we can sometimes see through the eyes of our direwolves, share their dreams. That’s how I scouted some things, when we were north of the Wall.”

Close enough, thinks Arya. Even if knows more, he doesn’t want to speak of it. It has served its purpose, for now, anything else Bran can handle, it’s not like I know much more.

Samwell Tarly is looking constipated again. Davos is muttering, but Sansa...her hand is over her mouth.

“Lady,” she whispers.

Arya gives her a half-smile. “I lost Nymeria too,” she says. Sort of. “If you have the talent, there are different ways to exercise it….” I can do cats, for example.

“Magic,” says Jon. “All magic. We’ve forgotten it, and now it bears down upon us like an unstoppable gale, we are surrounded by it, and we don’t know how to deal with it.” He looks down at the folded parchment in his lap. “Is there anything in this that...that I need to see, right away?” he asks.

Arya shakes her head. “Just...farewell.”

Jon nods, picks up the paper and tucks it into his shirt. Sansa does the same with hers. Then Jon clears his throat.

“So you came here to...warn me?”

“Protect you,” says Arya. Jon looks at Jaqen for confirmation, and is...somehow reassured by whatever he sees on Jaqen’s face.

“But you are Faceless Men,” says Davos, looking back and forth between them. “Faceless Men do not...”

JAQEN

He grins. “What is a precedent, if it cannot be set?” Too Lorathi for them, still. “Quite apart from...personal reasons,” he says, turning back to Sansa and Jon Stark (she is warm against his side, his personal reason, and she will have a real fight on her hands if she thinks he is going to let her go any time soon), “there is a matter of politics involved.”

His lovely girl has caught his intention. She reaches for her pack again.

“What politics?” asks Sansa.

“Braavosi politics,” says Arya. She pulls out a roll of oilcloth tied with a black ribbon. She unfolds it, takes out the parchment it protects, hands it to Jon. “I am the city’s official envoy, to the King in
Arya Stark only because it is the name given to me by my mother, and my father, whom I loved very much,” she says.

Her pronouncement is met with hurt irritation by Sansa. There is disbelief in Samwell Tarly’s face...only Jon seems unaffected. He is looking at Arya, considering, weighing.

“Does it mean so little, sister, our House?” Jon asks, softly.

The bones of truth.

“It means everything,” she says quietly. “He means more.”

Him of the Many Faces closes his eyes, for a very, very brief moment. There is a vast pit in him; when this chasm yawned, he does not know... maybe it was always there. R’hillor’s spells, the dreaming, it filled that pit with rage; in the absence of the rage... Who holds the darkness?

She fills the pit with herself.

His breath is controlled, his face is controlled, and he opens his eyes. He observes--The King in the North, Jon Stark, brother and childhood confidante, he has recognized the finality of Arya’s choice.

Jon Stark’s eyes flicker to Jaqen’s, and for the first time there is something in them other than bafflement. Jon Stark has also recognized Jaqen’s response for what it is.

How can you recognize something if you have not seen it before?

This man, he has loved, too, and lost, when a choice was made.

Jaqen’s lips pull in commiseration. Jon’s answering smile is an understanding between them. No more needs to be said.

“Braavos has entered the game of thrones,” says Arya, “drawn into it by two of their most influential guilds. The Iron Bank supports Daenerys Targaryen, with gold, with...scheming. The
House of Black and White supports the Starks.”

“Because Arya married you, Jaqen,” says Sansa, thoughtful, “and you are of the House of Black and White.” She sounds a little regretful.

He raises an eyebrow. “You’d prefer I was of the Iron Bank?” he teases.

Sansa smiles, resigned. “We’ll take what we can get.” She is thinking. “They would not have supported us--we have no gold, and I think the Iron Bank wants to make good its losses under Baratheon and Lannister reign?”

Arya nods. “They want the Lannister gold, and Tyrion Lannister is Hand to Daenerys Targaryen.”

“They also loaned a substantial amount to King Stannis,” says Davos, sadly.

Sansa looks troubled.

He can almost see the alliances and marriages and plots and counterplots swirling in her head, the what-ifs. This game that she thinks the world plays...its influence must be reduced upon her, upon Winterfell, Jaqen senses, for Arya’s sake if nothing else.

It is time to...clarify our position, mine, and my bride’s.

“The House of Black and White does not support the Starks because Arya Stark married a Faceless Man,” he says. Arya looks at him, a bit startled, and he gently traces the shape of her fingers in his hand. “The House of Black and White Supports the Starks because Arya Stark is a Faceless Man.”

Sansa’s eyes widen, a bit, and then they narrow as she thinks. Yes, sister of my heart, push, push back against the invisible cage they have put you in.

“And what is the price? No Faceless Man ever does anything without a price.”

“Winterfell has no power to pay anything…” says Sansa.

Arya turns to Jaqen for help in answering that question without exposing the other part of her scheme, the one where Arya Stark marries the Sealord of Braavos. She knows by now that her fledgeling schemes cannot steer the course of the House of Black and White. All schemes can be ignored, all plots can be brought to a screaming halt with a sharp edge, with poison. She knows this, and wonders…

She is endearing, when she is uncertain--though he would not dare say the word to her, “lovely girl” is about as much as he can get away with. Terrifying, when she is focused. Stroking the two sides of her, losing himself between them, between the swell of her breasts, her thighs open…

“Behave,” she murmurs softly, for his ears alone; the others think they take council, in secret matters, probably.

He nods, serious. “There is no price,” he says.

Davos’s brows furrow in suspicion. “Why?”

“Because one of our own asked for it to be so,” says Jaqen.

There is silence. They are not blind to the nuances of that statement, not Jon, nor Samwell Tarly. Davos Seaworth least of all.
But she looks bewildered, as if she did not expect such a thing for her.

“It has been done before,” he says gently, “the House’s resources mobilized to support the agenda of one of its members.”

He wills her to remember, and she does: Valyria, for every Faceless Man that came out of its slave pits. Gogossos, for Ambraysis Alayain. Vaes Diaf for their sister who rode out of Vaes Dothrak. The purge of the Iron Bank, for Varro Massag.

And, they have bound themselves to each other, Him of the Many Faces and Arya Stark, so it cannot be that one’s agenda is independent of the other’s. Arya Stark is not here simply to support the house of her birth (nor avenge them; the time for vengeance is done).

The Bride of Death is here to mobilize the allies of the House of Black and White. Because after Valyria, after Gogossos, the khalasar of Diaf, the Iron Bank...there is one more, added to His list.

Asshai, Ashshai for them whose name has been forgotten.

War is coming. She struck the opening blow, in a barrow, and the battle for the North, the battle for Jon Stark who is bound still as the champion of R’hllor, this battle is the next one that must be fought.

“What is the form of this support?” Samwell Tarly echoes Davos’s first question. “You will...um. kill people for us?”

Jaqen spreads his hands, as if to say, I have no idea. “Whatever Arya thinks is appropriate.”

“Yes, but Arya can’t just dictate what your guild...” Sansa pauses.

“I have discretion,” Arya says. A subtle word, discretion. It implies the power to negotiate, to bind, but up to a limit.

Everyone keeps looking at Jaqen for confirmation.

His beautiful girl is impassive. She sees it too... This is the constriction of Westeros--a woman, no matter how capable, no matter how powerful, if her husband (though he be a commoner) is around, she is somehow...less. And a woman that cows her husband, through power or nagging or guile, she is respected, but the husband is diminished, and both made a mock of behind their backs.

What an awful culture these people bequeath upon their children.

Jaqen H’ghar and Arya Stark are not of this culture, and they are not wearing any faces, any personas to blend in. It is a very, very strange thing, this. Stranger, by far, than kissing her while she wears my face. To be Faceless --it has another meaning this time. To be naked.

“Her word is law,” he says, and it is the last he intends to say on it.

“What do you need?” asks Arya, in a quiet, serious voice.

There are words on everyone’s lips, words they do not speak: alliances and the Last Hearth and gold, and an army. But Arya is looking at Jon Stark, and he is not their King in name alone...Jon Stark is thinking.

“What do you want?” asks Arya.

Jon snorts. “A hundred Valyrian Steel swords,” he says.
Arya smiles, feline. “How very interesting…”

Jaqen is reminded of this attribute of his bride’s, *she is calculating, not merely opportunistic. Bold, but not unnecessarily reckless*. The chances of Jon Stark killing her, when she bared her neck to his blade, perhaps they were smaller than Jaqen’s terror has calculated them to be. He relaxes his hold a little.

Jon has not lost his amusement. “Your guild of assassins has Valyrian steel swords they’d lend us,” he asks, and his voice is dry.

“She’s right,” she says. “But we have the knowing of their making, and I have a smith that might have the skill to make them; the magesteel must come from Myr.”

Babble breaks out—Samwell Tarly is speaking at the same time as Jon, Davos Seaworth is explaining the *why* of it to Sansa who doesn’t seem to have been told that White Walkers can be killed with Valyrian Steel….

“We need,” Arya shouts, cutting through the tumult, “We need dragonfire, for the forging.”

There is silence.

“The dragon queen,” says Jon. “You want me to marry Daenerys Targaryen, so we can use her dragons in the war against winter.”

Arya raises an eyebrow. “You’ve got a better plan?”

Both Sansa and Davos Seaworth shake their heads at the same time.

“She will not consider it, not a *Stark*,” says Sansa, “any more than she would a Baratheon!”

“Even if she did,” says Davos, “she would want the North to bend knee.”

Arya draws another roll of parchment from her pack, tosses it to Sansa this time. She leans back as well. “A proposal,” says Arya, and she suppresses the smugness very well. “Targaryen to Stark, Queen of Meereen to the King in the North. Your ex-husband penned it.”

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**JON**

His world has spun about its axis so many times since…last night, the night before, Jon still feels dizzy. This room, the blue and the orange, the women’s chairs…none of it helps him find his equilibrium. In this room, a part of him is a child again, disapproved of, one who is not allowed in here, and who must walk softly even as he passes this door in the hall, in case Catelyn Stark recognizes his tread.

Absently, he touches the paper that nestles between his vest and shirt. *What sort of farewell would she have bid me?*

Later.

At the moment, he must focus on Arya. “Solve problems, you said, the night before last,” he says to her. His eyes fill again.
I could have killed her.

He knows exactly why Jaqen drew her into his lap, exactly why Arya’s husband sits in the posture he sits in now, outwardly calm, but every muscle poised to...grab her and flee, to interpose himself between her and everybody else. He knows why Jaqen doesn’t let go of her.

Jaqen must continuously reassure himself that she is real, that she yet lives.

Had he moved but a heartbeat later...

The ash, the choking taste of mold at the back of his tongue, it is gone now, and he can feel Arya’s tears drying on his forehead, tightening his skin; there is a matching smear, of brown, on Jaqen’s that nobody has asked about yet.

Had he been any less of a fighter... Sansa’s words in the courtyard, they rang true-- Arya would not have defended herself.

And then the fear threatens to drown him.

I was going to kill Arya .

He can rage at Samwell, at Davos all he likes for leading him down that path, but it is not their fault. He is responsible for his actions. “I’m sorry,” he says, and he doesn’t care that his voice breaks.

“Should have talked to me before trying to behead me, huh?” says Arya.

“Lovely girl,” says Jaqen, in Westerosi though his inflection, his accent remains firmly of Lorath, “you have had months, of receiving news of your family, knowing they lived. Two days, for Jon and Sansa Stark, knowing that Arya Stark is alive.”

Why is he defending me?

“You have had many, many weeks,” Jaqen continues, “to become accustomed to the idea of your mother and father as bones. One day, for Jon and Sansa Stark, to lay the bones and the memories to rest. Death requires...acclimatization. And in between the knowing and the mourning, the king rode against those that do not die when they should.”

She bows her head. “I am chastened,” she says.

“No, you’re right,” says Jon. “I should have talked to you, first thing, no matter what.”

Arya smiles, a little sad. “You see me as the little girl I was, when last we met.”

Jon winces. “Um. Not anymore.” Intoxication should induce forgetfulness; in this case it seems to have amplified the moans, Jaqen’s voice...Jon gulps, frantically trying to rid himself of the memories.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow, then his eyes widen very, very slightly. “There are secret passages Arya Stark does not know about.”

Samwell turns as red as the wine they’d drunk the night before.

Arya’s face is completely, utterly blank. “Maester translated the High Valyrian, I assume,” she says, after a pregnant pause, and Jon has no trouble believing she is an assassin, at the moment. “If you heard everything, then why the suspicion?”
“Um. Heard only the last bit,” offers Sam, hesitant.

“Surprised you tried to kill her then, not me,” Jaqen murmurs, addressing no one in particular, his gaze focused somewhere over their heads.

Jon finds he cannot look anywhere in the other man’s direction, he must, perforce, study the scrolled molding along the room’s ceiling.

Sansa and Davos have finished reading the document. “Secret passages?” Sansa asks. “The ones behind our old rooms? What were you all doing there?”

There is silence. Samwell shifts, and Jon redoubles his fascination with the elegant scrollwork—he wonders if it is a House Tully thing, wooden ceilings and molding, the flowing lines are reminiscent of rivers…

Sansa sighs. “These Targaryen terms, Arya, they are not acceptable.”

Jon looks back down—Arya has lost her murderous look, mostly, he thinks in relief.

Jon still can’t meet Jaqen’s eyes.

“We must negotiate,” agrees Arya.

“How much can we push for?”

“Love,” Arya murmurs, and Jaqen removes his arm from around her. There is nothing to indicate whether the letting go has cost him anything, and yet…

The girls rise, almost as one, and retreat to a small table in the corner of the bower, spreading out the parchment in front of them.

“Davos,” calls Sansa, “a moment, if you please.”

“Right,” says Davos, and joins the girls.

Jaqen is the first to break the silence. “Maester Samwell, while the discussions continue, I must request an urgent loan of two of your ravens—we must send word, back to the guild and…elsewhere.”

Sam nods, vigorously. Then he looks downcast again. “We received a raven, for Lady Arya. We didn’t give it to you.”

The seriousness of this matter…Jon turns to Jaqen. “My fault… I was growing suspicious, I asked Tarly to hold back until we knew more.”

Now it is Jaqen’s turn to look terrifyingly blank. “How long ago?” he asks.

“A day and a night,” says Samwell.

Jaqen relaxes.

Samwell jumps to his feet. “I’ll go get it right away!” He trundles out of the room.

Jon ducks his head, looks up at Jaqen, wincing. “I’m sorry?” he offers. Not for the raven...that, Jon judges, falls under the duties of a king. No, he is very, very sorry he spied on them last night.
What was heard cannot be unheard.

Jaqen considers him. “You are not the sort to listen at keyholes,” he says, then sighs. “And I am not the sort to...well. Let us consider the matter forgotten, Jon Stark, until we see R’hllor, and we can pay him back for every indignity visited upon us. Upon her.”

There is anger, simmering below Jaqen’s surface, Jon realizes. The kind of rage that makes men dangerous... not that he needs rage to be dangerous. But Arya’s husband is not angry at him, not at Jon.

“I almost...I was lost,” says Jon, shaking his head.

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “So was I. So would I have remained, but for the grace of Arya Stark.”

Jon winces again. “I’ll have to apologize to her too.”

Jaqen shakes his head no. “Don’t remind her. She is...vengeful.”

Jon considers this, and shudders. “I’ll have Sam give you the key, for the passages so it doesn’t...happen again. Um. Sorry.”

Jaqen lowers his face into his hands. “Don’t remind me either,” he groans.

“Right,” says Jon with grim determination. Forget it ever happened.

SANSA

Glee dances at the pit of her stomach. She wants to grab Arya and twirl the breath out of her, she wants to kiss Jaqen H’ghar.

Dragons.

A dowry.

An alliance that will crush Cersei Lannister, wipe the name Lannister from the surface of the earth.

She maintains her decorum, but just barely.

Then she thinks of Tyrion. Maybe I can marry him again, if he’ll have me, she thinks wistfully. Princess Sansa Stark, given to Casterly Rock, would serve the North just as well as Highgarden. Ask him if he’d like to take the Stark name instead, gods know he has enough reason to hate his family.

Arya joins her husband again on the floor again, almost falling into his lap. Sansa decides they can do what they please, dance naked in the snow if they want--today. Tomorrow, if this lustful display continues, she may have to give Arya a very pointed talk.

Maester Samwell returns to the room, holding a small rolled-up paper--a raven-letter--with a thread tied around it. Sansa’s mood brightens further as Sandor arrives with the Maester, and he surveys the room.

“All settled?” he asks, doesn’t wait for an answer. “All alive. Good.” He drops into a chair, and
then swears as it threatens to buckle under him. He joins the others on the floor.

“Got your armory surveyed, little bird,” he says to her. “You’re in much better shape than you thought.”

_The day keeps getting better and better._ In the spirit of camaraderie, she walks over to Sandor, and delicately lowers herself to the floor next to him. They share a smile--Sandor...he is uncomplicated, what’s inside is what is outside. No need to worry about hidden agendas from his side. And she can touch him. She tries it again, patting his hand, and smiles for the joy of it.

And then she catches the look on Arya’s face. She is glaring at Maester Samwell. “These are our House’s tassels,” she says. “When did this come? And why has it been _opened_?”

_A raven came for Arya, Jon made the Maester read the message._ That Jon would do such a thing...unthinkable, if anyone had asked her a week ago, but... _assassins, and wights...he is becoming a King,_ she thinks, and is surprised that it saddens her.

“A day and a night,” says Jaqen to Arya, and his tone contains something Sansa cannot read. “And interception is...always a possibility.”

Jaqen leans back, and she suddenly realizes something has changed in him in the past few moments. He is... _relaxed_ now, and the lines of his body scream at her of sex, and knives, and silk and danger, that lazy grace that Ramsay had tried so hard to cultivate (from time to time, until he forget himself in his brutality, his perversions, and the beast got out).

_Jaqen is safe. Jaqen is safe. He will not hurt Arya. He loves Arya. He will not hurt me, he doesn’t even look at me like that._

“Enciphered, yes,” says the Maester uneasily.

Jaqen’s lips draw up on one side, as Arya slowly unrolls the message. “Did you get far?” he asks Maester Samwell, sounding genuinely curious.

Samwell shakes his head.

“Maester, Maester, Maester,” says Jaqen, leaning forward, a light in his eyes. “The first layer is a simple substitution cipher. Don’t _lie_ to me.”

_Oh dear gods._ Sansa pulls back a little, quietly, _be a mouse_; she partially shields herself behind Sandor’s bulk.

“It talked about the price of shellfish in Braavos,” mutters Samwell.

“Stupid tide,” Arya grumbles, a grimace on her face.

Jaqen draws back from the Maester. “So, how much did you lose?” he asks Arya with a grin.

“Three weeks of buckets,” she replies.

_Sansa exhales. Safe. But both Jaqen and Arya’s gaze snaps up at her breath, and they look at her, just for a moment, with an identical, _assessing_ expressions. Then Arya turns back to her message. Jaqen’s gaze lingers on Sansa for a few heartbeats longer, and there is so much _sorrow_ in his eyes...Then he, too, is absorbed in the message._

That cruel grace, it does not return to his posture, and when Maester Samwell moves to leave,
Jaqen quietly excuses himself to send some messages back to his guild.

And, suddenly, Sansa is angry at herself. *He is an assassin, of course he’s dangerous! And he’s on our side, like Sandor is, and I can touch Sandor and I can touch Jaqen, and it doesn’t matter what they look like or what they move like. This is Winterfell. This is my home. I will not be a mouse here, I will not be a mockingbird. If Jaqen’s posture upsets me, I will...I will look the other way.*

So decided, she smiles at Arya. “I will send for wine.” She tries a joke. “Do assassins *like* wine?”

Arya grins at her, showing her teeth. “Only if it is made with the blood of our enemies,” she says.

Sansa mirrors the grin. “I’ll send for a Bolton bottle...Roose Bolton was saving it, to open if he had a son.”

A part of Sansa feels bad, sometimes, for the baby, the only innocent in all of this. *I suppose Fat Walda didn’t get a choice either, in who she married.*

The wine arrives at the same time as Jaqen.

“Done,” he says to Arya. “Three days, as the raven flies.” He drops to the ground beside her, glances casually at Sansa, then draws his legs up under him, hunches over, very very slightly.

*Reducing himself, his presence, so as not to...intrude, upon another’s space. Not to trigger...something, anything. She knows it, oh she knows this motion, it has been imposed upon her so many, many times. Imposing it on another should make her feel powerful , but it does the opposite, it makes her a conduit, for Joffrey, for Cersei, for *everyone* who knew her as Alayne, for everyone that came after…*

He *knows*. She doesn’t know if Arya has told him, or if he has guessed, but he knows. *Did Jaqen have a sister*, she wonders, *that he has learned to be...careful? Like Jon is careful?*

She swallows her unease, and reaches a hand out towards Jaqen, leaning over, almost unbalanced. He sees her gesture, extends his own hand, palm up. She places her hand in his, grips it tightly for a moment. “Thank you,” she says, then draws back. He has made no move to grip her hand in turn.

“I heard that you sing, Lady Sansa,” he says. “Sandor here couldn’t stop talking about how beautiful your voice was.”

Her eyes, they *itch*, but the tears do not come. “I used to,” she says. “Sandor here couldn’t stop talking about how beautiful your voice was.”

He nods, doesn’t push any further. But he extends his legs again, drapes an arm over Arya’s shoulder.

Satisfied, and feeling inordinately proud of herself (*it was just a touch, I already touched him at the banquet, I shouldn’t feel so proud* ), Sansa leans back.

*Winter clothes, they need winter clothes*, she thinks. She’d had Arya and Jaqen’s and Sandor’s cloaks sent for cleaning, but they are pitifully thin, and travel-worn. *Father’s furs, from the last winter...they’ll need a good airing.* The Boltons, luckily, hadn’t had the time to go through the storerooms, to ruin or steal anything more than the things lying right at the front.

*It must be warm in Braavos, for them to travel with so little.* Braavos...it triggers another thought. Arya clearly has power within their guild, power that does not come without a bloodline in Westeros...a guild would be a meritocracy, surely, so why would Arya have so much power?
“Are you the guildmaster, Jaqen?” she asks.

His eyes widen a fraction. “I am rarely in Braavos,” he says, at the same time as Arya snorts.

“Jaqen avoids administrative responsibility the same way I avoid dresses,” she says.

*And that is no answer at all,* Sansa thinks, but it would be impolite to push.

Davos grunts. “There’s all sorts of rumors about you, mountains of gold bought with blood, magic, changing faces.”

Arya looks sidelong at Sansa, and Sansa understands her, like she has begun to understand Jon’s glances.

*Family only.*

“There’s always rumors about everything, in King’s Landing,” says Sansa. “I learned not to pay them much heed, to look at reality instead...and, Davos,” her tone is very warm, she can’t touch him but she likes him, “reality tells me you are exhausted. You’ve been yawning on and off for half a watch—you rode all night, didn’t you?”

Davos nods, passes a hand over his balding head. “I was worried,” he mutters. “Not as young as I used to be.”

Jon’s eyes widen. “Davos, I’m sorry. Never should have sent that raven.”

“My duty,” says Davos, stoic and grim as always.

“And mine, to see that you get your rest,” Sansa says. She rises, goes out the door, calls for a servant, then turns back to him. “Your chambers are already ready, the hearth is lit, and they’re going to put some bread and cheese on the sideboard.”

Grateful, Davos creaks to his feet. Another direct man, this, he doesn’t look for hidden agendas in people he trusts. Sandor...she looks at him, sees him watching her.

*Family,* she mouths.

He nods, rises to his feet, and Davos and him leave together. In the hallway they start a friendly argument—about cavalry, it seems like.

The door closes behind them.

“So tell me the real story,” says Sansa, the first of the many things she wants to know about. *Assassins. How does one become an assassin? Are there tests? How many men have you killed, Arya?* “You didn’t meet when you were eleven, surely?”

“We did. But it wasn’t like *this,*” she touches Jaqen’s thigh, “not till later.”

Are they lying? But Jaqen wouldn’t have hurt Arya; Sansa wants the truth.

“Should come up with some false story,” says Jaqen. “This one needs too much explanation to keep my honor intact, such as it is.” He mimics Sandor’s tone, frighteningly well, “’*So you do like little girls*.’”

Jon grins. “That almost got you skewered, yesterday.”
“Don’t blame you,” says Jaqen.

“Eleven, fifteen, as long as Arya was not hurt...” says Sansa. Bedded at twelve by Tyrion would have been...so different than Ramsay at fifteen.

Jaqen shakes his head. “There are more ways to be hurt than just the physical. That young, hurt is impossible to avoid.” His fingers brush over Arya’s face. “Would have waited till you were thirty,” he says to her.

Arya narrows her eyes at him. “I’m convinced I’m no longer a virgin only because you were too..unwell...to resist my climbing on top of you.”

Sansa chokes. “Are you serious?”

At the same time, Jaqen murmurs, “Promised you, had no intention to resist, beloved...”

Arya ignores him turns to Sansa. “Do you know how much fucking poetry he poured into my ears, courting me, after we were married?” She looks genuinely upset. “Aarrgh!”

Sansa doesn’t know how to feel about Arya’s...enthusiasm. Both Jaqen and Jon are looking at Arya with expressions that are half-part amused, half-exasperated.

“Decent men, Jaqen,” says Jon, a rare streak of humor in his voice, “we just want to do right, and we get the aggressive ones.”

“And the brutes get the ones that want poetry,” Jaqen murmurs, not looking at Sansa. “What was her name, Jon?”

Sansa knows some of the story, that she was a wildling, that she died. But she has never heard Jon say the name.

“Ygritte,” Jon says. He passes a hand over his face. “Ygritte, and they--a man at Castle Black--he put an arrow through her in front of me, and there was nothing I could do. She was the enemy. She chose. I chose.” Jon sighs, and leans back. “What do assassins do, Jaqen, with wounds that never heal?”

Jaqen considers him. “There is a thing we say-- Valar morghulis. It means ‘all men must die’. We say that, again and again, until we can pretend the wound is not there. And if you pretend hard enough, well, a lie becomes a truth, doesn’t it?”

“I’m too young for this kind of blasphemy,” says Arya, covering her ears. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You have the conviction of a new convert,” Jaqen says to her. “Disillusionment, conviction...it comes it cycles. It goes.”

“A convert,” says Jon. “You follow this Braavosi faith then, this god of Death?”


“And what does your god say there is, after death?” asks Jon.

“Darkness,” replies Jaqen. “Nothing. Peace, but you do not know it is peace, because you know nothing at all. But objectively...it is such.”

Jon closes his eyes. “The septons say there are hells, and heavens. R’lhlor says there is a vast field of light, where the righteous reign.”
Jaqen snorts. “Pretty fantasies.”

“Well, your god is the only one that has gotten it right, by my view,” says Jon. He takes a deep breath.

_He’s going to show them._

Jon raises his shirt. The slash marks, on his front, on his sides, where they stabbed him, they stand out, clear, black, against his winter-pale skin, _he says it doesn’t hurt_.

Sansa cannot bear to look, she looks away, looks to Jaqen and Arya, to gauge their response.

Arya is horrified, her hand is over her mouth, she is whispering: “ _Like Mother. Like Mother._”

Jaqen is incandescent with rage.

Sansa finds she is pressed up against the wall of the room, trying to make herself as small as possible.

“They took you from the darkness,” Jaqen hisses. His hand rises, it brushes over Jon’s head. “They dragged you out. R’hllor’s priests.”

“Priestess,” says Jon.

Arya is shaking her head, “Jaqen, no, don’t.”

“A choice,” says Jaqen. “Mercy, such as it is. Do you want to return? Freely offered, regardless of the consequences, regardless of whatever trap they’ve laid for me, for you. Do you want to return to the darkness?”

Jon closes his eyes. “Every day,” he whispers. “Every day.”

A terrible fear gnaws at Sansa. She had brushed against the despair in Jon’s voice, once, when she was under Ramsay, but she...dismissed it. It was the inverse, the polar opposite of the thing that kept her submissive, kept her quiet. The desire, the burning need to _survive_.

Jon wants to die.

She looks at Arya, begging. Arya meets her gaze, and their shared horror crackles between them. Arya is a survivor, too.

Jon just wants to die. And Jaqen will help him do it.

_No, no no._

And then, Jon shakes his head. “Too much work to do.” There is finality in his voice, resignation.

Jaqen pulls his hand back. “Fair enough, King in the North.”

“Sleep was nice,” says Jon. “Nothing--no dreams. Then the nightmares started.”

“You will be protected,” says Jaqen. _If he stands his ground, I don’t think a thousand horses could move this man._ “No dreams.”

Jon smiles at Arya. “I think I understood that, somehow, earlier, when the ash smell went away. Thank you, for the tears.”
Tears are coursing down Arya’s face again now, and she crawls forward. “Sansa,” she calls. “I need your help.”

Jaqen draws back.

Sansa crawls forward, heedless of her dress, she has knocked over the bottle of wine and it bleeds all over her mother’s carpet, and she doesn’t care. “What do you need?”


For Jon.

And just like that, Sansa finds that she is weeping.

Together, they smear their tears over Jon’s wounds...Sansa has never touched them before, they are cold to the touch, they smell like mildew. But as the moisture upon their fingers, Arya’s and Sansa’s weeping, as the salt touches the ugly gashes, the flesh knits, smooths itself, and bit by bit the smell that had clung to Jon, the smell that Sansa had always ascribed to the poor quality of the furs she’d had to work with at Castle Black, bit by bit the smell recedes.

At the end of it she has a headache, but Jon’s torso, his back, it sports new scars instead of black-edged holes.

Every wound has closed.

Chapter End Notes

So, this one put me through quite the wringer...worse than the barrow, in some ways, because of all the balancing and setup that had to be dealt with...Please, please, I really want to hear your thoughts.

Also a question that is *not* begging for food to quiet the insecurity-demon:

I’ve outlined some of the face-exchange sex, quite a while ago, but I was hesitant, and the window of opportunity for it is fast-closing, plot wise. I introduced it a bit, teased a bit in the first part here. Is anyone actually interested in some M/M, M/F (J as A, A as J), F/F, all Jaqen/Arya? This was billed as a het fic, I'm not sure how fixed people are about what they read? If you like, you can pick a combination, I'll write it into the next chapter :) - it will be the last opportunity for this specific kind of experimentation and playful sex in this fic because the chapter after is all pretty much set, and the sex has a specific purpose. Of course if there is strong demand, more fluff chapters can be inserted, it gets pretty dark (darker) a bit further in...

There is no sex currently planned for the next one, just the Sandor/Jaqen shirtless sparring scene I've been teasing for...how many chapters? Many. Anywho. I can make the above offer because the next chapter is taking too long to finalize, I'm slogging and getting unmotivated because it's another chapter that sets up some things, including the No One plot resolution, and I'm procrastinating giving it to gul.

You guys are just seriously, madly, absolutely fantastic for sticking with me so far. And gul is amazing for her patience and painstaking eye to detail when it comes to my
stupid punctuation errors, the comprehension errors. Yeah.
The Creature

Chapter Notes

Sooo...some organizational information. This, and the next few parts, are part of the "same chapter", i.e. they should be taken together. But it was taking me too long to get to it (you'll see when you see the total length, 30k+ words) so I'm going to put it out in parts.

Please pardon the choppiness of the endings, and that I didn't give everything at once, and poor gul hasn't had a chance to do more than check for the most basic things, because of my tardiness.

Please bear with me for the next "sub" parts, they will be consolidated into a single chapter when they're all out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

NO ONE

The one who is no one lies in the hold of a ship, amidst the smell of salt and rotten fish. He drifts. He knows he is sick; the rats skittering over his legs don’t help much, he supposes. He should not be sick, not so far away from Asshai’s influence.

Footsteps, upon the small ladder leading to this part of the hold. The one who is no one sighs. Jorah Mormont is going to bring the day’s rations: a fistful of flakey, dried fish. A cupful of fresh water.

Ration.

This day’s ration of despair: no one should not need help, but an accurate assessment of the self is hard to get away from...his ribs creak every time he breathes, the action sends daggers through his lungs. But that is not a consideration, it is biology, and by all rights he should be dead--blood doesn’t replenish itself without time, or resources provided to the body.

His hair--Arya Stark’s hair--he is losing clumps of it. But vanity has never been a consideration for him.

No, the one who is no one has a problem with his mind. His memory is rotten and full of holes. Ash and shadow wrap around his throat. His reason, his instinct to survive, it functions mostly as it should when he wakes. But he dreams, when he sleeps. Of R’hllor, of the pit.

And all things that should lie at no one’s hand--detachment, accurate observation, these things drown in terror. He drifts, in and out of dreams, even in the waking. Day-dreams, he would have called them had he not been no one.

I am afraid.

He has no control over his mind.

A Lorathi in this state, he should be put out of his misery.
And he knows that, too, is a statement born of his fear.

He cannot help but admit that it is hard to stand.

But there is a duty. The one who is no one carries them under his shirt. Two faces, that must go home. He is no one—he has no home. A visceral memory rises out of the tatters of him: cool stone floors. Clean smells. A hall, full of faces, that smells of blood, clean blood, sweet blood; it smells of death without ash.

No one should have no home.

The footsteps are close. And the one who is no one has a duty.

He sighs and wears Arya Stark’s face. Some of her convictions leech into him: maybe they will know what to do with me in Braavos. The conviction is a temporary condition. It will pass, as all things do.

The one who wears Arya Stark’s face, she smiles, shy and vulnerable, as Jorah Mormont approaches, bowl and cup in hand.

JAQEN

There is a certain quality of silence that Jaqen H’ghar is familiar with—it comes in the wake of great grace; grace undeserved, unlooked for.

He was awarded such a silence, for a while, after Arya Stark died, and did not let go of his hand, and in front of the darkness that extruded upon the world as a weirwood, they spoke their vows to one another.

Arya and Sansa Stark have brought such a grace into the world in this room. Silence reigns here—born of the divinity inherent in human, mortal compassion, and none of the room’s occupants want to disturb it.

Jon lies on the ground, eyes closed. Sansa is scrubbing wine stains from the carpet—she could have called a servant, but she does not. Arya...she reads and re-reads the message from the House of Black and White as she sits pressed up against Jaqen’s side.

The first layer of the message is a simple substitution cipher. It tells Arya she’s lost her bet, that the price of shellfish has gone down, not up, with the coming of winter.

“Why did you think it would go up?” he asks her. His voice will not disturb the silence—he is a part of it.

“It will go up, soon,” she says with a frown. “The market is glutted now because the shellfish they’re catching spawned in the summer, and it keeps longer because ice is cheaper and cheaper. Wait, until the colder water kills off all the mussels north of the Summer Isles.”

“So why did you lose?” he asks.

“Misjudged the timing.”
He nods.

The second layer of the message, the key embedded in the shellfish, is a transposition peculiar to the House. It tells Arya Stark that negotiations for her marriage to the Sealord of Braavos have reached an advanced stage; Jon Stark, as her guardian, needs to sign the accords that will be sent soon.

Jaqen grins. *I want to watch as my bride explains that one.*

The third layer of the message is a variant of the book cipher, but the book selected no longer exists outside of their shared, faceless memories (they’ve hunted down each copy, destroyed it). The message is short; each trailing digit of the detailed prices of shellfish corresponds to a place in the book of his memory. The message says *AA SCRY*, then the page number of an etching--an etching of the fish that dwell in the waters of Asshai.

*Aembraysis Alayain scrys that our brother has been fed the fish of Asshai.* Poisoned, beyond anyone’s ability to cure him. But shadowbinders have been known to survive the experience, though they are twisted and rebuilt into something inhuman by it.

*Thank you, Jon Stark.* The healing of his wounds--impossible, if any sorcerer was to be asked--it does not point the way, but it provides hope. Jaqen H’ghar is aware of Himself now, and the wind sits beside him, and between them, much can be accomplished.

The fourth layer of the message, the string of letters insulting Arya’s prediction of shellfish prices, is a theoretically indecipherable convolution designed by Varro Massag; it is meant for Jaqen’s eyes alone, coded upon his personal key (each Faceless Man is given their own to memorise). The keys are re-generated each time a Faceless Man returns to Braavos. The downside to the cipher is the length of time it takes to deconvolute for anyone other than Varro Massag--two watches of calculation, for Jaqen.

The security is necessary; the message says: *Your face in temple.*

His bride bound Him of the Many Faces to His body; He is inseparable from it for as long as she lives (*she will stand at my side, at the end of all things, when the stars are but a dim memory and the space of a thousand universes yawns between each mote of matter*).

There are positives to the binding--death cannot be chained by sorcery, He cannot be bound ever again. Death cannot dissipate. Jaqen H’ghar cannot die.

There are negatives--He cannot range outwards from himself as He did to find their brother, and His range even in the dreaming is reduced. And, apparently, Jaqen H’ghar’s face has shown up somewhere in the temple, open to the public, in the House of Black and White.

The last is a *significant* downside, for a Faceless Man.

They’ve sent their answers in the afternoon, in counterpoint ciphers: loss accepted fuck you too; send accords; brother ship volantis; cover it the fuck up.
The sun barely peeked over the horizon today, she thinks, as her and Jaqen make their way through the dimly-lit corridors of the inner keep.

Soon the sun will not rise at all.

Jon has been persuaded to seek his bed, exhausted enough that he doesn’t fight Sansa’s increasingly strident suggestion. Sansa herself, her hair fraying under the day’s strain, has made an orderly retreat to the rooms she’s claimed for herself, far away from the family’s living quarters.

Jon is healed. Sansa helped heal him. We can heal our brother.

Arya grins to herself.

Peace lurks in her breast, a sensation that she has never felt before. Something akin to the defocusing of her self that came in the wake of Walder Frey.

This peace, it is not a defocusing, it is a dissolving, she thinks, a mind-analogue to the boneless, loose-jointed lack of ambition that comes after a long day, week, moon of continuous, relentless training.

She has learned to pay attention to changes in her internal state. What does it mean? Is it done? Is Arya Stark done?

If yes, her and Jaqen should ride out before the Long Night falls. The raven from the House of Black and White...a week’s hard ride to White Harbor, a week on a ship and they will be in Braavos before their brother gets there. We must set out the moment they confirm he is in Volantis.

Her childhood’s chamber is lit by the cherry-red embers in the hearth; Jaqen steps out on the balcony, taking a single candle with him. The candle sputters in the breeze.

“The sun,” he says, “it will not rise the day after tomorrow.”

She stops breathing. His voice ...

He has stopped playing at being Him of the Many Faces, stopped playing at being “Jaqen H’ghar”.

With the realization comes the ability to control her childish, knee-jerk reaction to it--resentment, panic, fear of him, fear of disapproval. He is him now, again, she chides herself, and you haven’t done anything wrong.

It seems the space that he hovered in, trying to understand being Him of the Many Faces, trying to understand being Jaqen H’ghar...it has passed, in its entirety. Even he allows himself ignorance, if the condition is not a persistent one--if it is a transition.

This is the core of being a Faceless Man--a Faceless Man has no core; all identities lie at his fingertips. The ability to play at being anyone at all, even if that anyone is yourself. Arya Stark is not very good at remembering that she plays this game (good at recognizing it, though, she has been from the beginning).

She is still in transition.

She has made progress; ironic, that it should happen when she became Arya Stark with the greatest conviction possible, when she led Him of the Many Faces into the sin of identity alongside her.
There is a prayer, of the Lorathi, who excel at blasphemy: *in sinning, let us find salvation; in becoming, let us be unbecome*. Jaqen taught it to her, and he is the unquestioned master of this game; he can play at being a *god*.

At this moment he plays the role of “no one”.

*We never stop playing.*

“Is it time then?” she asks him. *Jon has been saved; the prophecy seems to have been undone.* She feels sad--wistful-sad, not sorrowful--it had been nice, to have a family again.

“Is Arya Stark done with her duties here?”

He has still not looked at her.

“You think Arya Stark is *dutiful*?” The scorn she embeds in the last word is sufficient, she thinks, to convey her disagreement without dismissing his opinion. Rude, to dismiss a Lorathi’s opinion without due consideration.

“Arya Stark knows that a thing can have more than one name, that some of the names are so twisted that the original is no more than a suggestion to them,” he says. “What is vengeance, other than a painful, twisted, self-serving name for ‘duty’?”

She closes the distance between them, stands beside him, the candle to her right. She thinks about his words. “Arya Stark is not *dutiful*,” she says finally. “Arya Stark is afraid. Afraid of losing people, of being lost to them.” It is not a request for comfort, it is an observation made in the Lorathi way. “She does what is necessary to *keep* people. If she loses, she retaliates.”

He nods, and he reaches an arm around her, draws her close to his side. It is unexpected--she is “beloved” to the Many-Faced God, “love” to Jaqen H’ghar, but what is she to no one?

“A mirror can only reflect the scene in front of it,” he says. “Two mirrors are needed, faced to one another, to reflect all the endless permutations of the world between them.”

“What is between us?” she asks.

“Our selves.”

It is a *very* Lorathi answer. For the very first time, she finds that Arya Stark is satisfied with a Lorathi answer. “Huh.”

“We will steal you back from the Braavosi yet,” he says.

Even no one is allowed a sense of humor.

“You have an unfair advantage,” she observes.

“What is?”

“The accent.”

His hand caresses the side of her waist, reaches around to caress the plane of her stomach. He does not linger there long, he untucks her shirt, replaces the cloth in her britches with his hand. His fingers find the opening of her sex. There is a clinical sort of quality to his touch, a cold precise efficiency utterly unlike her experience of him these past few weeks--his fingers, in this moment, they are strangers to her.
She moistens under his ministrations nevertheless.

She has never coupled with no one before, and there is no memory she can call upon for comparison--all their brothers’ memories stop the moment they die, and it is necessary for them to die to shed their names.

“Very odd,” she says.

“I would understand,” he offers.

“Water,” she explains. “In a fountain, in the sea, in the sky.”

His breath has changed; almost imperceptible, but the change heralds arousal, and he has allowed her to see it.

Her awareness is extended to its limits, she feels the wind above them and the dim heat of the embers of the hearth, through the open door. She reads the state of him, in the oscillation of his palm against her wetness, in the rise and fall of his chest--he balances between the clinical detachment of his mind and the yearning response of his body.

He controls both.

As she is not no one, she cannot help but oscillate along with him: a child’s sailboat, helpless to the eddies and currents of him.

It is not lust--none of the things that drive the tingling to her thighs, the warmth at the pit of her stomach (the quality of his gaze, the sardonic twist of his voice), these things are not present in the moment. It is not skill--he does not exercise any of the thousand types of touches that festoon their shared, faceless memories of such things.

It is, simply, intention.

It seems that when he is no one, he wills the world to accommodate him; suddenly she yearns to accommodate his girth with a type of desperation she has never felt before. The reason for the urge is meaningless: to break the unbreakable, to be consumed, to find the core of him I can find it even if no one else can. A posteriori justifications for something that has no reason save that he has willed it to be so.

“One sees why the Lorathi have a reputation.” She allows her own breath its inclination; it imparts a wavering quality to her words.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“I am Arya Stark.”

His palm has flattened, his fingers are no longer in play, only the flat of his palm. He presses circles into the front of her, her nub. It would have been maddening to Arya Stark, she would have writhed and whined and pushed back against his hand.

“Who are you?” he asks again.

“I am Arya Stark.”

His hand comes away, and then he delivers a short, sharp slap to the place he had just been pleasuring.
Arya Stark would have moaned. But to her, it just... is. A wave of pleasure, and she balances at the top of it, simply feeling it as moments turn into eons.

He has resumed the insistent pressure of his palm.

The wave rises, higher, and it carries her along with it, and she watches as if from a great distance as it crests.

Some sensations have the ability to grab one’s mode of thought by the throat and dash it upon the rocks, shattering it. And when the shards of the mode recollect, they have the potential to reform into something new.

She freezes the wave in place.

“Who are you?” he asks.

Arya Stark would have said *I am Jaqen H’ghar* or something equally false, just to feel the sting of his admonition.

“I am no one,” she says.

He nods, and she can hear the sounds of him undoing his britches, the slide of leather and cloth against his legs.

Then, then a sound she is preternaturally attuned to, like she is to the hiss of a blade being drawn, the drip drip drip of poison titrated by heartbeat into a glass vessel: the sound of his hand wrapped around his member. Silk, sliding over iron.

She lowers her own leggings, then rises onto her toes. Then higher, and she is suspended from the railing, bent over it, all her weight resting on her forearms. He is taller than her; rude, not to accommodate temporary variances in proportion, even as one accommodates such variance in opinion.

His hardness parts the lips of her sex, stretching her as it enters. Her flesh closes around him, clamps on to him by instinct; she allows it. There is no drawing-out, no teasing in his motion. It is what it is: withdrawal and advance by turns, sometimes fast, sometimes slower, deep and shallow with no discernible pattern, as he tests the vagracies of the sensation.

There is no urgency to her either; she is motionless more often than not, circling her hips, from time to time, when she thinks it is something that could be learned from. She feels, and she takes apart the feeling in her head and puts it back together, around the hardness of his cock.

The inner walls of her sex spasm around him, short and sharp, or drawn out shudders, from time to time, when she allows them.

Her sight is focused over the stone ramparts of Winterfell, over the still air, the glow off the snow on the ground. Her ears are attuned to every shift of movement in him; she tastes nothing at the back of her mouth. But she smells herself, his sex, wet and churned, she feels herself surrounding him, and she knows he must feel her heat anew each time he drives in.

She wills him to ejaculate--she wants to see what it would feel like, if she would be able to tell.

He accommodates her.

There is no outward sign of it; only the splash of heat, the increased wetness, a slight pressure, then
gone, deep inside her.

“Not odd,” he says.

He has never coupled with no one before.

“How not?” she asks, though she agrees.

“Water,” he says. “In the desert.”

She considers this. He had been sufficient unto himself for centuries, sufficient unto himself even after the barrow.

In this moment he moves in her and redefines what he called “sufficiency” before.

“A ship,” she says, “in dry dock.”

“Landlocked,” he agrees.

If no one hungers, he should eat if the environment so permits. If no one thirsts he should drink, if the environment so permits.

She is a permitting clime; no other environment has been permissible to him for the slaking of his thirst. Because if duty is not involved, even no one is allowed standards. Each Faceless Man’s definition of “standard”, however, is different--some use the term as a measure of acceptability (too much hubris, in this definition, for him). Some use it to embrace anything with a pulse and two legs: a standard activity (too much everything, in this definition, for him).

*His* standard--he has planted it upon the field that is her; she bears his colors: the black, and the white. Their union cascades in infinite permutations through all the roles they play and it is impossible to tell in which persona it originated, to tell object from reflection.

“I love you,” he says. It is not an endearment. It is an observation, in the Lorathi way.

She reflects. “What is love?” she asks, and knows the question is too inane, she will not, should not be answered. I love you. She dwells in the center of her mind, half of it focused on analyzing the statement, the definitions it assumes, the “I” and the “love” and the “you”, she disintegrates it into its constituent elements and puzzles it back together in unrecognizable shapes. The other half of her mind is diffuse, it experiences the statement without judgement. Truth is found, somewhere between the two, in the place she dwells: she is his mirror.

“I love you,” she agrees. An observation, to match his, though the definitions she assumes, the “I” and “you” are different from his.

“Love” is a noumenon to the both of them.

The muscles of her arms, her shoulders, her muscles are beginning to tremble; even no one cannot exceed the limits imposed by flesh, though they can be ignored.

He leans forward. “We will play a bit longer,” he says, and defies his statement by pulling out of her.

He leaves a viscous trail of seed and arousal in his wake. He seeps from her, and she makes no move to clean herself, to dress. The sudden coldness of the air, it turns wet heat to ice, for her sex gapes in the absence of the thickness of him; her skin finds pleasure in this sensation as well.
He gathers her to himself, takes her weight upon himself, takes the both of them into the room. The embers light their way. He lays her upon the bed, and she draws him down on top of her.

This time when they oscillate together, there is no exploration, no learning.

There is only intention, shared: a hurricane, and they are the eye of it, entirely detached, entirely still, while all around them they rage with savage, carnal need.

The contrast is almost unbearable—her mind experiences, it analyzes, it observes and the contraction of every muscle in her, her arms, her legs, every slide of him against her, inside her, it drowns her in another surge of ecstasy.

Two hurricanes, her mind tells her—she can feel the sharp edges of the contrast in him and it is almost unbearable for him as well; pressure builds, and it has no outlet, no way to release itself from their state of mind. Something must break; even no one cannot exceed the limits of flesh.

Her flesh thinks it is on the verge of death, and it fights.

She unfurls, and he winds her around himself, in ever-tightening spirals, wound around and around each other.

Their eyes meet, and there is a moment of something akin to recognition. The eyes of the hurricane lock, and hold.

We are no one.

One creature, with two bodies, joined, pleasuring itself to the limits of its endurance. This is the purpose of all things, the creature thinks. This is what it has been searching for, the thing before which all other needs pale.

The creature exhales. It shudders, and lies still.

Time passes.

The creature realizes it only exists as long as it can hold its own gaze. One of its bodies, or both, they must blink, eventually. Better it is done now, as a choice, than to have itself ripped out of existence by the failure of flesh.

It closes its eyes.

Desolation.

She turns to her side and sobs from the loneliness of it.

He draws a blanket over her naked flesh. The quality of his touch has changed.

There are two types of equilibrium. Children explore these, all unknowing—a marble, sitting in a hollow valley, it is motionless. A marble, perched in perfect balance upon the crown of a hill—it is also motionless. But the marble on the mountain can accept only an infinitely small perturbation before it loses its state.

The ripples of his transition from playing no one to playing Him of the Many Faces, they are not a small perturbation in her world, not with His hand warm upon her cheek.

Arya Stark is not lonely, her husband is right here. Loneliness is no one’s problem. She opens her eyes, relaxes the muscles of her jaw—she made no sound in the midst of it, but the effort had
exceeded the mind’s capacity for control, spilled over to the clenching of her teeth.

“*That...*” the word is a long exhalation, and if a little bit of reverence leaks into it he will forgive her.

“That.” Wonder, and *surprise*, and she forgives him for it.

*What was that?* A waste of a question--it matches the descriptions of a certain state-of-mind the Lorathi are reluctant to talk about.

She pretends to grin. “Always very cagey, our brothers, on how to achieve such a state.”

He tucks a strand of her ragged hair behind her ear; his eyes are open, and the loneliness Arya Stark has relegated to “no one”, it relents. She shifts closer to him, drinking him in.

“Cagey?” he murmurs, sardonic, “but *become no one* is a perfectly legitimate answer.”

It is, and yet something doesn’t...fit. “Our Lorathi brothers, the ones who take lovers within the order--they never take *other* Lorathi.”

His eyes dim, a little. “Not more than once, usually.”

“It won’t happen again?” She panics.

He soothes her with a touch. “It will,” he says gently, then pauses. “Hearsay, you understand--I have had no experience of it. But, I have been told there are some things too much to bear, even for one who is no one.”

She looks at him, eyes wide.

“It...ends, eventually, each time,” he says softly, and she imagines some trace of the desolation lingers in his voice. “And you find yourself lying, *naked*, in all definitions of the word, besides no one, and neither of you are capable of anything beyond some abstract, intellectual camaraderie. The creature that we were, the one thing that meant *everything* to one who is no one--it was a *lie*, a momentary hallucination. So what is left?”

Dismay.

His mouth twists. “That is one way, how renegades are made,” he says.

She wants to protest: *but it’s bound me tighter to you...* each coin has two sides. If there is anything with power enough to overrule the will of the Many-Faced God, surely, surely it is *this*.

“It is almost,” he murmurs, “as if some things are better not to experience.” A strange statement, from a Lorathi. “Had you not been so convinced you were Arya Stark, you would have been warned not to lie with me.”

“I would have disregarded the warning.” She rises upon her elbow. “Not one of them found...as we did?” she asks, though she already knows the answer.

“A paradox,” he sighs. “To fall in love with someone, there must *be* someone for your attention to latch onto. But to be no one, you have already *stopped* being someone.”

*There, but for the grace of coincidence, go we.* “Timing,” she mutters, “is everything.” *He fell in love with me when I was Arya Stark, and I with him when Him of the Many Faces was...unaware that he was also no one.*
She shudders. The loneliness--a potential loneliness, this time, threatens. He turns back to her, draws her leg over him, and she is glad for his warmth.

“I would tell you a thing, and it should not feed your Braavosi ego,” he says, and his tone is serious.

She allows herself the distraction. “It won’t, I promise! Tell me!”

“Memories come in flashes--seen quickly, seen slowly. But have you actually counted the years, for each of our brothers, between their coming to the House of Black and White as an acolyte and their deaths at My hand?”

“No,” she says.

“Almost a decade, for the last one I recruited, and his was the shortest after those that came from Valyria.” He traces the line of her jaw, follows his fingertip with small kisses. “I intervened in your becoming a Faceless Man, and it was not only because I was on the verge of losing you.”

“I was so stupid,” she mutters, fighting the urge to hide her face.

“You were incandescent,” he says, and his tone becomes something she cannot quite place. “And you were ready, more ready than even I gave you credit for.” He nuzzles her neck. “A very, very fast learner, my bride,” he murmurs. “The thing we just did--I did not think we could, not for years and years. You just needed to come to Winterfell, so you could let Arya Stark go.”

She grins. “Stop now, before the Braavosi in me gets so fat she cannot mount a horse.”

“Mmm.”

Also, she disagrees with his opinion of her readiness. It was not just the disobedience disallowed to an acolyte, the killings, but other things--pettiness, arrogance...the God’s favor was the only thing that could have drawn her over the divide between the angry mess she had been and facelessness, the mess she is reminded of every single time she wears the face of Arya Stark after wearing his.

“What would have happened to me, had I not begged for your help?” she asks. The choice of words--“begged”, “help”--sufficient, to state her disagreement.

He chuckles. “You would be surprised at the number of votes taken, about what to do with you. I recruited you, I gave you my coin--the House was responsible for your welfare, couldn’t just let you wander off and die somewhere, trying to exact your vengeance.” He sighs. “You know the courtesan matter.”

She twists in his arms. “That was a vote? I thought I was given a choice!”

His eyes widen. “A vote on whether the choice would be offered, beloved.”

“What else?” she asks. It is not something she has been comfortable exploring, her many faults and how they were perceived by those that are now her brothers--is not comfortable now to think on it, but embarrassment is not a concept that exists between her and Jaqen.

“You used to speak in your sleep,” he says, his gaze filled with remembered worry. “Nightmares.”

“I didn’t.”

He nods. “You don’t remember--your memories don’t contain their substance.”
“What did I say?” she asks in a small voice.

“Mother, once,” he replies. “Not ‘Father’--you kept that one locked behind your teeth, along with your list.” He sighs and his arms tighten further around her, and she must look away from his eyes (she still thirsts) and rest her head on his chest. But the rumble of his voice, heard through his ribcage, the steady thrum of his heart, those things, too, are good. “Jaqen, don’t go,” he says in a whisper. “Night after night after night.” His voice has no inflection. “There was a vote on your blinding, the ordeal before it--on the how of breaking your attachment to me.”

“*That* was effective,” she says, a mimicry of his customary sarcasm.

“Our brothers, they wouldn’t have reacted well, if they’d known the whole of it before you died--the three names, your giving me mine, my offer to take you with me. That I gave you my true name, showed you my face--never, to the others I recruited--that was discomfiting enough to them.” He pauses. “The god almost drove me back to Braavos, the day the raven came bearing the contents of your pleading. The first time I defied the god, told Him ‘no’.”

*Good, because, our brothers would not have taken that well. At all. A girl-child of twelve, bringing down Jaqen H’ghar? Different, now that she is faceless. The governance of her is given into her own hands; no Faceless Man rules another (unless the one who was born Jaqen H’ghar plays Him of the Many Faces and then things get...complicated). But Arya Stark’s attachments, Jaqen H’ghar’s attachments, they are their own problem.*

“Leaving you at Harrenhal,” he continues, “it has fueled some nightmares of my own. Had you been but one day early at the Twins…you would have seen the slaughter, and you would not have been cowed like Edmure Tully.”

*I would have fought. Killed, sooner or later...*

“What more?” she asks.

“Izembaro,” he says. “In the hopes that perhaps you could learn to pretend to be no one long enough for you to understand it.”

“Not wrong,” she says. “That’s how I got to, bit by bit, being ‘no one’ for some small time. Long enough, at least, to do what we just did.”

“Mmm. Again, soon, please?” he asks.

*Water, in the desert.*

“Oh dear god, yes. Before dawn.” *The last dawn.* But her curiosity is not yet satisfied. “What other votes?”

“The decision,” he says, a bit reluctant, “after you killed Raff the Sweetling.”

*A vote takes weeks, ravens have to be sent, received... “How long did I sleep?”* She knows now they used mullein root on her, she’s learned the aftertaste of it since then.

“Almost a moon,” he says.

“And what were the options?”

“You know that ‘Targaryen’ Izembaro trained?” He asks.
She does. “The boy who’s pretending to be Aegon?” Not an acolyte anymore, unfortunately--a con-
artist does not a good Faceless Man make.

*The horn, the Dance of Dragons...* There is a very deep mistrust, of Valyrians a-dragonback, within
the House of Black and White. When Daenerys Targaryen emerged from the Red Waste and held
court in Qarth, it was decided that she would have to be killed, her dragons controlled, her
throne...occupied. The last was the chancy part of the scheme, since Izembaro’s Targaryen would
never be a Faceless Man. But he could still be placed on the Iron Throne...

“A second lever, a second legitimacy,” says Jaqen. “Another failed acolyte of the House of Black
and White, given to the mummer’s dragon in marriage. Your vengeance, delivered to you by our
hand, in exchange for your penultimate loyalty when you sit beside the Iron Throne.”

But then Arya Stark bound herself to the Many-Faced God. A month later, Daenerys Targaryen
assumed another name: Breaker of Chains.

“Women,” one of the Braavosi had muttered. A bit baffling, coming from one who was a woman
herself, but Braavosi can be strange like that, and this one had been quite heavily invested in the
Aegon scheme. Last Arya had heard, the boy was still drinking fine wines and being feted in
Essos.

*Essos...*

“We must tarry in Winterfell a while longer,” says Arya Stark. “I need to look at Sansa. It’s
chronic, whatever it is--it’s been almost a year since she escaped that piece of dog-shit.” Arya is
*not* confident of her own capability to handle something like this. “I would prefer to take her to
Braavos with us,” she adds.

A Maester of Westeros most often restricts his knowledge of a woman’s problems to moon tea and
pregnancy, infertility and frigidity, according to Jaqen, and any further delving (which requires
practical learning) is considered unnecessarily messy, at the Citadel.

“We need to tarry, for Brandon Stark,” He says. “I have memories of him that are not yours, and I
think they come from the weirwood.”

Her mood soars. *More time in Winterfell.* She is like the glutton that has fed, and her body is
satisfied, but she still eats--purely for the greed of it.

Him of the Many Faces grins. “I’ve never had a family before,” he says. “So there is that...” He
places a soft kiss upon her forehead--no benediction, this, his tongue teases her skin. “Or a
princess,” he murmurs.

“You could have had a *queen*,” Arya says. “Kill Aegon once he’d established himself, take his
face and his wife.” She will not say that Jaqen could have had her for a tin penny and a heated look,
Iron Throne or not--the both of them know this very well (as the both of them know she could have
had him at Harrenhal, despite his every objection--he objects so much, too much, because he
knows he could have succumbed, had she but understood this thing between them enough to want).

He snorts.

“How did you vote, on the giving of me to Aegon?”

“My objectivity was not clear to me,” he says. “I abstained.”

It was correct of him, but she wishes he would have made some move, to keep her. “I’m glad it
didn’t pass,” she says.

“It passed,” he says. She turns wide eyes to him. He smiles, grim. “The Many-Faced God exercised His veto.”

Oh.

She encircles his neck with her arms, she kisses the vein at his throat. “Now, please,” she whispers, and tries to find that mode of herself, between nothing and--

Something crashes to the floor. A sound, something shattering, that propels them out of bed in an eyblink. Whatever it is, it has fallen from a great height...from the ceiling?

She gets to the candle on the sideboard before he does. There are shards of glass on the floor...he lights his candle, and the glass is melting...

They look up in unison.

Ice. Stalactites of ice hang down from the vaulted stone ceiling overhead, some more than a few hand spans in length. Water drips from their tips as they melt. And beyond the stalactites...the entire ceiling is marked with black smears. It has been scorched, as if by a great fire.

Carefully, they avoid walking under the largest of the ice-spikes, and retreat to a less...lethal part of the room--the corner beside the hearth.

“Jaqen, what the fuck?” she asks.

“I think we should have that conversation about magic Sandor so rudely interrupted,” he says, still looking up at the ceiling.

Then he crouches, and builds up the fire till it is roaring. She divides her attention between the ceiling and him, and so she misses the moment he thrusts his hand into the flames--she only notices after the fact, when he is elbow-deep in the fireplace without a single expression on his face.

Heart in throat, she swallows against the urge to throw herself at him, to pull him away.

“Dragonkin,” she murmurs.

There is more to it than the legend.

“Never tried that before,” he says.

Almost a rite of passage, she remembers, amongst the spawn of dragonlords; he alone had not participated.

But he is still a pure-blooded Valyrian.

He avoids naked flame, avoids discussions of Valyrian culture that don’t condemn it. So she is not quite sure what has prompted him to do this now, apart from the pending conversation about magic, but it must be handled very carefully by his wife.

“A parlor trick,” she says, scornful. “Lion of Night, do please focus on the issue at hand.”

“The scorching,” he says, “it is what happens when dragons mate.”

She remembers. But they mate on the wing, in the air--a blaze of fire. It frightens her, for him. “A man cannot help his biology,” she says.
He stretches. “Ah, fuck it.” And it is as if Arya Stark is speaking through him, he smiles at her, manic.

*This thing is not done yet.*

“I’ll engrave ‘Valyrian’ upon my forehead, if that is the price for us,” he says.

*This is how renegades are made.*

“Please don’t. Arya Stark is a *good* little Faceless Man, she hates Valyrians.” *I love you, therefore you are not a Valyrian.*

The manic edge of him has dulled, at her statement, but he still needs to be distracted from himself.

“The ice, Jaqen, whence comes the *ice*?”

He focuses on her. He looks up at the ceiling again, the drip of water, grins.

He withdraws his hand from the fire.

“*You*, my sweet Stark,” he says and he stands, draws her to him by the shoulders.

She has learned when patience will earn her information of better quality, and this is one of those times.

“I knew there was something *more* in your blood,” he says, “King’s blood, maiden’s blood...all those things,” he says, “they do not account for the birth of a god.”

She tilts her head to a side, considers it. “Possible. Or R’hllor would have been well awake by now, glutted as he is on sacrifice.”

“The Starks…” he is looking at her, a bit too intently. “There is something about the Starks. Each one of them is a *warg* -- Sansa could smell the mildew on Jon, though I could not, which means *warg* senses. Brandon Stark, I believe, he may be a greenseer. Arya Stark had the power to replace Me as death when I was chained in Asshai--”

“I was just a *wind*,” she whispers.

“*The Wind*,” he answers, directly, truthfully. “When I passed into shadow, the world was left bereft of death...this the world cannot abide, this *life* cannot abide, for it must have an ending. *Valar morghulis*. The Wind is another form of death, born of ice, of winter, as I was born of fire.”

“Oh.”

She will take it, take his explanations and not fight them. *He must be distracted from himself.* She will ask.

“What am I, Jaqen?”

“I extrapolate based upon geographical proximity alone,” he warns her.

“Understood.”

“Otherkin.”

*I am no one.* “An undead ice monster?” she asks, because even no one wants to make absolutely
sure both of them are talking about the same thing.

He shrugs. “As much as I am a winged fire monster.”

“It must be tested,” she says, “as you tested.” She indicates the fireplace.

“Go dance naked in the snow,” says Him of the Many Faces, eyes alight, “and when your pretty pink nipples haven’t darkened with frostbite after a few hours, we can know for sure.”

She grimaces. “My hand immersed in a bowl of water, on the balcony--”

“Or,” He interrupts gently, “you can take My word for it.”

She slides down the wall next to the hearth. Neither of them look up as more ice falls from the ceiling--the potential trajectories of the stalactites have been calculated, they require no further action. “You contradict my theory,” she says.

Him of the Many Faces leans forward, resting his chin upon his palm. “Which is?”

She sighs. “Forgive--I must needs be Braavosi for a bit, grope my way to an understanding of magic as you listen, for I do not know enough yet to internalize the understanding as a Lorathi does, to clothe metaphor in meaning.”

“I will tell Zural, the next time I see him,” He says, his voice dry, “that Arya Stark thinks a Braavosi is just a Lorathi waiting to happen.”

She rolls her eyes.

“So, beloved,” He says, “what is magic?”

“Power,” she says. “But power is simply the flow of potential from one place to another--like with coin. Coin is not power, coin is simply potential. It is the flow of coin that generates power. And for one to have coin, to have potential for power, another must not.”

“River to sea,” he offers.

Water is as good an analogy as coin--nature abhors unequal potential. Water flows, seeking its level, becomes river and stream in a bid to do away with inequality.

“The dragons are a locus of elemental fire,” she says. “They create a current of power in the world, and sorcerers draw upon this current--their spells are water-wheels, driving a millstone, placed in the middle of a river. Magic wasn’t working, was it, before Daenerys Targaryen birthed dragons back into the world?”


“Yes,” she says. “Blood magic, Jaqen. What greater equalizer of all unequal potentials than Death? We wear the masks in your name. Ambraysis is yours. Blood, life- blood, sacrificed to Death.” She pauses. “That was what made a god in the barrow, I thought--everything I was, sacrificed directly to you, no proxy, no mutterings over a brazier.”

He is thinking. “R’hllor,” he says. “The hole in your theory. Why does blood magic done in his name work?”

“Dragons only died out...recently, in the scheme of things,” she says. “And by the time they did,
the Heart of Flame was firmly ensconced in your temple.”

He looks up, eyes wide.

She smiles grimly. “You allowed R’hhlor to borrow from your aspect. Blood, sacrificed to you through him.”

*Every man, woman and child that was burnt alive--burnt to death.*

“Valar Morghulis,” he says, rocking back on his heels. “Valar Morghulis.” His lips form the words, but he doesn’t say them aloud a third time.

*Well, that solved the Valyrian dilemma, didn’t it? There are far worse things about you than your biology.*

“The wind is a cruel thing,” he murmurs, looks away.

“Otherkin,” she says, accepting it, the ice-demon, a lash upon Arya Stark’s flesh; it goes some small way towards balancing the lashes upon him. “It is to be expected.” *And if a Stark is kin to the Other, and Targaryen kin to Dragons, what does that make Jon?* Her father’s bastard, she would have said, save that she has the letter, in Eddard Stark’s hand, left in his sarcophagus for Jon. *A problem for another day. Now, now let us try levity.*

“The biggest problem, at the moment,” she says, and he follows her gaze to the ceiling, “is how the fuck we explain this to Sansa.”

He chokes.

*Got you.*

“Maybe...we could clean it?” he looks dubious.

“It will get worse,” she says.

He looks at her and all trace of mania, of self-hatred, it is wiped from his eyes. Him of the Many Faces recedes, is overtaken by a neutral, *considering* expression on his face. “Now.”

She rises to her feet. “If it pleases you,” she says.

“Nothing pleases no one,” he says.

She reaches out, slaps his cheek. Lightly.

He grabs her wrist, forces it to her side; she allows him to.

“I despise you,” he says, and captures her other hand as it rises to slap him.

“And so you trap yourself,” she says, and uses his own grip on her wrists to pull him to the bed. They fall backwards, under the blackened canopy of flowers, and into each other.

*We are no one.*

Chapter End Notes
Next part coming in 2 days, as promised earlier...just wrote a lot more than intended, is all.

Thank you for your patience, and for you overwhelming, overwhelming support and nice words and comments and fuck it all, you people rock my world, you make me want to stand on top of rooftops and bellow *my* name out, and say "see, people like what I write!". fuck.

I've had the better part of a small bottle of absynthe at the moment. Not sure how I'm typing, but it feels goood...fuck.
“Good morrow, Sansa!” greets Jaqen H’ghar. “And to you as well, Sandor.”

Sandor grunts. No man has a right to be that chipper in the morning. Sandor’s own hangover presses down upon his temples. He chews on a piece of bread--he doesn’t think he can keep the goopy porridge down.

“Good morning, Jaqen,” says the little bird. She’s happy too...Sandor’s heart had almost stopped as he’d entered her suite a half-watch ago, and heard her humming as she sorted piles of clothes onto the settee. “I’ve found some clothes for Arya that I think would fit.”

“If you put Arya Stark in a dress, it may not be returned in...one piece,” murmurs Jaqen.

Fucking sly-face, you should know better than to talk like that to her about her sister.

But Sansa grins, she actually grins.

Something I’m missing here. His voice...it sounded like he was insinuating he was going to rip the clothes off of the she-wolf, but the little bird would not find that funny.

“You dye your hair, sly-blade,” says Sandor. The other man’s hair is coming in fucking blonde at the roots.

The assassin's eyes become suddenly cold. “No. The white is a side-effect. It will pass shortly.”

Sansa is looking at Jaqen, worriedly.

Don’t want her to worry about him. She knows what he is!

“More assassin magic?” Sandor asks, in case the little bird has forgotten exactly what Jaqen H’ghar is.

“Something like that.”

Conversely, this relaxes Sansa. She smiles again, offers the man a cup of hot tea, turns a smile on Sandor.

Why the fuck do you suddenly trust this man? Sandor’s gaze demands.

“Later”, she mouths at him.

Sandor grunts. Family business, she’d said last night. He was out of the loop, had to catch up fast, with assassins and undead running around the place.
“Clothes, you said?” Jaqen asks her.

Sansa nods. “Trousers, shirts, made for a woman. I’d say they’re out of date, but…” she shrugs.

_Aunt Lyanna’s clothes_, she’d murmured earlier. _A whole trunkful of them, I guess someone forgot they were there._

Given the way Fat Robert was, Sandor thinks the forgetting part is right, or the trunk would be in King’s Landing for the past twenty years, its contents half religious artifact, half encrusted with...he shakes his head.

_Kings are fucked up._

As if on cue, the King in the North arrives, and the damn bastard is _also_ smiling.

_What in the seven hells happened yesterday? A great big orgy?_ The thought is hyperbole--wouldn’t have been, had he still been a Lannister man. _Fucking Cersei Lannister fucking any male she’s related to except the dwarf and her father..._

And then the she-wolf--she’s actually _skipping_ as she makes her way over to the table.

“Morning!” she chirps, and seats herself. Family, and Sandor; everyone sits everywhere, no order of precedence at this table.

Everyone but Sandor gets themselves a bowl of porridge.

“Are you feeling alright, Jon?” asks Sansa, looking at the king’s bowl in puzzlement.

“A good night’s sleep,” says Jon, and throws a smile around the table. _Charming bastard, when he wants to be._ “Apparently it does wonders.”

Jaqen snorts.

“Where is Davos?” asks Sansa.


The lightheartedness drains from the little bird’s face.

The houses of the North are reluctant to _fight_ a civil war, for all that one sits, declared, waiting to be acted upon. He’s getting some measure for their politics, for House Umber’s machinations, House Karstark...Sandor doesn’t like getting involved in politics. Ever. But he’s given his oath to Sansa Stark, and she’s in the thick of it, so…

“Cerwyn has three hundred men,” Jon says.

Sandor sighs. He is sworn to Sansa Stark, but her safety is contingent upon her brother’s survival. “Three hundred won’t make a difference. You’re still one to one if the Karstarks and Umbers unite with what’s left of the Bolton bannermen.”

Jon’s jaws clench. “We’ve handled worse odds.”

Sandor grimaces. “Only because the Knights of the Vale poured in,” he says.

“Petyr is coming to the moot,” Sansa offers hesitantly.
Jon shakes his head. “I will not use Petyr Baelish’s help, not again. And why is he coming, he was not invited.”

“He just assumed,” says Sansa.

Sandor doesn’t like rocking the boat, but it must be done. “You know he betrayed Ned Stark.” He’d told Sansa first; she said she had suspected it, that Baelish had all but confirmed it in the way he spoke the “Stark” in her mother’s name, the contrast to “Catelyn”. Such subtleties irritate Sandor, he knows about Baelish because he stood at Cersei’s back as the goldcloaks went about their business.

Jon’s eyes are hollow. He suspected as well.

“And he saved Jon, saved us,” says Sansa. “Saved me.”

“Wouldn’t have needed saving, if he’d kept his whoring fingers out of the mess,” grunts Sandor.

The she-wolf breaks the impasse. “One to one odds, you said.”

“Not good enough.”

Jon Snow opens his mouth. “Robb managed--”

“Robb Stark was a good commander,” interrupts Sandor. “One of the greatest commanders, according to Jaime fucking Lannister. You’re shit.”

Jon Snow blinks, as if he did not expect that. The she-wolf is about ready to attack Sandor, but he doesn’t care, he has his piece to say and he will say it. And this much he knows, this king won’t have him killed for speaking the truth.

The king looks down at the table. “Robb got the strategy lessons,” he says. No bitterness, just...sorrow. The bastard mourns his trueborn brother? Something Sandor did not expect.

_Fucking Starks_...he tries to soften his tone. “That shit I heard you did at the battle out front, charging in before everyone, when you saw the distance markers.”

“What distance markers?” asks Jon.

Sandor’s jaw almost drops open. “You’ve got to be fucking with me,” he says. “Davos pointed out the crosses--flayed men, burning, they weren’t there for _decoration_. Two lines! Marking the low and high angles for the damn longbowmen! You charge in between them, bows can pick you out like you’re a pig in a pen!”

Jon is cringing. “I didn’t realize, I thought they were there to intimidate me. Couldn’t let myself get intimidated.”

Sansa’s eyes are a bit wild.

“Not _stupid_,” mutters Jon, then he sighs. “Just ignorant.”

“That is _not_ true,” says Sansa firmly. “I heard, from your brothers of the Night’s Watch, of the way you handled that wildling siege. Nobody could have done better, not father, not Robb, not anyone.”

Sandor feels like drinking. Too early, no ale on the table. The she-wolf is goggling at her brother, and her eyes are a little wide as well.
“Recent history provides us with parallels,” says Jaqen, and Sandor almost groans. *Damn sly-blade’s going to be subtle again.* “A young king, come to the throne in inauspicious circumstances.”

A couple of faces look at Jaqen, uneasy.

“Tell us, Ser Sandor,” he says, “who planned the battle of the Blackwater? Who executed the plan?”

“Tyrion Lannister,” says Sandor. He’s ignoring the ‘Ser’ for now, subtle or not, he wants to see exactly where the sly-blade is going with this so he can shut it down.

“And what was King Joffrey doing while it happened?” asks Jaqen.

*Better have a damn good reason for mentioning that name in her presence.*

Still, Sandor’s mouth pulls in a humorless, bitter smile, it stretches his scars and he knows he looks grotesque. “Hiding.”

Jaqen nods, as if he’d known that. “Ignorance in a king, it has a cure--it is called experience, and competent advice. *Cowardice* ...now that is curable as well. The Faceless Men charge exorbitant amounts, for such a service.”

A black bark of laughter from the king. “Experience will come to me whether I want it to or not. Tell me you have competent advice.”

The sly-blade smiles at his brother-in-law. *He smiles too damn much*. “I only cure cowardice, Jon.”

“Ramsay Bolton was a competent commander,” whispers Sansa, staring into her porridge.

There is shocked, pin-drop silence around the table.

Then she looks up, and her eyes are burning with something, something fierce, and Sandor is at a loss to tell what it is, and that distresses him more than even the mention of that fucking piece of dog-shit.

“He liked to gloat,” she says, and her voice is steady, measured. “In great detail. *Stannis Baratheon* was a great commander--Fair Isle, the siege of Storm’s End. *Father* called him a great commander. But it took Ramsay Bolton all of twenty men, to take apart Stannis’s army.”

Jon is staring at her. “What do you mean?”

“She hit Stannis where it would hurt the most.” She laughs, a bitter thing that still *tinkles* as it falls upon Sandor’s ears. “He told me, before he sent out his saboteurs, and he brought down a cage with a raven in it, and he hung it outside my door to taunt me.”

Sandor feels sick to the stomach. *He wanted to show her how thoroughly he’d broken her.*

Then *Arya* laughs and now it’s her turn to get stared at by the men. “What was the catch?” she asks.

Sansa snorts. “Bowmen. I didn’t dare step outside my chamber. But I threw it a crust of bread, saw the red-and-white markings under the beak--raven was trained to seek the Dreadfort. Ramsay was sadistic, not *reckless*.”
He didn’t break her. Didn’t even come close.

Sandor realizes his perspective of the little bird is shifting, somehow, and he doesn’t know where the shift will take him.

Sandor sees Arya exchange a glance with her husband. Then she tilts her chin at him.

Jaqen leans forward. “We will return to Braavos, when things are...completed to Arya Stark’s satisfaction here.”

*Figured.*

But Jaqen is not done. “Sansa, sister mine, would you like to come with us when we go?”

*What, no! Why?*

But Sansa’s gaze is fixed on Jaqen.

“My coin was spent at Harrenhal,” says the fucking sly-blade. “Your sister still has hers.”

*No! To be a fucking assassin, how would that work, this is Princess Sansa Stark we are talking about! It’s a joke, nothing more.*

Sansa looks at Arya, and the wolf-bitch is fucking smiling at her, as if they were the best of friends in the whole wide world. *Why the fuck doesn’t the King, her brother, say anything?* But Jon is watching the tableau unfold before him quietly.

Weighing. Measuring.

Sansa...Sandor has watched his little bird too often, too closely, not to see the wavering in her, the sudden *consideration.*

“She has duties,” spits Sandor. “Whole damn place will fall apart if she isn’t here.”

Sansa’s enthusiasm...dampens. He *hates* that. “Is that what you want?” he growls at her. *Little bird, you’ve been stained, we’re all fucking stained you don’t need to cover yourself in blood to cover it up, I’ve tried it, it doesn’t work.* “To be a damn assassin?”

“Lower your voice, fucking hound!” hisses Arya. “Jon will be married soon, there will be staff to do what Sansa does. So you fucking stay out of it!”

“No!” snarls Sandor. “She has a duty to *me*, she took me into her house, what am I going to do, traipse after her, polishing her knives?”

He snaps his teeth shut. *Didn’t mean to say that. Said too much. Fucking assassins.*

But Sansa is looking less uncertain. She nods, once, then exchanges a sad smile with Jon. “Too much work to do,” Sansa murmurs.

The wolf-bitch’s jaw clenches, but she nods, pulls back.

Jon Snow shakes his head. “Always with the hard choices,” he says to Jaqen. *How the fuck was that a hard choice? She’s a little bird, not a fucking wolf-bitch like her sister!* “The tests.”

Jaqen looks troubled. “Was not meant as a *test*,” he says.
“It became one,” says Jon.

Sansa exhales. “I am Lady--Princess--Sansa Stark,” she says, and her voice is firm. She looks at Arya. “But...thank you, horseface. Just...thank you.”

“You’re stupid, you know that?” says Arya. “You have no idea.”

Both the girls have tears in their eyes. The little bird doesn’t cry. What in the hells is going on? And what hard choice did they give the king?

Sansa is the first to regain control of herself. “Forgive us, Sandor. Some lingering Stark business.”

Sandor points at Jaqen with his knife. “He’s not a Stark,” he grunts.

“Neither am I,” says the king quietly.

Babble breaks out, and Sansa’s voice rises the highest. “Robb legitimized you!”

The king nods. “And that is enough, for Jon,” he says. “But for the King...I must be a Snow, Sansa.”

“Why?” she asks in a whisper.

The king smiles, sadly. “For all the bastards that may come after me.”

Silence.

“Would you like to come to Braavos with us, Jon Snow?” Jaqen asks.

This time it seems it’s a bloody joke, all four of them are laughing.

Then Sansa sobers, looks up at Jon. “Will I be included in the council of war?” she asks her brother.

Jon nods, serious.

“Good,” says Sansa. “Because I know how to hurt the Karstarks.”

JAQEN

Talk of politics swirls around him; he deliberately tunes it out. The temptation to meddle...but Jaqen H’ghar is not an advisor to the King in the North.

Samwell Tarly arrives. His robe is askew, and he has that particular glint in his eye…Gilly.

Jaqen can certainly understand the Maester’s tardiness, having indulged in his own wife for more than half the night (Arya is still walking straight, she emphatically denied being sore; he will have to indulge in her for the entirety of a night to see if she can be fucked to bow-leggedness).

And then he thinks of all the nights on the road, before the stream, when his bride lay clothed and quiet in his arms and this animal lust in him wore a mask called protectiveness, called celibacy.
All the faces of love...Sandor, Sandor, you’re going to have to watch it, friend, you’re neither subtle nor too clever, and the only one who doesn’t know why you trail after her like the dog you say you’re not, is Sansa herself.

But then, Sandor’s love life (its lack thereof) is not Jaqen’s problem. He just hopes for Sansa’s sake that she doesn’t divine her shield’s true motivations too quickly, not before she’s had a chance to discover who she truly is.

The offer of a coin was not made in jest. Sansa Stark is built of much the same stuff as Arya (some fundamental differences--Sansa could never have slaked a caged Lorathi’s thirst). Very unusual, to have two of the same biological family in the House, but there are the twins of Leng to consider--each formidable on their own, peerless as a team.

Ah, Sandor, your ill-timed... well timed...remark has cost the House of Black and White a very potential recruit. And my bride, who hates losing people, she will lose her sister to the darkness, eventually. I hope there is a future for you and Sansa after this; be clever, Sandor, make my sister happy enough that you balance our loss.

“There is something else,” says Arya.

She is about to speak of the Sealord, and Jaqen is interested in what her plan for the revelation is--they have not discussed it yet... a bit busy, last night. He can’t help but grin, despite the scorching, despite the Valyrian in him.

He realizes his attention drifts. Uncharacteristic. He drags it back.

“...so Jaqen’s my lover, alright?”

A substitute Arya Stark to marry the Sealord, the real one is mine, but we can’t let anyone outside this inner circle know. Fair enough.

Simple, for once.

But the looks on the faces around the table…

“A scandal, but royalty is known for such,” Jaqen murmurs. “Along with the men’s clothes and the sword-wielding, I will be just another eccentricity she has cultivated.”

“And this is agreeable to you?” Samwell Tarly asks Jaqen, the first thing the Maester’s said in a while.

Truth becomes lie becomes truth. His fingers glance over his pocket. “It will be interesting, being a kept man.”

She grins back at him.

“The Sealord of Braavos…” Sansa is saying. “But who are you going to send to pretend to be you, Arya? You’re you!”

It is not a disparagement.

Arya sighs. “We have been training someone to mimic me.”

“This means you will be lost to us, forever,” says Jon.

That phrasing again. Alike, in more than just looks, Jon Snow and Arya Stark.
“What is a name?” asks Arya, with a raised eyebrow at the man who just refused to forsake his. “I am your sister, whoever and wherever I am.” She thinks. “You just have to pretend this other Arya Stark is also your sister.” An earnestness grows on Arya’s face, she leans forward on the table. “Jon, she is your sister, through me--my sister in the order, she would die for me, as I would for her.”

The Braavosi is out in full force, Jaqen thinks. Only they make such talk, of ‘dying for each other’, or ‘unbreakable bonds of brotherhood’. What is the use of making talk when a thing is what it is?

But the talking seems to have placated Jon.

Sansa is thoughtful. “The riders at the banquet--I didn’t introduce Jaqen, didn’t mention you were married to him,” she says, giving both of them an apologetic look.

“A man is grateful you didn’t shout his name from the rooftops, all else being equal,” he says.

Jon is shaking his head. “This is all too complicated.” He sighs. “But an alliance like this with Braavos…”


“So did the Lannisters,” adds Sansa.

And that, it seems, is that.

Breakfast staggers to a close. Jon leaves towards the stables.

For the rest of them, apparently there will be tasks.

“The Starks must show no weakness,” says Sansa, and begins to delegate.

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NO ONE

She dreams of R’hllor’s pit.

---

ARYA

She doesn’t know where the day went--in decorating, she thinks. The thought is accompanied by less disgust than expected--Sansa’s stance of “show no weakness” translates to a revival of Winterfell, one that includes crossed axes mounted on the walls, ancient bearskins (though not moldering bearskins, thanks to the dryness of the storerooms) upon the floor, along with newly-cleaned draperies.

Everyone works, even the Maester, once Davos rides back to Cerwyn and Jon takes the handful of riders that have returned from their circuit out to one of the Stark-held villages to the west.

Jaqen grins every time it is a servant’s turn to ask “princess Arya” to do something. It is the contrast, she thinks, between the royal title and the work her hands are turned to, beating rugs and dragging furniture around.
By the time Jon has returned from his circuit and they sit for their nightmeal, the public areas of Winterfell are resonant with the cold, grim majesty of the North. The few tapestries, carefully chosen, the few suits of armor (ancient, powerful in symbol if not metal)—the House of Stark speaks in understatement: a whisper, that commands silence. The quarters for all the lords and ladies that will arrive for the moot are also ready.

Jon is overwhelmed, she thinks, though he hides it well he cannot hide from a Faceless Man’s assessment. “All this, for *me*?” Jon is thinking.

But Jaqen grows quieter and quieter as the evening wears thin; he does not join them in her mother’s bower for wine, instead he excuses himself to send another raven to the House of Black and White.

Worry drives her from the company of her siblings (and the ever-present Sandor) very soon.

She finds Him of the Many Faces lying naked on the bed, staring up at the canopy; the ice is long gone, but the scorch-marks remain, testament to the dragon in His blood.

His hair, it spreads out on the pillow under him: a halo of white-gold around His head.

*Wrong. So wrong.*

She sits on the bed beside Him, and prays, and lays her husband’s face upon hers.

He does not look up.

Jaqen glances at himself in the small mirror upon Arya Stark’s rarely-used dressing table. His hair is dark, like the darkest part of night before dawn. *There will be no more dawns for a very long time.*

The god is not hiding; it seems he just can’t bear to look at himself.

“Give me your hand,” says Jaqen.

Him of the Many Faces complies, lays His palm face-up upon Jaqen’s. Identical, their hands, though Jaqen knows that if he were to take a knife and open a vein on each of them, his own blood would flow red, and the other, black.

But the god does not want to play the lying game. When He speaks, He speaks of memory. “Blood,” He murmurs. “So much blood, the ground was steeped in it. A thousand voices. The walls echoed with their pleas. And still Death awoke in a fucking *Valyrian*. ”

Jaqen considers this. He lets go the hand, climbs upon the bed, straddles his god. His hands stroke the outside of His thigh, feeling the hairs rise—His husband’s body responds to his touch, as it always does, even in the midst of His self-hatred.

“There was darkness in you…” Jaqen’s hands move.

The god has raised His head, He is considering Jaqen, and there is a gleam of interest in His eyes despite Himself.

*I refused to couple with a Valyrian*, Jaqen thinks. He thinks it loudly, he wears it on his face.

The Many-Faced God’s mouth twists. “So even Jaqen H’ghar is a good little Faceless Man,” He sneers.
Jaqen ignores His tone. “Everyone--slaves especially--have darkness in them. So why a Valyrian?”

The tone of his musing is more gentle than the god’s.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Still bitter.

*It is.*

“What *Everything,*” says Jaqen, “hinges on the simplest, smallest of choices. My darkness drove me towards vengeance. Each and every Faceless Man gives you their lives, their service, in exchange for vengeance. Dutiful, all of us, in our own twisted way.”

The god’s eyes are trained on him, but the only darkness that lurks there is lust. “Tell me what I need to hear so you will let me fuck you.” His voice is rough.

*That was the intention, Many-Faced God.*

“Of all the memories that I have been able to wear,” says Jaqen, “of every man I have seen around me, of them you, only you, your darkness moved you to *mercy.*”

The god closes his eyes.

“And death awakened in you.”

The god’s hair is darkening, turning black, starting at the tips this time as He comes back to Himself.

Jaqen smiles. *Fire can die. Ice can die. Death will take them all.*

Jaqen bends down, takes the god’s erect phallus in his mouth. Him of the Many Faces groans, His hips buck. Jaqen has but the theory of what he does--theory to reality, it is an entirely different universe, reality is wide, it stretches his mouth, warm and hard and smooth. There is a taste, the *taste* of him...

Jaqen realizes he is moaning around his husband’s cock, and that seems to be too much for the god to take, His arms come up, He twists, and He is pulling Jaqen down upon Him. Jaqen fights, and in this body he is entirely his husband’s equal in physical strength.

But his god is a canny one--He has Jaqen pinned shortly thereafter, the evidence of both of their lusts hard, throbbing between them.

“What are we doing again?” asks Jaqen, momentarily stunned by the ease of his spouse’s victory.

“I don’t know what *you* were doing,” says Him of the Many Faces, “ *I* was trying to kiss you.”

“I was fighting,” Jaqen mutters.

“Clearly. *What* were you fighting?”

“I have no idea.”

“Hmm.” Him of the Many Faces rains kisses down Jaqen’s chest, then up again. “Let me show you,” He whispers. His hand closes around both their erections.

Lightning arcs through him.

He moves his hips, again and again, rubbing himself against His hand, His cock. Lightning, and
heat, again and again...

*Never thought*... the sheer power of the wanting, it is not *need* like Arya Stark needs.

It is a *ravening*.

Arya Stark feels her desire for Him of the Many Faces as a tingle, a weight in her fingertips, in her thighs, in the ache of her breasts, in the core of her, diffuse and needing *everywhere*.

The hunger of this body, all of it, it is centered on his cock; it arcs through his spine and where it touches it leaves nothing, it takes everything, and focuses it back upon the feel of the god’s hand on him.

He groans, and struggles for some semblance of control.

“Not so easy, is it?” mocks the Many-Faced God.

Jaqen’s anger flares again in the face of His mocking. He stills, narrows his eyes to slits. “If not for me, then not for *you* either.” Without warning, he scissors his legs, twists out of His grasp.

And then it is the god’s turn to groan, to move His hips without pattern, as Jaqen bends forward, takes Him into his mouth again.

*The theory is nothing*, Jaqen thinks, tracing the line of the vein at the base of His cock with his tongue, the god’s cock is almost vibrating with hardness, drops of fluid appearing at the slit at its tip and Jaqen swirls his tongue around it, tasting it. *So good.*

“Stop,” says Him of the Many Faces; He doesn’t mean it. “Stop,” He warns again. Jaqen just grins, bends his face forward, takes as much of His cock inside his mouth as he can.

The god pulls back, pulls out of Jaqen’s mouth with a wet pop. Jaqen looks up, wondering if he has misread Him…

His gaze is soft, heartbreakingly tender...the anger leeches out of Jaqen.

Jaqen allows himself to be laid back upon the bed, accepts His weight on top of him.

Their mouths meet, wet and hungry, in a bruising kiss. Jaqen’s thoughts scatter *dear lord can you kiss*. Each swipe of His tongue sends the lightning to Jaqen’s cock again, makes the muscles of his thighs clench with each surge.

“Fuck me,” he says. It is the only thing the thing in his blood, the lightning, it is the only thing it will allow Jaqen to say. “Fuck me.”


“Forget it.”

“Bad idea.”

“Don’t care.”

The god cares. Enough to get up off Jaqen, and he snarls in frustration as he hears the sound of Him opening the wooden box that contains the unguents.
“This one?” He asks.

There are enough tools of their profession in that box that Jaqen masters himself long enough to look. Him of the Many Faces is holding up a small jar.

“No,” says Jaqen in alarm, “that’s oil of antimony! Two over.”

The god mutters something about Jaqen’s organization scheme, finds the right oil, and returns to the bed.

Jaqen reaches for his husband, pulls His head down roughly to him again.

Whatever tenuous hold the Many-Faced God had on Himself snaps. The true nature of His intention pours out of His mouth, “Going to fuck you so hard...” he roughly prepares Jaqen, “Fuck you raw, fill you up with my cock.”

“What are you waiting for?” Jaqen groans, his fist closing on around his own length.

“Fuck.” The god buries himself in Jaqen, and it burns, it stretches him and both like and utterly unlike the other times this has happened.

“Is this what you wanted?” asks Him of the Many Faces, as he buries himself in Jaqen to the hilt.

Jaqen’s vision is blurring, he pumps himself with one hand, ineffective, not enough, not fast enough. “You ask unnecessary questions. Fuck me.”

The god grunts, and pulls out, angles himself, pushes back in. His cock pushes against something, a spot...


But Him of the Many Faces is beyond the point where He will take instruction. It doesn’t matter, He is hitting that spot again and again, and their mouths are breathing into each other’s, harsh.

His thrusts become erratic.

Jaqen dimly realizes Arya Stark pleads, she grows incoherent as she is pleasured. Jaqen H’ghar, on the other hand, becomes focused, and the sounds that come from his mouth are very, very coherent: “Your body likes being fucked like this.” And the focused sharp filthy things he says are an amalgam, of Arya Stark’s forthrightness, and Jaqen H’ghar’s twist. “You like having a cock in you...”

The god spends Himself with a snarl, a hiss, and He fumbles between them, His hand finds Jaqen’s weeping erection. It takes but two strokes till the spasm travels from the base of his spine to the tip of his cock.

Jaqen comes, spurting around the Many-Faced God’s hand, all over his stomach, his chest, and he throws his head back as the god pumps his still-erect manhood, milking every drop of seed from him. Another few strokes and it is too much, his cockhead is too sensitive, too much, but Jaqen will not beg Him of the Many Faces to stop. Instead, he opens his eyes, locks his gaze upon the god’s.

The bed is soaked in their sweat, in the smell of their coupling, raw and visceral and very male.

Jaqen doesn’t reach for no one; he reaches for Jaqen H’ghar’s aggression. “You made me come,”
he says.

The god blinks, surprised at the tone of Jaqen’s voice.

“And now you will lick it up,” Jaqen says, softly.

The god’s eyes widen. Then, without argument, Him of the Many Faces bends to the task.

She wears her own face again as they deal with the aftermath of it. The sheets, changed, the soiled ones smuggled to the laundry. They keep exchanging glances, Him and Arya Stark, and either he grins, or she giggles.

*Love thyself.*

He shakes his head.

“A man cannot help his biology,” she says, smirks.

“Is this a pattern, Arya Stark?” He asks. “Solving every problem with fucking?”

“Would you like it to be?”

“My problems, yes,” He says, and He is quite, quite serious.

She runs her tongue over her canines.

“Another’s problems…” He trails off.

“Yours to command.”

It is under the snow-laden boughs of the weirwood that she finds she can still call the wind to her, albeit a much, much smaller wind than the one that had scoured the world in the wake of her fury. Even this small wind would have stripped Arya Stark of herself, left in her nothing but cruelty.

She is not Arya Stark. She is no one, and the hand of her god is upon her shoulder, and the wind is simply cold.

She sleeps there, against Him, and He takes the both of them into the dreaming; then she takes the both of them east.

She is no one, and yet, and yet...she is one who has known love, and pain, and fury, and she feels an echo of all of these as she sees the tatters Asshai has made of her brother’s self. The god, beside her, He brushes His hand over the surface of His brother’s dreams.

“Rest, brother,” whispers Him of the Many Faces.

“Rest, brother,” she echoes Him.

The wind whispers around them, a mere breeze by the time it has traversed the distance needed, over the sea.

Their stance firms.

They will stand, for as long as they can, between him and the gaping maw of his nightmares.
NO ONE

Something is different.

He is hallucinating, he realizes, caught between dreaming and waking, a hallucination born of Arya Stark’s memories...the smell of ginger and cloves.

“Rest, brother.”

“Jaqen?”

Of course not. But the scent, it is under his skin, and there is another scent there, one he does not recognize at all...mint and wintergreen and burning pine.

A soft breeze blows over his forehead, cooling his fevered skin.

“Rest, brother.”

The smell of pine and cloves in his mind, he falls into a dreamless sleep.

ARYA

She comes awake to the sound of someone calling their names.

“Arya! Arya! Jaqen!”

He has awakened beside her.

“It’s morning already,” she says. The color of the sky disagrees with her. “We were missed at the table.”

They stand, straighten their clothes as much as possible, and stride out of the godswood.

“Arya!” Sansa throws herself at her sister. “Where were you?”

“In the godswood.” Jaqen answers for her.

Sandor looms behind Sansa. “What the fuck were you doing there?” he asks.

“Praying,” says Arya.

“What happened to you?” Sansa demands. “You didn’t come, and then we went to look for you, and your room...your room...”


Sansa digests this. “Next time,” she says, her voice colder than the air around them, “please inform me when you are trying something, or decide to leave the keep in the middle of the night. I do not enjoy entertaining the notion that you have perished in a magical fire. Nor do I enjoy running.”

She places a hand on her midsection.
Arya winces. *I’m sorry, Sansa, I’m so sorry.* She takes a deep breath. *This can’t go on. She won’t come to Braavos, not yet; very well, Braavos will come to her.*

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” Arya asks.

Sansa *looks* at her, and her anger subsides. “Nothing that cannot be postponed.”

“Come.”

Arya takes her sister by the hand, and leads her (at a sedate pace) back to the keep, up the side stairs that lead to what were previously the heralds’ quarters, and to Sansa’s bedchamber.

Sandor and Jaqen are following.

“Stay out here,” Arya says to them. “Don’t let anybody enter.”

And then she leads Sansa inside, and closes the door.

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**SANSA**

She is trembling; Arya has asked her to undress, lie on the bed. A sheet has been draped over her upper body, and her legs are bent, spread apart in a lewd approximation of something...but Arya is *looking* at her. Arya has spread her apart, like the Maester did to check her virginity before they married her to Ramsay.

*Please, please, let it be something that can be healed.*

Some time passes, she can tell Arya is trying to be gentle, but she Sansa still winces from time to time; her hands are balled into tight fists, her nails cutting into her palm, by the time it is done.

Arya sighs, pulls the sheet over Sansa’s legs. Gratefully, Sansa lowers her legs, closes them.

Arya is looking at her with a frighteningly blank expression; it makes her look like a stranger, remote. “Arya?” Sansa whispers.

“It is a fistula,” says Arya, gently, though her voice is still so remote. “Not common, but not rare either, in cases of violent rape.”

Sansa swallows. “What is a fistula?” She doesn’t know if she wants the answer.

“The membrane between the two passages tore, at some point. It healed, but with a channel formed between them. The bleeding, the pain—it gets infected, from time to time, and because it is where it is, any rough movement—riding...” Arya’s voice is steady. Too steady. “Sansa, how did you ride?”

Sansa grimaces. “Painfully.” Then she lifts her chin. “But I don’t let anyone see it hurts me.”

Arya says nothing, that cold, clinical look still in her eyes, and Sansa finds herself almost speechlessly grateful for it.

*No pity, thank the seven, no pity.*

“Can you do something?”
Arya closes her eyes. “It is not deep, it can be healed.”

Sansa exhales.

“It will need cutting,” says Arya. “But I’m an apprentice...alchemist.” Poisoner, Sansa reads in that hesitation. “Not a chirurgeon,” Arya continues. “You need to come to Braavos.”

“I did not ask if it could be healed,” says Sansa. “I asked if you can do something. I can’t leave Winterfell, may not be able to for years and years. I’ve lived with it this long, I can…”

*Live a little longer.*

Arya’s jaw clenches. “No. Sooner or later the infection will get too much, it will travel upwards.”

Arya looks down at her hands, looks up again. “I can do something.”

“How soon?”

Arya purses her lips, looks at Sansa. “Today. Will take a few watches. But you will be a month recovering from it. No running, no walking for three days, no riding for at month, at least. You understand?”

Sansa closes her eyes. “The moot…”

“You don’t need to walk. That brick wall you call a shield can carry you, set you up in a chair before the day starts. I’ll be dosing you with tonics for the pain in either case.”

Sansa nods. “Then do it.”

“I need another set of hands. Jaqen—”

“No.”

Arya glares at her. “Sansa…”

*She shouldn’t have told him.* Sansa stares up at the ceiling. “Use Sandor.”

Arya looks at Sansa as if she’s gone mad. “You don’t want my husband-- my better, in every skill--”

“Jon doesn’t know. Jaqen shouldn’t have, either.”

*She keeps no secrets from him. What a strange marriage theirs is--even mother kept secrets.*

Sansa would have been less understanding of Arya’s...lack of discretion, but in the past few days she has discovered the release that comes from pouring the molten lead of your fears (the things that make a coward out of you at every turn) into another’s ears, letting them bear the weight for you. Absolution, of a sort--false, for the weight always returns in the end, but Sandor is strong enough to bear it.

“There is pride,” says Arya quietly, “and there is stupidity. You don’t want Jaqen in here, but you want Sandor fucking Clegane?”

Sansa laughs, black, black laughter. “Sandor’s seen me humiliated before the entire court of King’s Landing. He’s seen ugliness. He’s as jaded as I am, more, he’s lived in his own filth longer than I have in mine. This won’t bother him, and he won’t bother me. He’s probably raped a woman or two in his time. Jaqen...Arya, it’s not just that he’s your husband.” She looks at Arya, trying to get
Arya to understand. “Jaqen may be a killer, but he’s not ugly. I will not have him exposed to this.”

Arya chokes. “Sansa... Jaqen doesn’t need to be shielded from the harshness of the world.”

“Then shield me, from his having to see it.”

“You have slipped on ice, and you’ve hit your head, and you’ve gone mad,” Arya mutters.

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ARYA

She opens the door, steps outside, closes it behind her.

“How much did you hear?” she asks quietly.

The look on both men’s faces...they’ve heard enough.

She looks at Sandor, and his last words to her before she left him to die, his words are an alive thing between the two of them. *I meant to take her too... I should have fucked her bloody and ripped her heart out before leaving her for that dwarf.*

She knows he was goading her, wanted her to kill him, but strange truths come out of Sandor’s mouth when he’s not watching it.

He stands before her, unbowed, and he carries the weight of each and every one of his sins, real or imagined. *His ugliness, Arya thinks, Sansa conflates Sandor’s “ugliness” with “love”. Does she know or does she just sense it?*

*And why does she think...Sansa, what did you do that makes you the equal of the Hound in your mind?* Not the dogs, Ramsay Bolton--Sansa was proud of that, as she should be.

“Sandor, I need boiling water, clean--fucking clean cloths, a lot of them.” Sandor nods, thunders down the stairs.

“Knives, your box and bandolier, needles, gut and cord...anything else?” asks Jaqen quietly.

“Strong spirits. The clear ones--I think there’s still two bottles of the moonshine in the stillroom.” She rests her forehead on his chest for a moment.

“Weat our sister,” he says.

“The Waif,” sighs Arya. “Wish she was here. Can you talk to Sansa--tell her you’ve done field chirurgery before?”

Jaqen strokes her hair, says nothing. He understands *all* of it, damn Lorathi, he *knows*, even the things Arya doesn’t about her own sister. “Don’t cauterize,” he says. “Just pack the wound, let it drain.”

She nods, then steps away start her preparations.
This came back from gul yesterday, and so you have it now.

Writing Faceless Face-Switch sex scenes with both think of themselves as the person they're wearing...did it work? Was it clear?

Thank you! Love you all!

No absinthe today. Maybe for the next one, it'll be out Friday ;}

SAMWELL

Samwell Tarly rushes through the corridors of Winterfell Keep, images of Lady Arya’s room flashing through his head.

*What could have scorched the walls like that?*

Magic.

It’s not that he *wants* it to be magic (he tells himself sternly), but what else could it have been? There are many alchemical reagents and powders that could be used, he supposes, but their study is forbidden at the Citadel because of their destructive potential. Nothing in the room was *destroyed*. Simply...scorched. And the furniture...the corners of it, pitted and scarred, as if eaten away by some corrosive vapors, which lends credence to the ‘alchemy’ hypothesis...Lady Sansa hadn’t noticed, understandable, given how panicked she was.

Samwell has been pacing the corridor in front of his room for a watch; he wants to seek out Lady Arya and her husband, demand answers.

*None will be forthcoming, I think.*

He realizes he no longer paces--his feet have directed him with purpose, to the stairs that lead to the cold and drafty ravensloft.

Ravens are scarce, especially since Lady Arya’s husband commandeered two for his purposes, but this news needs to be sent. He was saving the raven, for when the Faceless Men’s face-changing magics would be confirmed, but that simply turned out to be a baseless rumor. *Better this way, means Lady Arya is alive, means Jon is happy, at least for a while.*

He reaches into the pouch at his belt, pulls out a scrap of parchment and a sharpened stub of lead they use at the Citadel for such tasks, sets the parchment against a somewhat smooth portion of the stone railing.

Wind whips at his hair, at the scrap he writes on, seeking out every gap in his robes. It plucks at him, and the howl of it is a taunt: *come out from behind those stone balustrades, see what I can really do to you.*

He picks out a raven marked with the brown-and-red banding of the Citadel, ties his message tube to its foot. It’s ciphered, but both Lady Arya and her husband deciphered their own messages without even consulting a lexicon.

*Told me almost a watch to undo the substitution, and that was only the first layer.*

*No*, he decides. *No cipher is safe anymore.* He will have to wait to the last minute before putting message to parchment from now on, haunt the ravensloft as and when he can, allow no one to be present when he does send and receive messages. Especially not Lady Arya’s husband.

There is something deeply unsettling about Jaqen H’ghar. Something about the eyes. His gaze
gives Samwell Tarly the same gut-clenching prickly feeling he’d gotten on the night of his initiation as a Maester.

Jaqen H’ghar makes Samwell Tarly think of black flames, and dragonglass, and vomiting up every meal you’ve had in the past five years when you succeed in lighting a candle with nothing but your mind.

Generations, according to Maester Marwyn, since that’s been done.

There are Maesters at the Citadel and outside it, working in the shadows, a cabal of learned men working to understand magic, instead of dismissing it as children’s stories.

Some believe dragons are the catalyst for the return of magic to the world, and perhaps that is true for the world at large. But in the North... Samwell Tarly believes not all magic has to do with dragons. Real magic, powerful magic, it never left the world at all. It was simply restrained behind the Wall.

Archmaester Marwyn is the Face of this cabal of forward-thinking Maesters--his elevated position makes his research an eccentricity, not a danger. He has left Westeros in order to observe Daenerys Targaryen, perhaps serve as an advisor.

That leaves the Hand of the cabal to observe the North. Samwell Tarly is a trusted friend to the King in the North, House Maester to the Starks.

Convenient, that.

The message to the Citadel is a list of questions--information, that must be researched and sent back to Samwell Tarly: R’hllor. Prophecies. Faceless Men. Mage-Steel. Myr. His colleagues have come to expect questions, and very, very few answers--Samwell Tarly does not disseminate the secrets of Winterfell.

Not anymore.


Samwell had built up a series of images in his head, flashes of fervently thought thoughts: images of himself kneeling before Jon, being forgiven, being empowered by his confession; visions, each of which culminates in a righteous confrontation, a burning, that has the power to scour him clean. Samwell hadn’t known which “him” he had meant--himself, the man who was once his friend. Both.

Pate died, and took all that with him.

And all Samwell has left is the bitter taste at the back of his mouth.

But, with every evidence of magic he uncovers in the North, he hammers another nail into the coffin of the anti-magic faction Pate used to scheme for. “Truth will set you free”, Pate used to say, gently, sardonically. Mockingly, to those Maesters that believed in some quality like “truth” that could serve as panacea for all the world’s ills.

Curiosity had driven Samwell to the Citadel, in search of dragons, of magic. Curiosity, no matter how many times he told others (himself) the story of the White Walkers and the dragonglass knife.

No longer.
Now, Samwell Tarly searches for the truths Pate disdained so that he may substitute them for the truth he dares not offer Jon. *Truth is very much like poison*, Samwell thinks. Different poisons, man still dies in the end from any of them.

Pate died.

So will the Night’s King. And it’s Samwell Tarly’s job to discover the how of it. *Redemption is like poison, too*, he thinks. *One can always be substituted for another.*

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**ARYA**

Arya has chosen a clean, sparse bedchamber on one of the lower levels of the keep. Candles burn on every surface and through the drapes are closed the room is brighter than the quasi-twilight they must learn to call “mid-day” outside.

Sansa lies on the bed, and Sandor sits on an uncomfortable stool at her head. Arya has fed Sansa some milk of the poppy. By the look on Sandor’s face, he thinks it is not nearly enough, but he’s keeping his trap shut for now.

Sansa is drowsy, calm. Perhaps because Arya’s blades, needles, they sit on a tray-table to a side of the bed, mercifully covered with cloth. Nothing to see but an innocuous tray-table. Her vials and powders are arrayed on the sideboard. Poisons, all of them—palliatives, in the right concentrations.

She concentrates on counting each grain of a coarse, greenish powder as she brushes it from a tipped vial onto the blade of a steel knife, carefully, with a twist of paper. Then, she counts out drops of a colorless, odourless liquid onto the blade, one for each grain. The blade hisses where the two mix, and soon the surface of the steel is pitted; a flakey white residue is left behind. She deposits the residue onto a flat plate, mixes it with calumel oil, sets it aside.

Out of Sansa’s field-of-view, she checks her knives. The two thinnest ones have been sacrificed for this task, their edges ground down until the blades are but thin slivers of metal. She tests the edge with her forefinger—a razor-thin line of blood marks the slow passage of the blade over her skin. She didn’t feel the cut.

*It will do.*

Sandor is watching, uneasy.

The hearth is lit, a large copper vessel of boiling water suspended over the hottest part of the flame.

She drops both knives in the water, watches it roil around them.

“What’s that for?” asks Sandor.

“Cleans the blades.” Jaqen can keep infection away, but better not to have it develop in the first place.

Sansa mumbles something.

“Talk to her,” Arya commands as she begins to prepare herself. First, she draws her cloak tight about her, draws the hood deep over her face. She can see clearly, if she keeps her head down, but with the candles focused on Sansa’s form, all Sandor will be able to see against the light are her
hands.

She prays, and draws the Waif over herself.

Then she douses her hands with the moonshine, once, twice for good measure, and quickly scores the bottoms of Sansa’s feet with the prepared knife, the one with the poison on it.

Sansa’s legs give a slight, spasmodic jerk, a reflex. And then they still.

“...little bird,” Sandor is saying, and there is something deeply disturbing about that man trying to make his voice gentle. “Are you sleepy?”

“No,” says Sansa, her mumble giving voice to her lie. “Terrified. But you’re not frightened, are you?” She answers her own question. “You’ve seen worse.”

For the first time since they’ve come to Winterfell, Arya’s heart goes out to the big man. To be valued for the things you hate of your soul, of your past...and not because they are to be used, like Joffrey used them, but because the woman you love (the pure-hearted, the beautiful woman you love, your “little bird”) sees in your ugliness her mirror...

He’s probably raped a woman or two in his time. Arya shakes her head, concentrates on pulling on as many of the Waif’s memories as she can. Her sister had not died till she was well past her first flowering, but even as an acolyte she had established her uncommon skill on matters pertaining to anatomy.

And alchemy.

“Never forced anyone that said no,” Sandor is saying, quietly, and he’s looking at Arya as much as Sansa. “But little bird, you know force isn’t the only thing that can bind a woman.”

With the Waif’s memories in her, Arya wants to say, please converse upon a topic less likely to agitate the patient. Instead, she steps up to the bed, places one of her hands on Sansa’s inner wrist. Hopefully Sandor will be too tied up in himself, in Sansa, to notice the discrepancy between Arya Stark’s hands and the Waif’s.

Sansa laughs. “Who knows it better, ugly bird? Fear binds us. Can’t even open your mouth to say no.”

“And name me one woman,” and some of his customary harshness returns to Sandor’s voice, “you too--that wasn’t afraid of the Hound? I paid whores, and even they were scared of me.”

Sansa reaches out a her other hand, gropes blindly for his. They hold on to each other, as Arya watches, her fingers counting the pulse at Sansa’s wrist. When it has slowed enough to be almostunreadable, and Sansa is deeply under, she gestures Sandor aside.

“Hand me the knives when I tell you to.”

So begins a watch, full of boiling water and cloths, and cleaning bloodied knives. Another watch after that, and Arya thinks her mother would have been proud of how neat her stitches are.

She wants to giggle.

She realizes she hovers on the edge of hysteria.

I am no one.
Her hands still shake as she cleans the last of the blood off Sansa, packs the wound.

“It is done?” asks Sandor, once he realizes she’s just been standing there, staring at the last of the candles burning down.

The one who was born Arya Stark lets the Waif dissolve into the darkness under her hood, and draws it away from her face with a weary sigh. “Now let’s hope she wakes up.”

Sandor grimaces to cover his sudden, startled terror.

_He didn’t realize, until now, how uncertain this thing was, for Arya Stark._ She’s not entirely sure how the poison will have mixed with the milk of the poppy she gave Sansa earlier...time will tell.

Then the one who is no one thinks Sandor should be offered something--some reward, for his unstinting assistance. “Your presence was helpful,” she says, imbuing the words with the grudging approval Arya Stark would have felt. “She’s a lot more attached to you than you think. She sees in you her mirror, Sandor, and whether it is a true reflection or not only time will tell.”

He bows his head. “False. All false. She sees me--she knows me, don’t know how she could get herself so wrong.”

No one’s mouth pulls upwards in a smile that is eerily like her mirror’s, and says nothing more.

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**JAQEN**

Sansa wakes in time for the nightmeal. And it is no sooner than needed, because Winterfell is coming alive. The advance guard of various noble houses, retainers, merchants with an eye to profiting off the moot, workmen looking for hire, they have slowly started filtering into the keep over the day.

The chaos of it, the bustle, the horses, the churned mud underfoot in the courtyard--the keep starts to resemble the Winterfell of Arya’s childhood. Guards--green youths infused with a potion that is half part confused pride, half part fear of Sandor--have taken up positions around the Lord’s sections of the keep. It has been put about--to the Maester’s consternation, that he wasn’t told--that Lady Sansa slipped on some ice, and she desires her solitude. In reality Sansa is putting out fires, issuing orders, organizing, from her bed.

Until Arya steps in. And then Sansa actually rests. And once the last crumbs of their cold supper are no more, Jaqen and Arya let Sansa know they will spend the night in the godswood.

But their brother does not sleep, his dreams are unreachable, and in the small hours of the night they return to Arya’s room.

They lie face up on the bed, staring at the scorched ceiling. The canopy has been removed, the room cleaned, furniture taken away to use as firewood in the servant-hearths. The stone is bare, and there is comfort in the grey; just their fingertips touch each other as they lie side by side, and Jaqen begins to drowse.

“Love,” she whispers, “you said you had much time to think on it, on us...what is the most depraved thing you’ve ever wanted to do to me?”

There is an echo in her voice, not of her response to his whispered seductions but of her response to...
the things she learned from the Waif, of weakness, of enslavement, of the things that can be done to women to break them.

Sansa’s truths.

“Wanted to have you in the main hall of the House,” he answers truthfully. Would have answered truthfully even if he had wanted to hurt her. “Beside the pool.”

She thinks about it. “That is not depraved,” she says, “it is disrespectful.” To those seeking mercy.

“Not going to do it,” Jaqen murmurs. “‘Twas a fantasy, when you were a world away, working in the hall, cleaning the floors…to come up behind you, draw you into my arms…you were faceless by then, but I imagined you in acolyte black. Very forbidden.”

“Very,” she says, inwardly focused. “But…beloved, I really don’t understand. What shape of mind can do that to another? What mind bears it, and does not break?”

Him of the Many Faces sighs. “Will never understand this thing. Wouldn’t matter if I tied you down, put bruises on you, cut you. Wouldn’t be that kind of depraved. Even if it wasn’t me, even if it was real. Cannot be violated--violence is a thing of the body, violation is a thing of the mind, the soul. You are no one now--your mind cannot be touched. Pain, fear, anger...these things you will watch and because you understand them they will be annihilated. The body may become a wasteland, you will remain untouched. Your Waif’s truth is not Lorathi truth--our sister is not no one.”

“But if no one does not understand this one thing,” she whispers, “how can she defeat it?”

And this is the core lacuna in the Lorathi way--a paradox. A Lorathi understands a thing of the world by looking at its reflections in themselves. A Lorathi changes the world by changing the image of it in themselves. But if an experience does not reflect on the self because the self is inviolable, how can it be changed? To go outside the self, to reach out to another to understand their truth...near impossible, for a Lorathi, to form such a connection.

She address the Many-Faced God. “How would you defeat it?”

I defeat everything, in the end, He thinks muzzily. Death, for the violated and the violator, for the suffering and the sufferer. It is the only surety. “Valar morghulis,” He says.

“Valar dohaeris.” Her response is automatic; but Arya Stark’s definition of service is closer to that of the god’s than that of no one’s--she wants to order all the broken reflections of the world. Her question is not about a violation of Arya Stark, though it was couched that way, it is something...larger.

How do I learn the truths of others? Learn though to go beyond Myself, to be Him of the Many Faces, when I, too, am no one?

Every Faceless Man comes to the knowing of this thing at some point--also an acceptance, of why the god is simply one of his brothers and not something set above them. Him of the Many Faces cannot serve His function without the service of the faceless.

“Memories,” He says. The Faceless Men serve the Many-Faced God for an uncounted number of years. But the very first service is discharged when they come to the darkness for the first time and give Him their memories. Their greatest service, perhaps, they discharge when they return to the darkness for the last time.
"Learn," He says, "as I do."

"I...I couldn’t wear some faces before,” she says. “Thought I’d be able to, if I actually had sex.”

"Told you,” He mumbles, half-asleep. “Violation is not sex, sex is a tool.”

“I know a sister’s name,” she says, and says it.

His eyes snap open, wide, stare into the darkness. “You started with that one? Arya…”

“I am no one.”

She is. And she needs to understand, even if the God doesn’t need her to.

“I’ll take the bedroll,” He offers. Safer, that way, for the both of them.

She doesn’t object.

He tries not to think about what she will remember, through their sister’s name. This, too, is part of her progression, and now that she is faceless, she chooses the pace.

It still twists at him.

He ignores it.

He is no one, and he draws sleep around himself, sinks into it, forgoing the dreaming for the night.

When he wakes, though there is no dawn he knows it is “morning”.

“Arya?”

“Come back to bed, best-beloved,” she says.

Him of the Many Faces rises, pads over to her. “Couldn’t hold it yet?” He asks, irrationally pleased.

He cannot see her expression. He lights a candle. The expression around her mouth, the tilt of her head…

Ah.

“I was told,” she says, “That the god, and a score of His brothers, they harvested an entire khalasar, once upon a time.”

And now you know whose life bought those deaths. “Vaes Diaf,” He says.

And yet again she looks at Him as if He put the sun in the sky. “Her hand,” He reminds her harshly, “her hand that wielded each blade, each, we each, we wore her face.”

A knock, on the door. It is hesitant, but out of politeness, and there is a certain implacability to the weight of the knocks.

“Samwell Tarly,” Jaqen murmurs. He looks at her over his shoulder. She is still on the bed, the sheets drawn up around her. “I’ll see to it.”

“Moment,” he calls, draws on his trews before opening the door. “Maester Samwell. Is everything
“Um. Sorry to disturb.” He waves towards the side, “Raven came, it’s beak is marked with red pigment. Urgent. But it won’t let me handle it.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“Two message tubes,” says Samwell. “Black and white thread. I thought maybe the bird was trained only to come to your hand…”

Jaqen exchanges a look with Arya. “Give us another moment, my wife must dress, and we will follow you.” He has not finished the words before Arya appears at his side.

She’s wearing the velvet trousers Sansa gave her yesterday, embroidered at the cuffs, but the shirt is his, oversized on her frame.

He questions her silently on the choice as they walk, brisk, towards the ravensloft.

“Smells good,” she murmurs. “Feels safe.”

Irrational, the warmth in his breast. She is no one, she should need no material tools to feel safe. Then again, she shouldn’t feel unsafe, not when there is no physical threat.

“It is what it is,” she says. “I use what is at hand, and move on.”

*Fair enough, my practical one.*

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**ARYA**

The *patterns* for women in the order seem to be but two--child, to Faceless Man, or mother, to Faceless Man, with nothing but darkness and rage and pain and grief in between.

The aftershocks of her sister’s memories still ripple through her psyche. *I was right, I was right* -- had she been able to hold the face before now, she would not have been able to analyze it, not have been able to be detached enough from it enough to retain who *Arya* is.

*Needed the fucking, needed Jaqen, needed to be no one, needed to be one with him.*

Needed to see, to understand, that sex was not a violation. Or she would have become like the Waif, closed-off. Not afraid, never afraid, but...locked in.

The wind bites into the ravensloft; the Maester huddles in the door as Jaqen persuades the bird to his arm--it is a large one, and exhausted. He calms it down enough for it to take to the feeder, and for him to untie the message tubes.

“Let’s go,” she says, impatient, “I need to change Sansa’s dressings.”

Inside the stone walls again, shielded from the worst of the cold, and the Maester asks, “What happened with Lady Sansa yesterday? Why does no one tell me anything?”

*Because you allowed yourself to be blackmailed into dribbling information about Jon. Yes, you dribbled to us, but it’s the principle of the thing.*
“Women’s problems,” says Arya.

“I was trained in healing,” he says, still affable, but a little upset. “I could have helped, at least!”

he bites back the caustic: how can you be of help if you insist on hiding in the ravensloft every chance you get? It will cause a problem, if the Maester and Lady of Winterfell suffer a breaking down of the trust between them. “Do you know she cannot touch some men?” she asks instead.

Samwell’s gaze is wide, surprised, as his head whips around. “No!”

“Jon, she can abide,” says Arya. “I know you are trained, others are trained, Maester, but…”

Samwell Tarly looks wounded and sad, and...angry. “Hate men like that. Hate them.”

He’d rescued his lady from something similar, Arya thinks. “You understand, then.”

He nods, pauses, looks back at Jaqen and her. “Um. You’re posing as lovers,” he says. “Would it be too much more scandalous to have Gilly around sometimes? For Lady Sansa to talk to, maybe?”

Arya shrugs. “Sansa would know...but even if she thinks it might be a bit scandalous, tell her...tell her Gilly gets lonely.”

Sam’s look is suddenly very, very considering, shrewd, almost, and it doesn’t suit his face. Pate’s influence. “You keep surprising me, Lady Arya.”

She doesn’t respond to the invitation. “And Sansa will need a lot of help as she recovers--Sandor can’t take her to the privy.”

Sam looks taken aback, as if he hadn’t even considered that aspect of it. “I’ll send for Gilly,” he mutters.

SANSA

Sansa lies upon a wide chaise in her bower (such as it is). Unlike her mother’s, the walls of this one are plaster-over-stone, and overhead the wooden rafters cross, at angles, one upon the other, like the spars in the belly of an Iron Islands warship. Three hearts (this used to be a training room, for the heralds) and a fire roars in each one, and the smooth-sanded wooden floor is bare save for the skins in front of the hearth. Her one concession to the comforts of the south, and that is a defiance more than a concession, are the embroidered, silken pillows upon each chair, the bolsters at the head of the chaise.

She lies on the chaise, and studies the letter in her hands. She cannot feel much beneath her waist--a tingling, a heaviness, her legs will not obey her--but Arya’s draught has left her mind mostly clear.

“Petyr was in White Harbor the day before yesterday,” she murmurs.

Sandor sits, hunched, in a tall-backed chair. She thinks the positioning of his chair odd--too far from her for comfortable conversation, too far from the door to efficiently foil a sudden attack--until she realized the angles of his placement; he watches the door, the wide balcony, the small servant-stair at the side, the door to her bedchamber and the large leaded-glass windows through that door.
So much to learn.

Cold fear still gnaws at her--so much for Jon to learn as well. Maester Samwell has the iron link, he has studied the arts of war, and there is Davos Seaworth. But none of theirs is the voice that Sansa still strains to hear as she passes certain rooms in the keep.

_Father, we need you; we need you because you are not here, and were you here in answer to our need we would not need you._

“Petyr will be here in two days,” she says, louder.

Sandor grunts.

She waits.

“What does he say?” he asks, finally. _Curiosity_--it is a hesitant thing, in Sandor, but its very existence was unexpected, unearthed as she gave him a tour of the heart of Winterfell, and his questions did not pertain to defense or armament, but to their childhoods, hers and Jon’s.

In answering him, she discovered something about herself--with Sandor, she can speak of the things that make her a monster (a petty, minor monster when she was a child, like she imagines Joffrey was when he was that age) and Sandor _judges_ her, and bit by bit the pity Sandor feels for her erodes; erodes further, when she speaks of the things that make her a monster _now_.

Bit by bit she chips away at the image he has of her in his head, his “little bird”, and what is revealed underneath is her.

_Sansa Stark._

She was born in Winterfell; should that death-god of Arya’s favor Sansa, she will die in Winterfell. She was _annealed_ in Winterfell, under Ramsay Bolton. But the forging of Sansa Stark was done in King’s Landing, and the shaping of her was done in the Eyrie.

She engages now in the sharpening, in the polishing, under the file of Sandor’s judgement, until the lines of her are revealed to herself.

“Petyr speaks in half-truths, as always,” she replies. “He says the Iron Bank is heavily invested in Daenerys Targaryn, that the north stands all alone, that I need to convince Jon to trust him.”

*Like mother convinced Eddard Stark to trust him.* And once Petyr learns of the proposed alliance with the Mother of Dragons, with Braavos--it will be discussed at the moot, the houses of the North must be allowed to weigh in on the changing of their world--once Petyr learns of this, of how much further the Iron Throne is from his grasp now... _he will destroy Jon. He will use me for it, somehow, I don’t know how._ Petyr taught her most of what she knows when it comes to machination; he did not teach her even a tenth of what _he_ knows.

“Do you care for Baelish?” Sandor is hesitant, again.

Truth. “I hate him and I...lean on him. He saved me, then sold me to Ramsay Bolton. He betrayed father, and rode to help Jon. He killed Aunt Lysa...before she could kill me.”

Her lips are pressed together.

Sandor leans his head back, stares at the rafters overhead. “He doesn’t want you,” says Sandor.
“He doesn’t want me like other men do--didn’t care about my virginity or who I was tied to, or he wouldn’t have sent me back to Winterfell.” He wants me. He told me, and I believe him.

But Sandor isn’t done. “He wants the idea of you,” he says, and there is something strange in Sandor’s voice.

The idea that Petyr doesn’t want her is terrifying; it means she has no leverage on him. “He loves me.”

Sandor sighs, mutters something: “coward”. She must disagree; Petyr is cautious, conniving, but he does not lack for passion. Petyr has the scar from the dual with Sansa’s uncle to prove his foolhardiness.

“He loves the idea of you,” says Sandor, and he turns until he is looking at her.

Half a room between them, and yet...yet it feels that he is too close, his gaze burns into her.

“Take it from some one who knows,” he says, and his voice is rough, gravelly.

Her teeth clench; her breath is coming in short gasps.

“Come here,” she commands. “Come here, Sandor.” And her voice is unrecognizable to herself.

He rises, and walks over, his hob-nailed boots thudding on the ground. She reaches out, grasps his hand, draws him down. Furious, panicked, she runs her other hand through his hair, over his face.

He is kneeling beside her chaise.

She lies back, in boneless relief, removes her hand from his face. I can still touch him. A bitter smile tugs at her lips. “Cured you of that quickly enough,” she murmurs.

“I don’t know what to do about Petyr,” she says. Sandor’s hair is mussed, his shirt askew, and he has the look of a dog with its paws caught in a beartrap.

Sandor loves me, Sansa thinks. He doesn’t want to fuck me; he loves me. Imperfect, the both of them, impossible to be the creatures they had wanted to be; he grasps and holds on to the one thing he can--a knight’s love of his liege. And she, in turn, exercises the one noble truth she may (ignoble in its specifics, pure in its intent): unshakable, unbreakable trust in him.

“Talk to the king,” he says. “He’ll protect you.”

“I don’t need protection,” says Sansa. “I need leverage.” Sandor is looking less unsettled. They are on firmer ground now--strategy--not ideas that skirt things that are denied forevermore to the both of them. He loves me. The complications of love, between men and women...Sansa Stark cannot afford complication within Sandor Clegane, if they are to hold on to the one pure thing that is left to them. She shakes her head. “Do you marvel, Sandor, at the child that I was, the one you took pity on?”

“Fucking terrified of you now,” he mutters.

She laughs. “You shouldn’t be,” she says. “I’m good to hounds.”

“Not a hound,” he growls. “Not even for you.” It is the reaction she wanted to elicit; it hurts, a little bit, and that, too, she wants.

“Forgive me, Sandor,” she says. “Cruelty is a heady thing.”
His posture changes, suddenly more aware, and from that she can tell someone is coming. Why is he still kneeling? And that is when she realizes she is still gripping his hand.

ARYA

Arya approaches the doors to Sansa’s suite, wide open, and she wonders why Sandor doesn’t have the guards standing up here and not at the base of the stairwell to the courtyard.

“Forgive me, Sandor. Cruelty is a heady thing.”

She walks in, flanked by Jaqen and Maester Samwell. Sandor is kneeling beside Sansa. His hair is wildly out of place, his shirt…her hand is moving, and if she’s just let go of his.

“Are we interrupting something?” asks Jaqen, wry.

“No!” Sandor explodes, rises to his feet, stalks over to a wall.

Pity, Arya realizes, the name of the thing she feels. Even no one can feel pity, if she knows the shape of it.

Sansa cranes her neck, takes in the visitors. “I was just about to send for you, if you had a few moments,” she says.

Arya nods. “Sandor, carry Sansa to the bedchamber.”

Muttering: “damn nursemaid now, carrying women about the place, fucking stupid idea cutting into her so close to the moot,” he lifts Sansa, effortlessly, as if she was a down pillow, carries her to her room. Arya follows, and then sends him out again.

She helps Sansa use the chamberpot, cleans her, cleans the wound. It is so small, even with her neat stitches over it, not much larger than a penny; no infection. So small. And after her sister’s memories she knows the shape of the excruciating pain Sansa will be in, should Arya withdraw the poisons she doses her sister with.

She mixes another one— not milk of the poppy (Sansa needs her wits about her now). She uses a small sliver of wood to rub the mixture over the edge of her blade, and as before it blackens before the black reacts with the air, becomes a white, flakey powder. This mixture is a knowing of the order; she rubs some agar-seed-extract into the powder to give it body, and turns Sansa to her side. She scores a line across Sansa’s back with the poisoned dagger, a little below the one from yesterday, and then two scores at the back of Sansa’s knees.

“You will start feeling your lower legs soon,” she says. “Pins and needles, as the feeling returns. It may hurt, it may not, everyone is different.”

There will be no sensation, between the lower and upper cuts, between the knees and the waist.

She feels Sansa nod.

Arya finishes her ministrations, rolls Sansa back, covers her. She has noticed, but not realized—Sansa is wearing a colored dress today. Brown, somber, but heavy with coppery embroidery. It is the first time she has seen her sister out of mourning blacks.
Arya grins. “So. Why did you make the poor hound kneel?”

Sansa sighs. “He loves me. Had to make sure it stayed pure.”

And that, too, Arya understands. Wonder if she figured it out, or if he mustered the courage to tell her. Idle curiosity; not Arya’s business.

“Need to do something about Petyr,” says Sansa. “He’ll be here in two days, and Sandor’s only solution is ‘tell the king, the king will protect you’.”


“No!” says Sansa. “I…”

And then Arya recognizes the pattern in Sansa for what it is: it is the same pattern for which the order never allows the one who recruits to be the one who trains.

There is a saying, in Braavos--give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. To be both fed and taught, saved and trained by the same man...

Jaqen recruited me, but it was the Kindly Man that trained me, him and the Waif, and a half-dozen others. She was taught, one-to-one, once she became faceless, but it was acceptable only after she held the equalizing potential of their most intimate memories in her head. It is a disparity in power that drives this pattern, this imprint upon the mentor; it is yet another self-serving, twisted version of the pattern of co-dependence (affection) that grows between a kidnapper and his hostage.

“What do you want of Petyr Baelish?” she asks.

“I want to be free of him,” says Sansa. “And yet…”

Arya wills herself to be Lorathi to the core. What would Jaqen say?

“A debt is owed,” Arya mutters. Whether that is true or not, Sansa feels that a debt is owed. “You must offer to pay it, in all sincerity. And he must choose, he must have a choice. If he does not accept, you get what you want.”

“And if he does accept?” Sansa asks.

Arya smiles sadly at her. “Then you get what you deserve.”

And under the pretext of dealing with “women’s troubles”, Arya and Sansa stark remain in her bedchamber long enough to converge on a plan that gives Petyr Baelish everything he wants, and everything he deserves.

It is only fair.

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When she opens the door to call Sandor in again, she sees Jaqen sitting in a chair, looking sightlessly out of the balcony doors. He missive from the House is in his hands, open.

Sandor brushes past her, even as she steadies herself, crosses Sansa’s sitting room, reaches for her own message, unrolls it, reads it standing in front of the heart.
Only one message, ciphered four times.

She deciphers it; her mind flies at the speed of her panic.

*I am no one.*

When she unlocks the fourth layer, short, *mercifully* short…

“Fucking piece of *shit*,” she hisses. “No. No, no no.” Rage takes her, and she hurls the missive, tassle and all, into the fire, and rounds on Jaqen. “You must not allow this.” High Valyrian, her choice of words immutable, unchangeable, ground that has been chosen and will be held at all cost.

“*What* must not be allowed?” asks Samwell Tarly. She looks up, and realizes much time has passed. Sansa sits propped up on the chaise, the Maester and Sandor on chairs beside her.

Jaqen gestures, dismissing Tarly’s question. But Sansa is not so easily dissuaded.

“Tell me, Arya,” Sansa says. “If this is about the Sealord—”

“*Not everything* has to do with the Starks!” She grabs Jaqen by the wrist, and drags him to the balcony, slamming the door behind them. And it is as if the movement has taken the last of her energy, because she sags against the doorframe.

The silence between them is heavy.

*Even the Kindly Man has agreed--to offer our brother the gift if his body does not decide to die on its own.*

“He is very far away.” Jaqen’s voice is neutral, but not analytical--He does not speak as no one, he merely suppresses His reaction. Arya stood beside Him, *inside* Him, her hand in His, as they reached across the sea to the one who is no one. She knows very well what Jaqen H’ghar’s reaction is.

“All that is left is our vote,” he says.

“An *empty* vote,” Arya snarls. “*Two*, against the rest of the order.” Her mind churns. “*Veto,*” she tells Jaqen, in Imperial Qi.

He looks up at her. “Against *everyone*? Not wise.”

“What was the split, on the last one?” she asks quietly. *How many did you go against, for me?*

“Thirty-twenty, the rest abstained,” he says.

This is a case of a hundred and ten versus two and a single abstention from their missing brother.

“One incurable thing, the poisoning by the phosphorescent fish,” Jaqen murmurs. “Mercy--”

“One incurable thing, the wounds upon a dead man’s body,” she interrupts. She read through certain sections of that book yesterday, in her memory; she knows exactly how horrific a death it is her brother must endure if he is not given the gift.

*I am the Wind*. Arrogance. *I brought death back to life.* Fact. *I stand in the seat of my power.* Fact. *My god stands beside me.* Fact. *With his god at his back, my brother defeated the best of R’hllor’s sorcery.* What the fuck does a simple fucking poison matter? Supposition.
“How many vetos before?” she asks.


So the God intervened twice, in the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Arya Stark came to the House of Black and White. Should he veto again, he will have intervened twice more within a space of three years.

“Not wise,” she agrees absently.

The location of His temple, the allowing of women to serve Him, His bride...these can be identified as belonging to the God’s domain, and His brothers may grumble but they will see the justification in His use of power.

But for a brother, a no one, who has done his duty...the only reward any Faceless Man can expect for doing their duty is mercy, a reclaiming into the darkness. Arya Stark’s stance, Jaqen H’ghar’s stance, this is born of inexplicable attachment, born of Asshai.

*What use is a democracy if the will of the majority can be crushed for the sake of emotion?*

Mercy, for a brother--such has been voted on twice before (though always at the brother’s request, a very severe, accidental crippling in one case, the adult-onset of a hereditary madness in another).

The giving of such a gift is a thing for all Faceless Men to judge. It does not pertain to the God’s domain.

*Or does it?*

She smiles. *He cannot veto this. But... “Persuasion is not disallowed,” she says, and looks into His eyes, her gaze alight. Manipulation, vote trading, last-minute deals...such things are part of the process.*

“My bride schemes,” He says. “What manner of persuasion would she bring to bear?”

“To begin with, simple ‘no’ vote from you,” she says.

She does not know how many of her brothers suspected the true nature of Jaqen H’ghar. More than a few, in hindsight, given their varied reactions to her questions about him (given that one time a Lorathi brother extrapolated the kinds of dreams the god was sending her and proceeded to give her a very earnest, entirely unnecessary lecture on Lorathi courtship rituals from four centuries ago).

Irrelevant, how many of them knew--his face has now been revealed (whatever that means).

Still, by itself, a “no” from Jaqen H’ghar is not enough to overrule His brothers.

“How many times did I have to hear it before I died? When she refused a kill she was assigned, “You steal a death from Him of the Many Faces” , when she saved old Karin the sail-mender from
drowning, “You stole a death from the Many-Faced God.”

Arya Stark undid each of her thefts, returned to the God each name she had stolen, in the weeks, months after she became faceless. The Kindly Man praised her, even, for the retroactive penance (“too much piety”, her Braavosi teacher had muttered, “it is a phase, Arya Stark, no doubt”).

But for the purposes of this vote...their brother is a Faceless Man; it is his life that will be stolen from the Many-Faced God, against the god’s wishes (and His wishes will be quite clear, given Jaqen H’ghar’s “no” upon the ballot).

Her ballot, her explanation, it will be a suggestion only.

An insinuation.

Jaqen watches her, and she knows He extrapolates the results of her insinuation. He snorts. Softly. “Arya Stark,” he murmurs, “you are a dangerous creature.”

She grins at him, her worry sublimated into impish delight. “Valar dohaeris.”

The vote may well be nullified entirely. It happens (when a target dies before the guild can decide upon the price to be charged, when no brother wants to take on a certain contract but then one volunteers at the last minute...).

Jaqen nods, once.

Even now, even after everything, the core of her thrills at his approval. He sees it; the Many-Faced god smirks. The one who is no one, born a Jaqen H’ghar, dissaproves.

Arya Stark rolls her eyes, and throws open the door, leading the way back into Sansa’s bower with the same gracelessness she had exhibited on the way out.

Jaqen is more controlled, as always. “Forgive the secrecy,” he says, addressing the rest of the room. “Guild matters. But Sansa, there is a favor I would like to request.”

The others have read the change in Arya and Jaqen’s bodies, subconsciously, perhaps, but the air in the room becomes lighter.

“Anything you need,” says Sansa graciously. Translation: whatever we can provide. Winterfell is not in a state to provide much, but...

“One of our order is unwell, deemed incurable,” says Jaqen. “But as Arya has reminded me, there were other things deemed so, until recently.” He is holding Sansa’s gaze.

She looks troubled. “Not plague?” she asks.

“Poison,” Arya answers.

Sansa’s face clears, returns to her Lady of Winterfell mien. “Arya told Jon that your sister in the order was his sister as well, through her, through you.” Her voice is firm. “If you think something may be done for your brother...” Sansa’s eyes soften, and there is something of an alien, almost-forgotten,childlike wonder in them. “There are a lot of things we have to weep for, Arya and I,” she says. “Better that the tears serve a purpose.”

Confusion, on the Maester’s face, on Sandor’s.

This is one secret that will not be entrusted to them, not unless Jon deems it necessary.
“It may not work,” says Jaqen, and His warning is meant for Arya as well. He means more is uncertain than just the efficacy of the magic she and Sansa wrought for Jon’s sake.

*Our brother’s life hangs upon whatever power a blank ballot contains.*

Jaqen dips his head towards Sansa. “But even if it doesn’t...thank you.”

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry, sorry, lot of things had to be fixed and re-written, life intervened. This one has not been edited, just FYI, and it's not finished. But it seems I *can* be moved, buy guilt if nothing else (your worried inquiries) to abandon any pretext at perfection.

So.

Apologies again for the delay.
NO ONE

The Westerosi, Jorah Mormont, sits beside her.

“Who are you?” he asks. “Because you are not Arya Stark.”

The one who is no one almost rolls her eyes, but her own failure prevents the mocking of Jorah Mormont--no one should not have been speaking during sleep, especially in languages Arya Stark has no right knowing.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t throw you overboard,” says Jorah Mormont. Deception, deception, deception, waste, delay his tone conveys.

“Because there is stoneskin beneath the bandages on your arm,” says the one who is no one. “You cannot silence me, not entirely, before you kill me. Sailors…” take a dim view of those that bear stoneskin. “You were going to Asshai to have it cured?”

Jorah Mormont sighs.

The one who is no one laughs. “They cure nothing in Asshai–they corrupt. You’d be better off joining the colony off old Valyria.” She thinks. “A cup of sweet poison. Take me to Braavos, you will have a peaceful death.”

“The ship is about to dock in Volantis,” says Jorah Mormont. “I will dump you overboard, and turn back to Asshai.”

“They will give you nothing but suffering, in Asshai. They will enslave you, whether you know it or not.”

Jorah Mormont is silent.

The one who is no one is terrified, and the fear as no cause; death is no stranger to a Faceless Man.

Should never have left Braavos.

A voice out of Arya Stark’s memories: Jaqen, don’t go!

No regret. So at least that is intact. The one who is no one had volunteered, to go after the renegade, renegade for coin, of all things...the god gave years to some of the others, the Lorathi that left in their periods of disillusionment with the order, with Him, and once one had even come back.

Would go again.

She takes a deep breath, and there it is again--a breeze, and the smell of ginger and cloves and wintergreen...Olfactory hallucinations are common side effects to certain poisons, perhaps they poisoned him in Asshai and it yet lingers.

Got our brothers’ faces back.
She sleeps.

JAQEN

Another night they stand guard over their brother’s dreams; the crunch of snow draws them out of the dreaming, and they must needs slip away into the shadows before the men with burning torches come into visual range of the weirwood’s heart tree. More nobles and warriors have arrived over the night; their retinues make the guest wings of Winterfell bulge at the seams. Some of these men are pious, it seems, that they must greet the face in the tree the moment they arrive.

The political application of prayer in the godswood (a return to the roots of the North) would be best done when it is “morning”, and there are more people that can note the observance of long-neglected religious custom.

Returning to their room undetected is more difficult; it is managed by navigating the paths used for mischief-making by Arya and Brandon Stark when they were children.

Brandon Stark--the wind dreamed of him. The finding of him is another thing that must be done, but it subject proves elusive--Him of the Many Faces cannot find Brandon Stark in the dreaming, though He dreams under the godswood.

The wind has ranged east. Can it range north of the Wall? Something tells Him “no”--Jon says his warg senses cannot reach Ghost when Jon’s direwolf crosses the Wall. To His own senses, the Wall registers as an...absence, looming in the distance, in the future.

It has been making Him more uneasy day by day. When they return to their rooms, Jaqen resolves upon distraction.

“You thought about us too, in Braavos,” he says, as they lie side-by-side on the bed, her head on his chest. “What was your most depraved thought?”

“Harrenhal,” she says.

“Ah.” He is, quite suddenly, rock hard. “In the baths?”

“Mmm,” she says, throws her leg over him. “You too?”

He covers his eyes. “Yes, lovely girl, so help me, yes.”

She sighs, breathes deeply of him. “Ginger,” she murmurs, “cloves.”

He looks down at her. “Warg senses.” Faceless Men are taught to eliminate all scents from their bodies, eliminate identifiers. They use soaps made especially for this, to disintegrate scent-markers.

“Must be,” she says. “Wonder what I smell like.” She giggles, a bit, stretches out against his side. “Waif wondered why I filched the winterwine spices with summer still around us.”

“Bad Arya, stealing from the order,” he says. “Dare I ask what you did with the spices?”

She snuggles closer to him. “Just...smelled them. Didn’t know what to do about the tingling, the heat in me, just thought it was nice.” Her voice turns dry. “Figured that out quickly once I got the
memories."

“Didn’t let myself go past the exact boundaries of my memory of you in Harrenhal,” he admits. “Until you entered the darkness, and I saw from your memories that...that perhaps it would not be a violation, to think of you in that manner.”

“And then?”

He half-turns, presses his hardness into her side. “What do you think?”

“Bad Jaqen.”

“Yours.”

“All mine.”

“There are baths in Winterfell…” he suggests.

“The springs are leaking, Sansa hasn’t allocated a budget for it yet.”

He sighs.

“Such an ugly child when you first saw me,” she muses. “Still funny looking. Wondered, if I should put on a prettier face for you from time to time.”

He shouldn’t be amused with the error of her self-perception (such can be deadly, for a Faceless Man), but it gives his morning a shape. Look, a problem I can solve with fucking.

He grins, and wears Arya Stark. “Look at me.”

She looks.

“Not like that. Look at me. ”

She looks again, and there now her gaze is an assessing one.

She is no one. Better than her being Arya Stark, but still not exactly what he had in mind. Let’s see where this goes.

The god draws no one’s hands to her face. Wondrously, as if touching the planes and lines of that surface for the first time, no one runs her fingertips over Arya Stark’s features. The curve of a brow, the bow of her lips.

“It doesn’t look like a horse,” says no one.

Took you this long to ascertain that, beloved? The god leans forward. “Will you let me kiss you, or will this be another fight?”

When there is no response, the god rises to her knees, lengthens, stretches out, lips hovering over her bride’s.

In the end it is no one who reaches up with her mouth, closes the gap between them.

Lips, on lips, soft, so small. So familiar. So...different, to have such a delicate tongue, to swipe against hers.
“I would understand your motive,” whispers no one.

Him of the Many Faces, wearing Arya Stark’s, the god can feel herself getting wet, can feel the echo of the wetness between her bride’s legs.

“Depravity.”

And that is too much, for the one who is come but newly to the selflessness of no one; she falls, back into Arya Stark.

The god turns, and skin slides over skin, the curls between her legs dark, inviting. She curls her fingers into her bride’s hair and guides Arya’s head, slowly, slowly, towards her moist slit.

Arya pauses, her breath warm over the god’s cunt, and looks at herself. And then her tongue darts out, pink and pointed, and she licks her lips. Her mouth descends, and her tongue comes to rest above, just above the opening.

What she does then is not what Him of the Many Faces does to Arya Stark with His mouth--that is sex.

This, this is a kiss, sweet and carnal, of lips and tongue and the gentle graze of teeth. Arya Stark is kissing herself, and the sheer wonder of it...the god’s sex, it feels as if it is glowing, light and soft and the god shudders, gently, gently--no great peak, no fall, just long, drawn out.

A gentle death, slipping into the darkness as softly as her bride slips her tongue into her.

Eventually, eventually, when all movement has ceased and the room is still, the god wears again the face He was born with.

Arya Stark rises to her knees. “How was that depraved?” she asks, wiping the juices from her mouth.

He reaches, draws her down to lie flush against him, his arms overtight around her. “It wasn’t, unfortunately,” He says, feigning regret. “Your god is not a gentle one, Arya Stark,” he whispers in her ear, “though He may be merciful. When I see beauty, I defile it.” He traces the curve of her spine.

Her hand fists over His heart, her breaths come shallower, faster, and He cannot tell whether the timidity is real or artifice. Truth becomes lie becomes truth. She is timid with Him, in this moment. He twists his arm around her, rolls on top of her, presses her into the mattress with the weight of Him.

“You, my bride,” He says, “see something beautiful and you don’t know what to do with it.” His voice is deceptively soft, quiet; He grinds himself against her, and He does not moderate his strength. It will edge from simply demanding to the border of pain for her. “You bestow upon beautiful things the most gentle of touches.” His lips brush over hers. Gently, gently, in vivid contrast to His hips, His erection grinding against her.

“You mock me,” she whispers against his mouth.

“You like it,” he says.

She growls. There, there is that spark of defiance he’s been looking for.

“Look at me,” he commands.
“No.”

He grins, and grinds harder against her.

“Aarrgh!” He can feel her reaching, reaching into the darkness and she pulls Jaqen H’ghar’s face from Him and into her. He lets it slip.

And in the moment she wears him, the Many-Faced God assumes Arya Stark’s face.

“Will you not look at me?” pleads the god.

“You, you, always,” whispers the one who wears Jaqen H’ghar. His eyes are wide, trained onto Arya Stark’s features.

*See yourself, beloved, see yourself as I see you.*

And then the one wearing Jaqen H’ghar surges upwards into the core of Her.

“I understand what you were doing, you know,” says Jaqen H’ghar, later, much later, his arms around the god.

*You want useful conversation, after that?* “Mmm.” *Love thyself.*

“Arya Stark is not funny looking, when I see you in her skin,” he says.

*What is despised in the self is bearable, desirable, in the self’s mirror.* Arya Stark taught the Many-Faced God that particular truth.

Jaqen H’ghar exhales. “I suppose must be content with ‘lovely girl’, even if it is only from you.”

*So stubborn.* Sleepily, the god wonders why, exactly, her bride wants to hold on to the illusion of plainness. The god smirks. *The problem is clearly very deep-seated; will require much in the way of...remediation.*

“Do this again, and again,” murmurs the Many-Faced God, “and again, till you get it.”

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**SAMWELL**

Dawn does not break, but Winterfell comes awake nonetheless. Samwell thuds up the stairs to the King’s Tower, and does not care who hears him coming.

“Jon!” he demands, throwing open the door. The king stands alone at the window. “What in the hells happened four nights ago? *The smiling, the change in his demeanor as he leads the riders out of the gates...* Something *good* has happened. Something to do with Lady Sansa and Lady Arya and tears...and *magic*. “Why are you keeping *secrets* from me?”

Jon has turned to him, and the candlelight plays over his dark countenance. “I trust you,” he says, “even when I don’t know what you are doing.”

“You are fully aware of everything I am doing,” retorts Sam.

Jon raises an eyebrow. “Think you I do not see *exactly* how many people there are in the keep?”
Cold fear settles in Samwell’s guts. He knows.

“We go hunting wights every morning, counting the missing people in villages,” continues Jon, his tone still conversational, calm. “Think you I do not count the people in my own home? We spend coin on a score more servants than we actually have. You keep the books. Tell me, Samwell Tarly, where goes that coin?”

Samwell swallows.

“Where comes the information you give Sansa, of the doings in King’s Landing? Where comes the information you give Davos, of the building of Iron Islands ships?”

Samwell opens his mouth.

Jon shakes his head. “A king’s advisors must have information. You provide it. That you choose not to tell me whence it comes...I trust you, Samwell. I can trust you even without knowing, exactly, what it is you do for me, what you do to keep my hands clean, I can trust you without knowing what shadow it is that hovers over your soul since you came back from the Citadel.”

Samwell Tarly bows his head. “I...,” he says, then falls silent, and finds his mouth has bound his words, he cannot speak.

“I pretend the secrets you keep do not exist,” says the King. “because I trust you.”

Tears burn in Samwell’s eyes as he looks down at the ground.

“Can you trust me?”

Samwell closes his eyes. Not for need alone is this man our King. “If I cannot trust you,” says Sam, “then nothing means anything at all.” If I destroy your trust in me, then, too, nothing means anything at all.

He cannot confess his treason, the letters to Pate. Not now, not ever.

He hears Jon take a deep breath, and looks up. Jon is unbuttoning his shirt, a heavy garment of velvet, edged in thread-of-gold. He dresses like a king today, a small part of Samwell’s mind notes even as Jon draws the shirt away from his chest, and instead of the horrific black, unhealing gashes upon his flesh, Samwell sees only scars.

His breath deserts him, but he must move forward, reach out, brush his fingers over Jon’s skin, to see that it is real. “What...?” he whispers, swallows. “How did...” Suddenly, his ire rises again, and he steps back as Jon draws the shirt closed.

“It’s magic, isn’t it? Of course it’s magic, and you didn’t tell me! Jon, come on.” Samwell ends on an almost-whine he is not proud of.

Jon grins, and for a moment he looks exactly like the young, boyish recruit that had ridden through the gates of Castle Black years ago. “Didn’t want to share.”

Samwell rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning too. “This is not sex details with Ygritte, this is magic.”

He doesn’t realize he’s said that name until he notes the sudden sobriety in the air.

“Some old magic,” says Jon, “Jaqen said it shouldn’t have worked, it’s just a legend, even in Essos.”
Samwell presses. “What kind of magic?”

“Tears,” says Jon. “The weeping of a sister over her brother’s corpse. Jaqen says it’s one of the most obscure myths, something connected to the Weeping Lady.”

Samwell’s brows furrow in consternation. “So Lady Arya and Lady Sansa cried over you and you were healed?”

Jon’s hands rise, palms upwards. A twofold gesture: I have no idea what happened. I am grateful, whatever happened.


Jon shrugs, again, helpless to answer.

Samwell shakes his head. “Never mind, Jon, never mind, we’ll figure it out.”

“I’m trying not to look gift horses in the mouth,” Jon mutters.

Samwell nods, understands. That’s why you have me. I’ll take apart the damn horses and see what makes them tick. Someday.

Jon glances over his shoulder at the window. “Gates are about to open--Lyanna is coming. Let’s go.”

They descend the stairs, are met by Lady Arya. She carries a large drinking horn, and a bottle of mead in her hands. She’s dressed in another one of those men’s-clothing-made-for-women, a flared set of trews, with delicate embroidery at the hems, a sky-blue silk shirt that is tucked in at the waist, highlighting her womanly form underneath. She wears a sword-belt, and a saber in a curved sheath at her side.

“Sansa’s still resting,” she says to Jon. “She’s told me what to do.”

Jon looks worried. “She slipped that badly?”

Arya’s mouth is a narrow line. “She slipped a year ago. The break has been...reset. It will heal cleanly now.”

Jon’s eyes are wide, pained, his mouth now a bitter, angry moue. “I didn’t know what to do,” he says. “I didn’t know what was wrong.”

“She slipped on some ice,” says Arya firmly, holding Jon’s gaze. “You know nothing else.”

The bitter look on Jon’s face fades somewhat, into a dry half-smile. “I know nothing.”

“Just so,” says Arya. “Shall we?”

Arm-in-arm, the Starks lead the way to the great doors of Winterfell Keep.

The King’s Riders have gathered on the steps before the doors. The Hand of the King is a Targaryen tradition; the North has the King’s Riders. Mormont and Manderly, common-born and noble. Wildlings. They serve as Jon’s shield-arm, his voice, his advisors.

Another tradition, resurrected from the grave, reconstructed from what legible records they have left. The records also speak to the dark side of the tradition--by the end of the North’s Kingship,
the position of Rider was a sinecure, an empty but boast-worthy position for second sons and
nephews of powerful families, and they caroused and whored, raped and vandalized more than
they rode, with the King either oblivious or turning a blind eye to their depredations.

*How to make sure that never happens again, after we are gone?* It is something Jon worries about,
to which Samwell’s answer has always been, “Let’s deal with the White Walkers first, shall we?”
Davos Seaworth just mutters.

Davos--he was to ride in with Lady Cerwyn; neither Cerwyn’s banner nor Davos are anywhere to
be seen.

*Let’s deal with Lady Mormont first, shall we?*

She rides in, in a flurry of determination and hatched-faced resolve, her Mormont riders looking
weary and hard-pressed. *The little bear set the pace for the ride, then.* Samwell winces in
remembered pain; he’d gaily offered to partner Lady Mormont during a hunt, back when he’d first
arrived at Winterfell, in the assumption that staying abreast of a little girl would be far easier than
one of the horse-mad warriors.

*Never making that mistake again.*

Arya walks forward. “Be welcome,” she says, and her voice echoes around the courtyard, “to the
hall of the King in the North, whomever you may be.”

Lyanna Mormont’s brow is furrowed in puzzlement; she expects Sansa. But she answers
nonetheless. “I am the High Seat of the House of Mormont, servant to the King. I come by right of
blood, of roof and shield and salt to this hall.”

Arya steps forward with the filled horn. “And again I say unto you, be welcome, welcome
forevermore to the hall of my brother.”

*My brother...* The puzzlement clears from Lyanna Mormont’s face--rumors of the return of Arya
Stark are making their way through the North, ripples of information--Lady Sansa’s domain, on
who has to know, and how much.

The ravens have been kept busy.

Lady Arya passes the horn to the lady upon the horse. Lady Mormont drinks, passes the horn back
to her lead rider. Arya concludes the ritual. “May your sheepfolds strain at the seams, may your
harvests multiply tenfold every summer, may your wife bear you strong sons and daughters to
carry your name.”

Neither woman twitches at the last, their faces somber, though there is a light dancing in Lady
Arya’s eyes.

*Have to update the wording, but the change can’t come from Winterfell or Lady Mormont, looks
too self-serving that way, ask Lady Sansa for advice. Maybe she can get one of the eastern
bannermen, with a son as heir, to propose it.*

When the last Mormont rider has drunk from the cups, Lady Mormont descends from the horse,
gives a short, stiff bow in Arya’s direction.

“Well-met, Lyanna Mormont,” says Arya. And she gives a shallow curtsy, a calculated gradient:
Princess to Head-of-House.
Lady Sansa wouldn’t have taught her that, thinks Samwell uneasily, *Lady Sansa still uses the lady-to-lady with Lyanna Mormont*. Such is also strictly correct, of course, and Lady Sansa still hesitates to use ranking with Lyanna—*something lingering from their first meeting*, Samwell thinks.

*So where did Lady Arya learn this curtsy?* The only other person she would have seen using it would be if she had seen Myrcella Baratheon greet Lord Eddard Stark, back when they first went to King’s Landing. *The angle of the head, the dip...can a child of ten note such details, recall them years later with perfect accuracy?* Samwell thinks not. Which means the Faceless Men have drilled Arya in the social niceties of rank, have taught her the things she needs to know.

*Is she a Faceless Man at all, or a well-trained excuse for Jaqen H’ghar to insinuate himself into Jon’s household?*

*She* healed Jon. *Jaqen H’ghar was present.* And if they’re not deeply in love, and married, they’re doing a damnably good job of acting it, down to the last detail (the way Lady Arya hungrily seeks her husband’s eyes in a crowded room, the way Jaqen H’ghar hesitates, looks in Lady Arya’s direction, queries her silently before making a decision). They don’t mean Jon harm, *this* Samwell is sure of. But there is much, much more going on here than the return of Arya Stark to Winterfell.

And then he wonders something else. *If the Faceless Men trained her in the modes of making a curtsy, they have trained her in formal introductions.* Why then, at their first meeting, did she introduce the King and Lady Sansa to low-born Jaqen H’ghar? *Calculated ineptitude? Defiant mockery of Jon’s new rank?*

But they’ve been truthful until now (if a bet reticent, about “guild matters” at least)—Samwell hasn’t caught Lady Arya or her husband in a single falsehood yet. And Lady Arya is affectionate with Jon, loves Jon, she doesn’t *mock* him, nor his kingship.

*Is it a Braavosi thing? Was she making a subtle point about which rules she follows? Is Jaqen H’ghar to be afforded precedence because of some Free Cities custom?* Samwell hasn’t looked too deeply into the political and social makeup of the various factions in Essos, but surely the King in the North is of equal rank to the Sealord of Braavos. And of the list of people that go *before* the Sealord in precedence must be a small one (such can happen by decree sometimes, regardless of birth-rank. It was a Stark King, after all, that bestowed prestige equal to himself to a peasant for saving the life of the King’s only son, and the nobles spent the next two decades being introduced *to*, *bowing to*, a charcoal-maker).

If such a list exists, it will be short, and well-documented.

*Time to find out who you are, Jaqen H’ghar.* And then Sam thinks on it a split-second more and comes to a decision. *They may have told Lady Sansa more than me--family ties and all. Better as her first.* There is no point in repeating the sorts of miscommunication that led to Jon almost beheading Lady Arya.

He takes a deep breath and greets the Maester of House Mormont, an older, middle-aged man, born and bred in the deep North, who has been careful to avoid all affiliations at the Citadel.

Until now.

As Lady Mormont and Jon and Lady Arya leave towards the interior of the keep, Samwell clasps his hands behind his back, and the Maester falls into step beside him.

“The direwolf, Ghost,” murmurs Samwell, as they walk slowly around the perimeter of
Winterfell’s inner walls, “It is as you thought.”

The Maester raises an eyebrow. “What makes you sure?”

“Lady Arya and Jon talked about it. They don’t know much, less than your House certainly—Jon said it was an old magic of the Stark bloodline, lets them communicate with wolves. Lady Arya called herself a warg.”

The Maester gives a small whistle. “Two, in the same House, in the same generation?”

Samwell hesitates. He hasn’t confirmed it himself... need to have a really long talk with Lady Sansa, without any of the others present. Sandor has been clingy to her like ivy to brick. “There may be more,” he says finally. “All the Stark children had direwolves.”

The Maester dodges around a cart, filled to the brim with pale white winter-sprouts. That’s working well, thinks Samwell with satisfaction—the glasshouses were the first things he demanded repairs for, and Jon had backed him up while Lady Sansa sold every last one of her jewels (and Lady Walda Bolton’s and what the razing of Winterfell had left of Lady Catelyn Stark’s) to make up the lack, worked alongside Samwell to organize the planting and the servants’ training.

They are reaping the second harvest of vegetables now, the sorts of things that can be forced, that do well in darkness—mushrooms and rhubarb and sprouts. It’s not nearly enough to feed the keep, but anything that supplements the imports is sorely needed.

“How do you reply?” asks Samwell.

The Maester snorts. “An old man’s nose, burned by years of smelling philters and potions for healing, can’t even smell my own socks.”

Samwell grins, momentarily. The smell of this particular Maester’s socks is somewhat of a legend, even in the Citadel. “Something Jon said...” Samwell trails off. Ash, and mold. “I think you are right. Lady Mormont is a skinchanger, like her great-grandmother before her.”

None of the men of House Mormont have been suspected of having the gift. The magics of the Mormont bloodline reside in its women.

The Maester purses his lips. “Her aunt may have been one too.”

Samwell knows she’d died in childbirth, her babe with her, married to a Vale-lord’s son.

“The south has stolen our children from us, over and over again,” says the Maester sadly.

It is a common complaint. “There are further developments in that direction,” says Samwell. “You’re not going to like them. But they are necessary.”

The Maester sighs. “When have I liked any of your developments, Tarly?” He looks around at the glass-houses, expanded from what they were under Eddard Stark, taking over half the training yard. Similar construction, at prohibitive expense, is underway at Bear Island, White Harbor, Torrhen’s Square. “But they have always been necessary. Tell me.”
“Daenerys Targaryen,” begins Samwell, “has proposed marriage to the King in the North…”

They continue on their circuit around Winterfell, talking quietly. They will return to the keep proper once it is time for the noon-meal--the Citadel’s mess-hall has dampened neither of their enthusiasms for food.

ARYA

“You look like the statue in the crypts,” says Lyanna Mormont, the first words she’s spoken since their strange ritualistic introduction in the courtyard.

“So I’ve been told,” replies Arya.

Jon had excused himself immediately after the greeting--the moot doesn’t start till tomorrow, and he will ride as far north as the day allows today. Six wights, in the past three days, six dead men stinking of rotten meat and hoarfrost, shambling their way towards populated places.

“Why do you have to be told?” asks Lyanna Mormont. “Don’t you have eyes? Haven’t you ever looked in a mirror?”

Just this morning. “Do you believe everything your eyes tell you, Lady Mormont?”

Lyanna Mormont gives Arya glance from the corner of her eyes; her gaze roves up and down Arya’s form, assessing.

“Can you use that?” asks Lyanna Mormont, gesturing to Arya’s saber.

“One should never wear a weapon one is not prepared to use,” says Arya. “One is more likely to cut oneself than the opponent.”

“One can intimidate,” retorts Lyanna Mormont.

Arya grins. “Not many men as would be intimidated by a girl that looks like the statute in the crypts, no matter what kind of weapon she wears.” Their strides across the stone floors, they match, and if Arya was a servant, she would scurry out of the path of such purposeful tread. “Better to be underestimated.”

Lyanna Mormont nods thoughtfully. “Gives you a clean first strike at least.” The set of her shoulders is marginally less hostile. Marginally. “Rumors say you were in Braavos all this time.”

Arya nods.

“Your brother needed you, and you were gallivanting in the Free Cities.”

“Had to train up a bit,” says Arya softly, “before we got to collecting heads. Jon and Sansa were so busy up here, but somebody had to deal with the Freys.”

Her words net her a slight, slight widening of Lyanna Mormont’s eyes. If she knows about Arya Stark’s return, she knows about Walder Frey, suspended between freeze and rot over the bailey. “Edmure Tully was killed almost a moon ago,” says Lyanna Mormont, “trying to take the Twins. The Lannisters took off to King’s Landing in a huff after all that finger-pointing by the Freys. You should have stayed in the riverlands--you have a right to the Tully lands, a few heads removed.” A
twist of phrase, a suggestion, both at once--Lyanna Mormont is *sharp*. Sharp means dangerous. *Wonder how Sansa deals with her?*

But Lyanna Mormont is another person that naturally, instinctively, understands the world by understanding herself, if Sansa’’s rendition of their first meeting is correct. Lyanna Mormont *knows* what she is, and she defines the world at the edges of herself.

*What lies beyond Lyanna Mormont?*

“*We collected some heads, as I said,*” Arya replies. “*My lover--Jaqen, you’re going to meet him soon, we came together from Braavos.*”

Lyanna Mormont’’s eyes widen, noticeably, and her footsteps falter. *Lover*-- not a word the head of House Mormont hears too often. The words she knows are *mistress*, *whore*, *catamite*, *bed-warmer* or, alternatively, *betrothed*, *lord*, *husband*.

The Lady of Bear Island is cautious now, off-balance. “*Can’t make claims to the Tully lands, or the Riverlands, with that kind of reputation,*” she mutters, trying to decide whether she wants to insult Arya or not.

Arya shrugs. “*Win some, lose some.*” She puts on a bit of a pout. “*Have to give him up, soon, they’’re discussing marrying me off to the Sealord of Braavos.*”

“*Can you be married, if you’re…*”

Arya snorts. “*I’ve been knocking around Braavos for years. Sealord knows what he’’s getting--he’’s after the alliance more than anything.*” *And not to the King in the North--that’’s just the cream on the cake.*

The sheer callous disregard for her own reputation, the tone that says “*Arya Stark knows who she is, you can’t hurt her with the knowledge*”, the harshness in her assessment of the Sealord--it settles Lyanna Mormont.

“*Suppose he’’s not a virgin either,*” says Lyanna Mormont.

Arya calculates whether she should push Lyanna Mormont just a little bit further. She’’s an ardent supporter of Jon, after all, will be for years, given her age. Intelligent and clever and strong…but her horizons are limited to the education the North can provide.

*Yes, let’’s push.*

“*Tormo Fregar is discreet, but no, not a virgin at all,*” agrees Arya. She allows her tone to grow fond, slightly gleeful. Gossipy. “*He has a type, I am given to understand.*”

Lyanna Mormont raises an eyebrow.

“*Small women, long, dark hair--have to grow mine out.*” A complete invention, Arya has *no* idea what the Sealord likes (though the Kindly Man will have gathered this information by now, he hasn’t shared it yet). She deliberately doesn’t look back at Lyanna Mormont as they climb the stairs, single-file, to Sansa’’s bower. The doors are open, and Arya waits, lets Lyanna Mormont walk through them first. And as the Lady of House Mormont passes her, Arya leans forward slightly to murmurs. “*Tall, when it comes to men, the blonder the better.*”

Lyanna Mormont stumbles, recovers herself. A dark red blush stains her face, her neck.
Sansa is seated in a wing-chair, arms resting quietly in her lap. She looks up as they enter, grows confused at the unsettled, blushing Lyanna Mormont. Sandor stands behind the chair, while Jaqen, deceptively lazy, sprawls on one of the hard-backed wooden chairs belonging to the table.

*How does he sprawl in that thing?* Arya studies his posture, memorises it. He winks at her. All very loverly. *He won’t be able to wear his own face outside the House once this is done,* she thinks. *Not for another century.*

“Usually it’s you greeting me,” says Lyanna Mormont, as she recovers her equilibrium, turns her attention on Sansa.

“I was feeling unwell,” explains Sansa, gently apologetic. *Ah. That’s how Sansa plays Lyanna Mormont*—she also becomes something beyond Bear Island’s horizon: a woman that swims in grey waters, in uncertainty, where the brutal certainty that is Lyanna Mormont hesitates, waiting for greater clarity. *There is* a pallor to her cheeks, her lips are tinged mildly blue, almost unnoticeable in the candlelight. *Almost.* The poison that keeps her unfeeling and upright in the chair does have some side-effects.

“Are you dying?” asks Lyanna Mormont.

“No.”

“Good.”

*Little Bear*? Arya thinks to herself. *Warhammer* would have been a better appellation.

“We’ll leave you two to catch up then,” says Arya. “Jaqen, come.”

“Stay,” says Sansa. “Arya, you. Sandor, Jaqen, could you please give us some privacy?”

Sandor looks taken aback, but only for a moment, for he gives a short bow, steps outside the room, followed by Jaqen. Arya decides that watching Jaqen’s leather-clothed rear cross the room, however tempting, is a bit too much.

The door closes behind the men.

“Sandor...Sandor Clegane? ” asks Lyanna Mormont. “The Lannister dog?”

“The same,” says Sansa, quietly, calmly. “I cultivated him in King’s Landing. A useful man, the Hound. Joffrey certainly found him to be so. And loyal, as hounds are.”

Lyanna Mormont considers these words, and her eyes narrow. “Is he your lover?”

“Lyanna,” remonstrates Sansa gently, “you know me better than that.”

“Had to be asked,” says Lyanna, not at all apologetic. “Just so we know where we stand.”

Sansa grins a little, and Arya comes forward to take the seat Jaqen vacated. Imitating his sprawl (however tempting) would also cross the line.

Something in her longs for the quiet clarity of their travels together, where she could watch him as she pleased, where lines did not exist at all save in the road beneath them.

An insight, the thing he terms “an uninvited extrapolation”, comes to her then: the road stretches out before them still, and it has no end. Such moments will come again, in their time. *What is time to us, we two who will stand side-by-side at the end of all things, as He has promised?*
Arya lets go her longing, and focuses on her curiosity as to what Sansa has in mind. Lyanna Mormont is wondering the same thing.

“You said the furs I had made for Jon were moldy,” says Sansa.

*Oh. Shit. Another one?* Arya’s thoughts start to spin furiously as Lyanna counters with, “they were!”

Sansa shakes her head. “No one else can smell it, Lyanna, except you and me, and Jon. And Arya.”

Lyanna casts Arya a look, turns back. “Say what you mean!”

“The bear-women of Bear Island,” says Sansa. “It’s not just a legend, is it?”

“Children’s stories,” says Lyanna Mormont, dismissive. “If we could have turned ourselves into bears, think you we’d have submitted to the Boltons, to the Starks even?”

“Not a story, not exactly,” says Sansa. “Jon dreams with Ghost. So did Arya, until she lost her direwolf like I lost mine.”

Lyanna Mormont’s eyes are round. She is too intelligent, to dismiss Sansa--practical, political, southern Sansa’s conviction.

“There is something to it--how much, we do not know. I wanted to ask you if you knew of others, with such bloodlines--Jon is already passing the word through his wildlings.”

An image dances through Arya’s head--an army of trained wargs at Jon’s command, doing the kind of damage Nymeria had done to the Lannisters… *Nymeria.*

*Nymeria hunts on the wind.*

Will Nymeria hurt a warg? Arya cannot be sure--telling “friend” from “foe” is hard, for a direwolf of Nymeria’s disposition, they all look like “prey” to her.

*Surely Jaqen can call her to heel, if the wind herds her within his reach.*

Lyanna Mormont is listing names for Sansa, names and stories the Stark children should have heard, but Septa Mordane kept from their ears. Old Nan would have told them, but Catlyn Stark had put a stop to the story-telling, at least for the girls. Jon…Jon didn’t get any stories at all.

Sansa is carefully taking note. Should Arya?

*No.*

The magics of the North are too unknown to Jaqen; there could be a binding in there, lying in wait to snare one who is very much a Stark still. Better to stay away, see what Sansa and Jon and now Lyanna discover.

The talk turns to Daenerys Targaryen. And *here* Arya sees the strength, the utility of Lyanna Mormont’s bluntness. She sniffs out every possible weakness, every half-lie and approximation in Sansa’s estimation of the situation, and pummels it till it gives up its shape.

Now Arya does take notes--Sansa will need to sleep soon, Arya can see the poison wearing off, the slight grimaces of discomfort that pass over Sansa’s face from time to time. So Arya will take notes, and pass them to Samwell Tarly, who must pen the North’s final response (after the moot) to Daenerys Targaryen’s proposal.
At the nightmeal, it is Lyanna Mormont, the Kingmaker, that sits to Jon’s honored right. Arya gratefully slides into the seat beside Sansa–Sandor and Jaqen, in some kind of show of machismo (conspiracy?) have positioned themselves behind “their” respective ladies, foregoing the taking of their supper at a lower table.

The blades at their hips, the posture of parade-rest...it does look impressive, and a Mormont knight has hastily moved behind Lyanna, imitating the “honor guard” pose.

Arya sneaks bread-rolls under the table onto her lap, to give to her “lover” later, when Sansa taps two fingers on her wrist.

“They ate in the kitchens already,” murmurs Sansa. One of the servants must have told Sansa, at some point, or she’d asked.

With a shamefaced look, Arya returns the bread to the bread-basket.

To cover up her...error of observation (and the surreptitious brushing of crumbs off her lap)--Jaqen’s noticed of course, he’s going to pretend to disapprove later, Arya asks Sansa about Lyanna Mormont.

“She is absolutely adorable,” says Sansa, her voice too low for any but the two of them (and Jaqen, given the man’s hearing). “I was intimidated by her for the longest time, and then we...found an understanding between us.”

Arya raises both eyebrows.

“That glare I gave you in the courtyard, after Jon tried to kill you?” asks Sansa, biting into the wrinkled skin of a winter-apple.

Arya nods.

“Learned that from her.”

“And what did you teach her?” asks Arya.

Sansa looks sad. “Who not to trust.”

Jon and Lyanna Mormont are arguing, amicably, about the order of the agenda. Jon wants the wights and the Karstarks front-and-center, Lady Mormont wants the “problem” of Daenerys Targaryen dealt with as soon as possible so they can get to important matters, like the wights and the Karstarks.

Jon gives in. “As you wish,” he says. “But in compromise I want you to raise the issue of the women’s army.”

Lyanna Mormont slams her fist down on the table. “Done! And about time.”

This, to Jon’s unconventional new notion of arming and training northern women--including wildling women--into a special force, a “fifth column”, as saboteurs and guerilla troops.

An army of women, an army of wargs...Jon’s thoughts turn to the unconventional because he has no other options.
“Jon, you don’t know that women will volunteer in the first place,” says Sansa, who wants to send out feelers first, make sure it is a sure thing before presenting it to the lords at the moot.

“I know nothing,” says Jon, and his eyes twinkle. “Two northern women have said that to me now, and they were both quite right.”

Me. And...this Ygritte of his that he lost, Arya surmises. Wish I could have met her.

“I like you,” says Lyanna Mormont to Jon. “Wish I could have married you.”

Startled, Arya looks to Sansa for information-- will House Mormont truly oppose the union with Daenerys Targaryen?

“She’s not serious,” murmurs Sansa. “It’s that age...when you think you want to marry, but you have no idea what that really means.”

Jon’s eyes are warm, he’s grinning at Lyanna Mormont. “You are too young for me, little bear,” he says with mock regret. “But if there was no winter and no war, well then, I would have waited for you.”

She grins right back at him.

Arya is relieved. Friends, jesting with each other. Jon has such few friends, true friends--Samwell Tarly, Lyanna Mormont, Davos Seaworth. Jaqen H’ghar. If a man’s true worth is to be measured by his companions...Jon does very well for himself.

Arya smiles fondly at her brother, as martial insults begin to fly between the “white wolf” and the “little bear”; the Mormont Knight has joined in, though he functions more as an arbitrator than anything else.

“Arya, remember when you told father you wanted to marry him?” asks Sansa.

“I did not!” returns Arya.

“You were three,” says Sansa, gleeful (the poisons are at the height of their effects), “and he’d just returned from something, I don’t remember what. You told him, ‘when I grow up I’m going to marry you, da.’” She finishes her apple with neat little bites, and her eyes grow shadowed. “We still called him da, not father.”

Jaqen leans over between their chairs.

“I did not know of this,” he murmurs, turns to Arya. “It’s older men for you, is it?”

She gives her husband a half-hearted glare, trying to remember. All she gets is an impression of boots, of a tall sword. “What happened to Ice?” she asks Sansa.

Sansa takes a deep breath, her mouth becomes hard. “I don't know how much of Petyr's word to believe. But he said Tywin Lannister had it melted down. Reforged, by a mastersmith in King's Landing.”

Gendry's master.

Anger rises in Arya, something that belongs entirely to Arya Stark, to Eddard Stark’s daughter, to Robb Stark’s sister, Jon Snow’s sister.

The sword of our House, in Lannister hands.
“The sword was named Ice, you say,” says Jaqen. *He knows very well what it was called. Knows what happened to it too, didn’t tell me.*

_Fury._

He places a warning hand on her shoulder. The touch, rare, so rare between them in such public environs, it sends heat to the base of her stomach, and the abrupt sexual response in her can only come from *his* willing it to be so.

_He is no one._

“There is more to Valyrian steel than its sharpness,” says Jaqen. “Once a blade is told what its name is…those two swords will return to the North, eventually.”

She responds to his will; her fury sublimates to desire.

The wind battering the windows of the Great Hall, dashing snow against the glass, it falls off. She hadn’t even realized when it started; it’s been howling at her for an eternity, it feels like, and the sudden absence of its wail drenches the hall in silence.

Arya realizes Jaqen’s warning was not aimed at her _anger_.

_I need to understand how I did that._

He nods, draws back.

A servant comes in, bows, speaks to Sansa.

“Petyr,” she says, voice low. “He’s been sighted by the sentries, about a watch away.”

Arya nods, raises her voice. “Jon,” she says, “Sansa tires, but she won’t listen to me. Can you please order her to her rooms?”

Jon raises both eyebrows. “I have no wish to die tonight, Arya.”

“I’m going, I’m going!” says Sansa, even as Sandor draws her chair back. He lifts her up into his arms, strides from the room, Jaqen and Arya flanking him.

There were options, for this confrontation, this decision. Their mother’s bower, for one. But Catelyn Stark is pain, for everyone involved, and Sansa wants to find out of there is anything to Petyr Baelish other than his pain.

Another servant meets them in Sansa’s rooms. “My Lady, the Vale’s standard has been sighted.”

“I’ll bring him here,” Arya says.

“Don’t let Jon see him!”

A cruel smile twists at Arya’s mouth. “No. We mustn’t. Jon will kill him, thanks to Sandor’s lip-flapping. And death, for Petyr Baelish...that’s just a little _too_ kind.”

Chapter End Notes
Another one, unedited (sorry, not gul's fault at all, just so late finishing these up I didn't even dare send them to her).

The Big One coming soon, 27 Part 4. Then we're off to the Wall for some icy great times.
ARYA

As Petyr Baelish dismounts from his horse, Arya thinks of a word peculiar to the Summer Isles. *B'bsgillelahi : an irrational hatred engendered simply by the look of another.* Irrational, because one who is no one has no hate in them. And yet she despises every line of his face, even the nature of his *stride* as he walks towards her, a mocking smile on his lips.

“Be welcome, Lord of Harrenhal,” she says, cutting short the lengthy greeting. Her voice is modulated for Baelish’s ears alone; she holds out the horn of mead, perfunctory.

“Lady Arya Stark,” he says, his voice an oily smear over her ears, “well, well, well. I am so very glad you are safely returned to Winterfell.” Perfunctorily, he drinks, hands the horn back to her instead of the over-dressed Knights of the Vale that have accompanied him here. He cocks his head to a side. “I had expected Lady Sansa to greet me herself.”

“The Hound came up north, she took him into her service I don’t know why,” says Arya. *Warn him, of what the Hound has to say. Prime his quick departure. Or the other, less likely scenario.* She twists her mouth into a sour grimace. “Sansa’s busy .” Disgust, at the last: an insinuation.

Baelish’s eyes narrow. He is *angry* at her insinuation, and not simply due to possessiveness.

*She was right ,* thinks Arya. *He does love whatever picture of her he has in his mind. Enough to care.*

A suspicion: the Vale did not ride against the Boltons to help Jon; the Vale rode against Ramsay Bolton. No way to tell.

*He betrayed father. Father is dead. He may have kept faith with Sansa. Sansa is alive.* A choice *must* be offered to Petyr Baelish.

But slime does not forget it state, and from her tone now he thinks he knows the lay of the land between the two sisters.

He looks at Arya--dressed in forest-green trousers and shirt with little flowers embroidered everywhere, a sword at her hip.

It is uncertain whether he will remember the clothing, but the style of it *must* kindle some recognition. His mocking smile is back--he thinks he has read Arya now: another Lyanna Stark, rejecting the mores of womanhood, going about competing in tournaments behind a mask, all the while pining, in conflict, for an idealized version of womanhood she cannot quite grasp. A woman who thinks she is in a story, disguised as a Knight who will reveals her face at last, and the handsome Prince will fall in love with her.

The Maiden, to the core. The last one he’s seen such a pattern in: Brienne of Tarth.

He steps up to her, far too close to comfort. Arya glares up at him defiantly.

“You have grown up into such a beauty, Lady Arya,” he says, gently touching a finger to the side
of her face. “Have you any idea how much gold you could make for your house in one of my brothels?” His finger brushes down the line of her jaw, rests under her chin for a moment.

He expects her to blush, or stammer and step back, or, alternatively, sputter in fury and slap him. Instead, she smirks up at him, focuses on the darkness within her to dilate her pupils.

He blinks.

“I’ve been in Braavos for a while, Lord Baelish,” she says. “The option has been offered before.” She shrugs. “Honestly, if I had to choose a brothel I’d choose one over there--the exchange rate for Westerosi credit is plunging to the seafloor amidst all this chaos. Your coin is not worth much more than its metal value.”

He opens his mouth, closes it again.

Jaqen steps out from the shadow of the great doors. Baelish’s gaze snaps up, surprised that he hadn’t noticed Jaqen’s presence before.

Sansa has foisted many of Robb’s clothes upon her brother-in-law; today Jaqen dresses in green doublet to match Arya’s, worked through with silver thread. The doublet deepens the black of his hair, flowing around his shoulders, it draws out the sharp symmetry of his features.

“Jaqen, meet Lord Petyr Baelish,” says Arya, and her voice drips with amusement. “Jaqen is my bodyguard,” she says to Baelish.

“Bodyguard?” Petyr Baelish tries to regain his footing, twist an insinuation of his own into the conversation.

Arya grins. “Something like that,” she says. “After all, Lord Baelish, If sex must be transacted for coin, one would much prefer to be on the buying end, no?”

Jaqen’s mouth twitches.

Arya holds out her arm, in expectation of Baelish offering his. “Shall we? Sansa should be done by now.”

Petyr Baelish gives her a half-bow, and there is irritation in him as he offers her his arm.

They walk the short distance to “Sansa’s” corridor, Jaqen trailing them. And though Arya is no one in the moment, Jaqen H’ghar is...Jaqen H’ghar. Only her fingers rest on Baelish’s arm, separated by three layers of cloth from Baelish’s skin. And yet she can feel the heat radiating from Jaqen’s body, even from a pace away.

Not the courtesan thing--the caress, and the casual, filthy insult Baelish intended with it.

Arya insulted Sansa’s honor, and so Baelish retaliated, attempted to intimidate her with a touch. Jaqen’s fury is a response to that.

Action, reaction.

The one who is no one is amused. The god will sense her amusement, in the glance she throws him over her shoulder.

Jaqen’s fury abates as quickly as it had risen. And she makes a decision.

“Your presence reminds me of something I’ve been curious about, Petyr. May I call you Petyr?”
“You may call me anything you like, Lady Arya,” Baelish says warmly.

_Slime. Littlefinger. Uncle_, from his marriage to Lysa Arryn. The last would be worst of all, she thinks. _That would be another priming, but in entirely the wrong direction._

“Petyr, all this talk of coin,” she says as they reach the doors to the heralds’ suite. “I can’t figure it out, and Sansa won’t tell me--do you pay her, or is it the other way around?”

Baelish’s nostrils flare.

“I suppose you won’t tell me either.” She shakes her head, pushes open the door a little. “Jaqen, come, we’ll leave Lord Baelish and my sister to _talk_ in private.”

She drops his hand as if it is worth nothing at all, pivots on her heel, and stalks off. Jaqen, of course, follows.

They are far out of earshot before Jaqen speaks. “Was that part of the plan?”

She sighs. “No.” She looks up at her husband through her lashes. “No matter how twisted it is, love deserves a chance, don’t you think?”

“You hate him.”

She shrugs.

“And now you’ve needled him to anger.”

She gives Jaqen a half-smile. “If there is any righteousness at all to Petyr Baelish, something that will choose to protect instead of destroy--it’ll rise to the fore now, when he needs it most.”

“And if it does not?”

Arya’s half-smile becomes thoughtful. “Then he will drown in regret for the rest of his life.”

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**SANSA**

She hears Arya’s voice from downstairs, the opening of a door. And then Petyr comes up the stairs to her bower. His face is pinched with fury, but his eyes are fixed on her and her alone.

“You shouldn’t have come,” says Sansa.

Petyr takes the last few steps in a bound, comes up to her, kneels before her.

_Sandor, a few days ago, just like this. Must I suffer a glut of men that love me, now, when I am beyond hope? Where were all of you when I needed you?_

“You are unwell?” he asks.

“Healing,” she says, offers him a small smile: forgiveness, at least in part. Then she grows serious. “Petyr, you need to leave. Jon is riding now, but he’ll kill you if he sees you here.”
His jaw clenches. “Sandor Clegane.”

“He talks too much,” says Sansa.

“You took him into your service.” His voice is dangerously soft.

She dismisses it with a wave of her hand. “He had to be controlled.”

“If he talked, I’m surprised you didn’t have archers take me down before I got through the gate.”

She looks up at him, earnest. “You have nothing to fear from me.”

His lips pull to a side, mocking. “I’ve taught you better than that.”

“You’re not the only one that taught me,” she replies. “My father did, too.”

His eyes grow blank, shuttered.

“I keep faith,” says Sansa. “Until I cannot—would have kept faith, even with Ramsay Bolton, had he kept faith with the North, with me, kept to the vows he spoke in the weirwood.” She gives him a sad smile. “Not very successful, as a strategy for survival,” she says.

“You’re alive,” murmurs Petyr.

“I hadn’t noticed,” she says: help me feel alive, Petyr. A lie. She wants to be dead from the neck down—Arya’s poisons are wonderful; she wonders if her sister will ship her a supply of those from Braavos when Sansa’s runs out.

“And your brother?” he asks. “Do you keep faith with him?”

“Mostly,” says Sansa. “I evade, when it comes to you.”

He puts a hand over his heart, gives her a short, mocking bow. “I am flattered.”

She sighs, leans back. “Lord Baelish,” she says, “what do you want? I am of no use to you anymore—the North has a king.”

He has not risen from his knees. He bends forward now, lays his head against her knee. “I feared you hated me.”

“I do,” she says softly, even as she strokes his hair.

“For Ramsay? For Eddard Stark?” he asks.

“Forgiven,” she replies. The first lie she’s spoken yet. “And forgiven. No Lord Baelish, I hate you for that picture you painted me under the Heart Tree.”

He looks up, startled.

“I keep faith,” she says. “And I can keep faith with you. Love you, cherish you,” and she smiles bitterly at him. “As my mother never did. As Lysa Arryn did, but without knowing what you are. I see you, mockingbird, all of you—you taught me. And I can love you.”

He pushes away from her, rises unsteadily to his feet.
He flees.

Only to the hearth, where he stands with his hand against the wall, facing the fire, lurid orange-and-red playing against his face.

“So why do you hate the picture I painted?” he asks.

“Because you can have only one of its subjects,” she says.

He shakes his head. “You do not know me.” Looks at her, sidelong. “You think I love you?”

She laughs. “I’m not that foolish,” she says. “You think I love you?”

“I see you too, Lady Sansa,” he says into the fire.

Lies between them, questions whose answer is lie and truth at the same time.

“But I know you,” she says quietly. “That man that you think you are--that you pretend to be--wronged, grasping for ultimate power to avenge himself. That man does not exist. Chaos is not a ladder for you, Petyr, chaos is the goal. You do not want to rule Westeros. You want to destroy it. When you betrayed my father, you did not want to reclaim Catelyn Stark--you wanted to destroy her. When you sent me to the Boltons, you did not want to tighten your hold on power through me, you wanted to destroy me.”

He whirls, his face drawn, eyes glittering with rage. The first time she’s seen him like this. “That is a lie,” he snarls.

Arya, whatever she’s done, she’s put a spine into his back--the last time I confronted him he folded like a eunuch. And guiltily she thinks: anger is passion; passion can lead to love. The angrier he is, the more likely his choosing of me.

They need him. The potential in this man, it stagger her sometimes. What little things she manages to get coordinate, what Jon and Samwell manage to organize... with Petyr Baelish given enough power, he could save half of Westeros.

The problem with putting power in Petyr Baelish’s hands is, of course, as always, Petyr Baelish himself. Unless he chooses me. If he chooses Sansa, he can be controlled, and if he can be controlled she can give him her trust, and Jon’s. Love is a leash--Petyr himself taught that to her.

“You destroy what you love,” she says. “Chaos does that, and you are its self-proclaimed priest.”

“What do you want of me?” he asks.


There is a grotesque expression on his face, bitterness. He thinks I am manipulating him, leading him into a trap. Not entirely an unfounded suspicion--every wedding Westeros has seen in the past few years has yielded tragedy, one way or another.

Jon’s wedding will change that. Or mine, if Petyr chooses me.

She realizes that despite the nausea roiling in her gut--Petyr is not a safe man, not for her, but what else is new--she wants him on her side. So much. Not love. But a need to keep a person.

He comes forward again, sits on the chair beside her. In control again. Urbane. He props up one foot on the arm of her chaise.
“And the price for you is the Iron Throne?” he asks, sardonic.

She shakes her head, then commands herself not to give him more information than she already has.

“Confess to Jon,” she says. “He will forgive you, once he understands the tangle, between you and mother and Brandon Stark, the duel.” Even I almost forgave you for Father, when I learned. Jon has loved. Jon will understand...he may hate you but he will forgive you. “Join us,” she says. “In all truth. Keep faith. Keep your secrets too, if you like, we will keep them between us, you and I.” She reaches forward, lays her fingers lightly over his hand (suppresses the bile rising in her throat). “Serve order, Petyr. Stand beside the Starks. Stand as a bulwark against the Long Night.”

She cannot interpret the way he looks at her. Tears? His eyes are glimmering with moisture. He reaches forward, lays a hand upon her head. “You want to save me,” he says, wonder in his voice.

Her own vision grows blurry. “No,” she whispers. “I want you to save me.”

The next thing she knows he is beside her, and his arms are wrapped around her.

“Sweet Sansa,” he is murmuring into her hair. “Sweet, sweet Sansa. You are twenty years too late.”

Ah.

And now her tears do fall. They are absorbed in the fabric of his surcoat.

Abruptly, he lets her go, retreats again to the center of the room. “Thank you,” he says. “For the might-have-been.” His voice is its usual calm, mocking self again.

You have no idea, the might-have-been Petyr. But you will know, this I promise you.

“Choose me,” she says softly. “Please.”

He has already chosen. And what he has chosen is not her, and so he will get exactly what he deserves. Her pleading, the tremor in her voice, these are meant as cruelties—a delayed poison, and he will not feel it for some time.

But when he does...

“The Long Night is coming,” she says. “There is more at stake than just a crown. All the world as we know it—”

“You believe your bastard brother’s stories?” he interrupts, amused. “Have you seen any of these White Walkers, these dead things, with your own eyes?”

“No.” Jon won’t allow me to ride north of Winterfell, and he’s certainly not going to drag one into our home just so I can satisfy my curiosity.

“I taught you better than that, at least.”

“I have written to you so many times,” she says. “You ignored me.”

Confusion. “No, I don’t think I did,” he says.

“Liar,” she says.

He’s not, of course. He hasn’t yet received the last message she will ever send him. Now her mouth
twists, with real cruelty.

“Marry me, Petyr, and take the Stark name--give up the Iron Throne.” She levels him her best Lady Mormont stare. “Or leave. I will delay Jon’s riders as much as I can. As a thank-you, for the pretty picture you painted me long ago, even if it was a lie.”

His eyes burn. “Can there be no middle ground between us, Sansa?” he asks.

“We serve different gods, Lord Baelish,” she says. Order, against Chaos. “If you want me, you must convert.” One last try, and even to herself she does not know if it stems from cruelty, or hope. “You do not realize the rewards,” she whispers up at him. It is as much as she can offer--this choice will not be a test of character, a rite of conversion, if he knows everything.

She jumped off a cliff once, put her trust in a man that had betrayed her and her family. What she proposes is another such leap for Sansa Stark. The least Petyr Baelish can be expected to do is jump alongside her.

“I need a sevenday,” he says. “It is not an easy ride.”

To White Harbor.

She bows her head. “You will have them.”

ARYA

The thunder of hooves--she looks over the battlements. The Vale’s riders are departing, in a hurry.

Petyr Baelish has chosen the futility of the Iron Throne.

Good. He is a despicable man. And yet, and yet…

For all your scheming, Littlefinger, you are locked into the most narrow of visions; a horse, wearing blinders. Had you the foresight to see beyond yourself you would know already that the Iron Throne is lost to you. It was lost the moment Daenerys Targaryen became the Breaker of Chains and we stayed our hand against her.

The rule of Daenerys Targaryen is inevitable. No scheming can stand against dragonfire, that most un subtle of weapons.

She holds Sansa’s missive in her hands, the one to be sent out should Baelish choose to ride away. It is dated a moon prior to the present--the blizzard, a delayed bird, enough to explain the discrepancy, and the parchment is suitably stained and water-damaged.

The pre-dating of the parchment is a cruelty. A thousand “ if only ”s to ring in Petyr mind for each such lament of Sansa’s after their father died. Petyr Baelish will receive the message when he gets to the Vale, and in the moon it takes Petyr to get there, much will have changed--Daenerys’s fleet will be in Dorne, and her betrothal to the King in the North will be common knowledge.

The contents of the parchment are cruelty as well--sweetmeats dangled before a starving man.
Daenerys Targaryen is Queen of Slaver's Bay, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. She will be Queen-Consort to the King in the North. Holding on to so vast a dominion becomes untenable after but a generation.

Sansa’s missive contains a plan--detailed, stepwise. On how Sansa and Petyr’s child may be placed second-in-line, after Jon and Daenerys’s heir, to the thrones of both the North and the south. Arya has laboured over the plan, the alliances it requires, the wording of it, alongside Sansa. A reasonable chance of success, if Petyr Baelish can prevent Cersei from destroying King’s Landing with Wildfyre--something well within Petyr’s capabilities as the whoremaster of spies.

There are truths known to the Faceless Men--Daenerys Targaryen’s womb is barren.

“*But when it is discovered that the Mother of Dragons can bear no children of her own...*” Sansa has written.

Apart from Daenerys Targaryen and Sansa Stark, there are no others whose blood is blue enough to whelp an heir to the Iron Throne--the Baratheons are spent, Tyrion Lannister’s child, after Cersei’s rule, will lead to open rebellion everywhere. Tyrells are down to an impotent Wylis and a grandmother. Dorne is ruled by regicidal bastards.

The point of Sansa’s choice was not for Petyr Baelish to relinquish the Iron Throne for himself.

The point was for Petyr Baelish to choose the Iron Throne for his heir.

And Sansa’s letter, so very hopeful, machinations on Petyr’s behalf, not her brother’s...With this missive, Sansa thrusts a knife into Petyr Baelish’s gut, and then she twists it: “*We must act quickly--our heir superseding any but Jon’s can be stipulated in the accord, but we must be wed before the Kingsmoot, or it will be too late.*”

Baelish will read and re-read Sansa’s words for a very long time, and each hopeful endearment, each foresight Sansa has written into the parchment (foresights that will be truths, by the time he receives the letter), they will engender nothing but bitter regret in him.

*No barriers of noble birth to stand in your way, a love match and a political match all in one offered freely to you, along with the Iron Throne for your descendants.*

Shipments of food will drop off soon, as they must, and it seems none but those in the North make preparations to survive the Long Night.

Petyr Baelish will *starve* in the months to come, as the Eyrie is evacuated for winter and he can turn to neither the North nor the South--Winterfell was the last friend he had left outside the Vale.

*This* time Petyr Baelish will have no one but himself to blame for the ruins of his life.

And Sansa’s missive will sit on his desk, mocking him: *you could have had* everything.

Arya attaches the roll of parchment to a Raven’s leg, its beak coded blue-and-gold for the Vale. She releases the bird and it falls a short length before its wings unfurl. With powerful flaps the raven ascends into the grey winter sky.

*Wrong choice, Petyr Baelish. You made the wrong choice.*

The riders of the Vale disappear around that familiar bend in the road.

“What was that then?” asks a voice--Samwell Tarly has finally chosen to speak. He, too, haunts the
ravensloft, and both Jaqen and Arya have noticed the proportion of Citadel-coded birds in Tarly’s keeping is higher than would be expected.

Jaqen has told her some of it—the Maesters conspiring against dragons, the quiet support of the Faceless Men for this scheme over generations. The changes in plans, each faction serving its own end.

“A letter for the Vale,” says Arya. “We’re telling Petyr Baelish of Jon’s proposed betrothal, as if forewarning him.” She shrugs. “There was a blizzard. Message was delayed. So sorry.”

Tarly shakes his head. “His Maester will know, from the state of the bird.”

“No bird we have knows the Gates of the Moon, Samwell—it’s going to go to the Eyrie, and the evacuation is well-complete by now. By the time the message gets to Petyr Baelish, there will be far too much confusion in what went where to check the health of a raven.”

“Very canny, you assassins,” says Samwell, and there is something in his voice.

Arya does not look at him. “So says the Spymaster of Winterfell.”

Samwell takes a deep breath, says nothing as he fusses about the feedbox, breaks the thin ice that has formed over the water trough in the last watch.

“Tell me about Pate,” says Arya.

“What do you want me to say?” asks Samwell, his voice defeated.

She purses her lips. So much, done for Sansa and Jon, and all the things that mean anything to Jaqen, I must be helpless? He has warned her, not to say anything.

Arya decides it is time to disobey.

“You broke your oath to the Night’s Watch,” she says.

“Followed Jon,” he replies. “He gave me a pardon—I’ve written to the Citadel for a Maester for Castle Black, they’ll send someone suitable, soon.”


She can feel Samwell’s gaze boring into her back.

“You are supposed to be celibate. But you rescued her, fell in love with her.”

“Aye,” says Samwell, cautious now. They come too near the wound in his chest.

“A difficult decision,” says Arya. “To be thrown out of the Citadel—the Citadel for a Maester for Castle Black, they’ll send someone suitable, soon.”

“No response.

She turns, and finds Samwell bent over, his hands on his knees. He is starting to hyperventilate.

She gives him his time. When he regains himself some, he rises and is looking at her with wild, wild eyes, panicked and furious all in one.
“Horn Hill, the proofs of marriage,” says Arya. “It was meant as an apology, you know. Not a leash.”


Arya grins. “You are a fighter. I doubted, for a bit. But you’ve been blooded in battle.”

“Tell me now, or so help me—”

“We have a mutual friend,” says Arya. “Had. I understand he was murdered.”

Sam’s face is flushed; the Maester is livid.

“He was no friend of mine,” he snarls.

Rage, by itself, does not make a man tremble in this exact manner. Sorrow, betrayal, so much, much sorrow, he grieves for Pate’s death and hates himself for his grief, hates Pate for leading him to betrayal hates himself for allowing it, but he will not allow the hate to spill over into the lever used upon him, into his child and his lady, he keeps it all in himself.

Too much love, in this man. Too much loyalty; he doesn’t know how to let it go.

“I imagine your friends in Castle Black may feel some of that towards you,” she says.

That stops Samwell Tarly short.

“Imagine a child, in a faraway land, and you love her and though she has the disposition and the aptitude for it, still it is your hand that has made a murderer-for-hire out of her,” says Arya softly. “And you marry her, and she begs you to tell her about her family, and there is nothing but rumor and speculation to be found. And then, as if by magic, a source of information, of reliable information, falls into your lap.”

Samwell Tarly has closed his eyes. “You--Jaqen--he killed my friend and took his face, the rumors are true, aren’t they, so he could blackmail me.”

Arya snorts. “You never knew Pate.”

Samwell shakes his head. “I knew him. And he was not a Faceless Man, he was a scholar--devious, and cunning but he was gentle, and wise too.”

This is not going well.

Samwell looks up, and now there is hate glimmering in his eyes. “Jaqen H’ghar killed Pate so you would know what Jon ate for breakfast?”

Maester, idiot, must mean the same thing around here.

“So that I would know enough to find you a way to defeat the Night’s King, Samwell Tarly,” she says coldly. “Or do you forget the alliance I have been allowed to bring to you? By Jaqen’s grace alone do I stand here, do you understand?”

Samwell Tarly takes a deep breath, then another. The hate in his eyes has not lessened, but there is calculation behind it now.

“I won’t tell Jon, if you answer some questions for me.”
“No,” says Arya. “Tell Jon what you please— you’ll be surprised as what we’ve told him as well.” An empty threat— Jaqen does not wish to have Jon’s trust in Samwell Tarly lessened in any way.

“You killed my friend,” says Samwell bitterly. “Couldn’t your husband just have come to me, asked me?”

No, because at that time Jaqen thought he might have had to kill Jon, and there are some kinds of cruel he is not— he’d have killed you and taken your face before he made you complicit in Jon’s death, unwitting or otherwise.

“I tried to do you a kindness,” says Arya, “to let you know that you did not betray Jon to anyone but another Stark. But since you’re not in a listening mood— fuck you.”

She turns back to the battlements.

Jaqen was right. Shouldn’t have spoken. No evidence can convince Samwell Tarly that the Pate he knew was not a scholar, not unless he wants to believe. Or Jaqen sits down with him and shares anecdotes or something.

She sighs. Too much Lorathi in her not to accept the truth: the burden of proof is on them, her and Jaqen.

“The inkwell,” she says, when Samwell makes no move in any direction. “Under the librarian’s ledger. You didn’t want to do it.”

A prank, in the first week of Samwell Tarly’s acceptance as a novice. Pate and Tarly had risen to be the kings of the Citadel’s pranksters, before succumbing to the seriousness required for earning their chains. Jaqen had spoken, some, of the lighter parts of his stay in the Citadel, and the inkwell had stuck in her memory as particularly un- Jaqen-like. Mean, almost.

“Red ink,” she says.

“I refuse to listen to you,” says Samwell bitterly, and she hears his footsteps retreat. The door of the ravenloft opens, then slams shut as he retreats to the keep.

What is wrong with people, she wonders. Does nobody use reason anymore?

She would like to retreat as well, go find Jaqen, drag him into their chambers for a bit— an apology, of sorts, for opening her damn mouth (she can suggest he shove something in there, shut her up for a bit as punishment— he likes putting his cock in her mouth) but she must wait for a missive of her own.

A watch and a half passes before the bird arrives.

She opens the roll of parchment with trembling hands, deciphers the single message for an entire damn watch before she can read it.

The decision is not a vote; it is a command for unanimous, cohesive action. A command like this from the Kindly Man means the vote has been nullified.

No Faceless Man rules another, but commands are given, received, roles reversed as need demands for the coordination of assignments and the day-to-day operations of the House. And with mercy off the table, why, this is day-to-day, isn’t it, the retrieval of an injured brother?

A cameo on a string of pearls and onyx, transported from Volantis to Winterfell, the gift must be
refused.

A train, of escorts, handing him off one to the next until he reaches Winterfell. Though he must suffer, their brother will not be left alone, will be kept alive by all means at their disposal.

*Two days, at most, since the nullification of the vote. Lightning fast, almost impossibly fast, this level of coordination, even for the old man.*

She remembers his words: *Loved him like a son.* Did he anticipate Arya Stark’s machinations? Did he place his trust in *her*, preparing to kill their brother with one hand, save him with the other?

She cannot extrapolate. But the underlying motivations here are irrelevant now. The House of Black and White acts.

*We will not let our brother fall.*

*Assassins*, at least, listen to reason. The thought cheers her, perhaps unreasonably so, but it is what it is.

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**SANSA**

The effects of facing down Petyr fade slowly from her gut. She immerses herself in the needs of the moment to accelerate the process. Petyr will not simply *stop* being who he is, regardless of what “oh his tender heart, it hurts” types of feelings Sansa’s letter may evoke in him. He will try to ally with their enemies again. *Euron Greyjoy--Cersei certainly won’t take Petyr back.*

Two wait for her in the corridors behind Jon’s tower. Tormund Giantsbane and Davos Seaworth. One she has work for, one will give *her* work if she can read the sour expression on his face.

Sandor carries her towards the men, who gawk at her manner of arrival in surprise. Sandor sets her down upon an upholstered bench, set into one of the casement windows of the corridor.

“Slipped and fell,” she says ruefully once she is seated. “Arya dosed me with something, bound my leg, and now I can’t feel my toes.” A mild complaint. The confusion clears from their face and there is sympathy on fatherlike Davos’s.

Tormund... *he* mounted Ramsay’s head for her. He knows her better than to be sympathetic to Sansa Stark.

“Are your men ready?” she asks him.

Tormund nods.

“No torches,” she says. “I don’t want them to see you coming.”

The wildling laughs in that wild, wheezing way of his. “Don’t need torches to see shiny armor ’gainst the snow,” he says.

This part of the plan is wholly Sansa’s. Tormund will know, which means Jon will too (eventually), and Sandor of course. But she’s extracted a promise from Arya not to tell Jaqen--her brother-by-law has a very clear idea of debts owed, he would not approve, she thinks.
“Cripple him,” she says. “But make sure they don’t go too far. I want him to live.” She thinks about it. “I would say ‘geld him’, but he may not survive that.”

Tormund nods regretfully.

Sansa feels no regret at all as she dismisses the wildling. His men have been carefully chosen, ones that can put on an Iron Islands accent. Enough weapons and armor has been left behind by Theon’s raiders that a motley assortment of men that will pass for Euron Greyjoy’s can be created out of a group of wildlings.

What they do on the eastern coast of Westeros—that will be up to Petyr to explain to himself when he is left without the use of his legs.

Wrong choice, leaving Winterfell without accord between us, Petyr Baelish. You will regret it, and not just for the might-have-beens.

An Iron Islands raid is plausible, even near the eastern cost. More than plausible--Euron Greyjoy has limited himself to scouting parties, but it is only a matter of time before they become raiding parties--a month, Jon estimates. About the time that Petyr will arrive (in a litter) at the Vale, see her letter.

If we’re lucky, Petyr’s plots will keep Euron from an alliance with Cersei Lannister. A pity--Petyr could have been so much more useful. His choice, though he only knew a tenth of what he chose.

Davos is looking very uncomfortable. He is another one of those that disapproves. But he will say nothing--she has promised him the Red Woman’s head (in time, once she has left the North, once she can be taken in a manner that Jon will not come to know of it). So Davos will keep his peace.

Vengeance is a leash, as much as love.

“What does Lady Cerwyn say?” she asks Davos.

She listens impassively to all he has to say--he arrived with the knights of Cerwyn before dawn. Half a watch later, Lady Cerwyn, who travels in a horse-drawn carriage, is pulling into the gates.

She calls for Sandor, and he takes them to the front hall. A servant is waiting for her there with the mead-filled horn.

“Put me down, here, out of sight,” Sansa murmurs.

She is furious at Cerwyn’s tactics--delay, delay, and then ambivalent refusal.

Fury has given her strength before, and it gives her strength now as Sandor hesitates, but obeys. Sansa walks, under her own power, the wide skirts of her dress hiding the trembling in her legs.

The traditional exchanges are made, Lady Cerwyn drinks from the cup, and is helped down from the carriage by an aging retainer. The doors of the carriage are promptly shut, and it’s driven off to the far side of the keep, where the Cerwyn knights are to be bivouacked.

This is not the Lady Cerwyn Sansa had known while she was Sansa Bolton--this one has gained weight, lines around her mouth, lines of pain and worry. Her dugs hang low, and...Sansa looks for it, and finds it.

The smile she greets Lady Cerwyn with is bright, and the woman hesitates as she extends her hand, links it with Sansa’s. Then turn, make their slowly into the keep.
“And how fare you, Lady Sansa?” asks Lady Cerwyn. “Busy?”

“A bit,” says Sansa. “But I’m so thrilled you are here—another woman, to talk to.”

“Of course.” Lady Cerwyn smiles, falsely. “What are friends for?”

Sansa smiles back. “I recently saw the midwife,” she says, lowering her voice, as if in gossip. Lady Cerwyn stiffens. “I don’t know if you noticed,” continues Sansa, “but I had been in some pain, since I escaped Ramsay’s bed.”

Lady Cerwyn is looking at Sansa with wide eyes.

Sansa smiles again, prettily, nicely. “It’s all healed now.”

“That…” Lady Cerwyn hesitates. “I did not know. Forgive me.” She looks away.

“The Boltons leave such lasting gifts for their lovers,” says Sansa, and when Lady Cerwyn looks up, there is no trace of smile on Sansa’s face, and she knows her eyes must glitter a cold, cold blue. She looks down, deliberately, at Lady Cerwyn’s chest, and the Lady’s gaze must follow. A damp spot, at the tip of each breast, it shows as a very, very slight darkening of the fabric of her gown.

“Sheer luck, that he did not get me with child,” Sansa continues. “It would have broken my heart, to strangle my own sweet baby in the cradle.” She titters, raises a hand to her mouth, and her smile is back, as empty and girlish as any of the smiles in the mouths of the ladies of King’s Landing.

“Don’t you agree, Lady Cerwyn?”

The woman clenches her jaw, nods, tightly.

_Roose Bolton_, Sansa is almost convinced. Lady Cerwyn doesn’t have the startled-flinching look of one of Ramsay’s lovers (even Miranda had that look, from time to time), and Ramsay had Sansa to keep himself amused after all, while Roose had Fat Walda, and once _she_ was with child…

_Was it rape? An exchange for protection? Affection?_ Perhaps all three—life under occupation is not a simple one, not for women, not for the lady of a keep a stone’s throw away from the bulk of Roose Bolton’s armies.

Sansa does not judge Lady Cerwyn—she herself has done far worse, and with far less to lose. She _pities_ Lady Cerwyn, for the ambiguity she must live with for the rest of her life.

_A son_, Sansa thinks. _A girl wouldn’t require this much caution._

Roose Bolton’s son. Ramsay’s brother. Will he be a problem if he learns of his heritage? Not for a few years.

For now the child is leverage. If Sansa had borne Ramsay’s child…could she have had the strength to get rid of it? Small mercies, that she will never have to know the answer to that question.

_But I have strength enough to strangle someone else’s._

Lady Cerwyn looks into Sansa’s eyes, and whatever it is she sees there, her hand trembles upon Sansa’s arm.

“Ser Davos said you had some reservations, about committing your forces to the fight against the Karstarks.” Sansa’s tone is gentle, enquiring.

“I…” Lady Cerwyn takes a deep breath. “Ser Davos must have misunderstood something. Our
forces are committed. I serve the king.”

“You know,” says Sansa thoughtfully, “that’s what I told Davos. I’m glad I was right. And here we are! Your rooms!” She smiles brilliantly at Lady Cerwyn, and waits, waits for the entirety of the Cerwyn retinue to disappear into the suite set aside for them, and close and bolt the doors, before she allows Sandor to sweep her up into his arms.

She rests her head, weary, against his chest for a moment. But only for a moment. Then she straightens her spine.

Her late-afternoon dose of poison leaves her slightly dizzy, soft-headed, and she must needs sit still, and not try to make decisions for a watch or so.

And so she has Sandor set her upon the viewing balcony of the salle Arya has appropriated for her and Jaqen’s private weapons training.

Her shield has made a request to join in, and Sansa is glad he’s doing something more than just carting her around the place like a draft-horse and yelling obscenities at the recruits. A man should have some amusements. He doesn’t go drinking and whoring with the other knights.

Lyanna has joined Sansa in observing the men--Arya is not here. Up in the ravensloft, Sansa guesses.

Sandor and Jaqen have taken off their shirts, they pick up staves, test the weight in their hands, and then Sandor makes the first attack.

His muscles move under his skin, there is not the lean grace to them that Jaqen has, but Sandor… Sandor.

She bows her head.

Should have gone with you after the Blackwater.

The regret, the speculation contained within it, is the closest Sansa has come to to a moment of spontaneous admiration for a man’s masculinity in years. Not since I thought I could marry Loras Tyrell. She snorts.

Lyanna looks at her.

“The Tyrells,” says Sansa. A safe topic of conversation, the poor man is dead, along with his sister. “They wanted to marry me to Loras, until Cersei found out.”

“The Knight of the Flowers,” says Lyanna. “Good match.”

Sansa looks down at the salle again, tries to focus on the fighting and not the man.

“Ser Loras would have preferred my brother,” says Sansa ruefully.

At Lyanna’s choke, she looks over. “Lyanna?”

“Is everyone… ” Lyanna Mormont shakes her head. “There is a lot about the world I don’t know yet.” She turns back to the salle, deliberately focusing on the sparring.

She could probably tell me the name of each one of those parries and thrusts. Jon’s idea has merit,
Sansa doesn’t question that, she only questions the willingness of men to allow their women to go to war.

“War’s killed a lot of men,” says Lyanna. “Not too many lords to choose from.”

So that weighs on her as well--how can it not? The duty of the Head of the House and the duty of a woman, all rolled up into one.

“I think we can marry whom we choose,” says Lyanna.

“The pickings are slim,” says Sansa.

Lyanna shakes her head. “I do not speak of lords and lord’s sons. Commoners. Strengthen the bloodlines--you see what inbreeding did to the Lannisters. Every remaining, unattached male in the North is a cousin of ours, however distant.”

Sansa blinks. “I knew there were relations…”

“Strengthen the bloodlines,” says Lyanna, and looks Sansa straight in the eye. “If what Jon has holds true for me as well--I should marry a wildling man, one with skinchanger blood on his mother’s side.”

Sansa presses her lips together. “Too many changes, too fast. A landed commoner, even a Knight would be pushing it, but better than a wildling. You don’t want your daughter to be denied her birthright.”

Lyanna glares at Sansa for a moment. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“Have you a particular wildling man in mind?” asks Sansa.

Lyanna shakes her head, sighs. “I’d like one that could turn into a dragon.”

So she can save the North, and Jon doesn’t need to marry one of the hated Targaryens. Sansa’s heart goes out to the little bear. “I don’t think that’s how the magic works,” she says gently.

“Probably not. Which leaves the landed gentry. Or a knight.” She looks down at the fighters below.

Sandor’s skin gleams with sweat, tiny rivulets of it following the curve of his spine.

“The big one is ugly, like me,” says Lyanna.

Far too old for you.

“Not ugly,” says Sansa. “Scarred-a warrior’s scars don’t make him ugly. Ignore the scars, he’s actually quite handsome when he bothers to smile.” She smiles at Lyanna in turn. “And you are not ugly, Lady Mormont, so you should stop speaking like that.”

Lyanna gives her a look.

“Your face is symmetric,” says Sansa, knowing flowery words will have no effect. “Your eyes are large and well-spaced, and your skin is very fashionably pale. Stop being ridiculous.”

Lyanna thinks about it. “Hm,” she says, then turns back to the fight. “He’s feinting, the pretty one,” she says. “And he’s not taking half the openings he has.” Lyanna looks up, and she’s grinning. “Maybe you can have the big one, and I’ll marry the pretty one--Lady Arya is supposed to get
married to someone else, she can’t keep him too.”

Giggles almost escape Sansa’s mouth, but she confines them behind her teeth. “Mmm,” she murmurs, “Arya is...very possessive.”

Arya, of course, chooses that very moment to walk in.

“Ladies,” she says, and she looks happy.

*She’s happy I lost Petyr*, thinks Sansa. She can’t blame Arya, and her own measure of relief is...not insubstantial. *Could I have lived up to my end of the bargain, to love him, cherish him, if I had to go vomit in a chamberpot every time he so much as touched me?*

“Lady Arya,” says Lyanna.

“What are we discuss--” Arya walks up to them, looks down, sees the men, shirtless, their harsh breathing distant, almost inaudible from up here. “Well,” Arya murmurs. “How interesting.” From time to time the men say something to one another, but the content of their communication is unclear from the balcony.

“We were just dividing up the spoils,” says Sansa. “Lyanna wonders if you’ll give her the pretty one once you go to the Sealord of Braavos.”

Arya turns an incredulous look at Sansa, sees the jest. They share a smile--that secret smile that sisters have, they’ve been working on theirs--*She’s adorable, isn’t she?*

“You have good taste, Lady Mormont,” says Arya.

“Nothing to do with taste,” says Lyanna. “You see how he’s simply *toying* with Sansa’s big one?”

“Yes, yes he is,” murmurs Arya, and there is a definite glint in her eyes as she watches Jaqen’s back with hawk-like focus.

Sansa feels she should say something, defend her shield. But she knows nothing about weapons and sparring beyond which end is used to hit your opponent. “Sandor’s muscles are nicer,” she offers.

“Bigger,” says Arya absently. “Built for strength. There are two types of muscles--the ones that give you brute strength, and the ones that react fast, faster than conscious thought if you train them well enough. Jaqen maintains a certain balance he prefers. Need to use long, repetitive motions to build the fast muscles, slow heavy motions--broadswords--for muscles like Sandor’s.”

Lyanna is looking at Arya. “You learned that in Braavos?”

Arya nods. “The pretty one taught a lot of it to me.”

“Are you *sure* you want to marry the Sealord of Braavos?” asks Lyanna in a small voice.


Lyanna sniffs. “I feel bad for you.”

“Live in the moment,” says Arya, “and at this moment I’m just enjoying the view.”

Sansa cannot help but agree with Arya, despite a slight disagreement about the specifics. *I think the bigger muscles are nicer than the fast ones.*
SANDOR

They don’t realize we can hear them down here.

“Live in the moment,” Arya is saying, “and at this moment I’m just enjoying the view.”

The she-wolf and her husband are cagey about their training, when he’d asked to join in (observing the greenhorns with his hands behind his back, insulting their mothers and sisters, that only accomplishes so much--Sandor needs to be able to keep up the pace. But his leg…No excuses. Sandor Clegane has gone soft), so when he’d asked to join in, he’d expected they would make sure no one was watching.

That’s what I get for assuming an assassin will behave reasonably. The little bird is watching from the gallery that overlooks the hall.

Shirtless, sweaty, his leg aching like mad...

“You listening to this?” asks Sandor, as he closes in for a quick sweep at the other man’s legs.

Jaqen H’ghar is also shirtless, a fine sheen of sweat covers his skin, but he carries himself with an insouciance that belies the awkwardness in his motions every time one of the women comment on the two fighters.

“Trying not to,” Jaqen mutters as he redirects the sweep away from himself. “A man doesn’t know whether to feel flattered or…”

“Just don’t make me look bad,” growls Sandor, quietly, as their staves meet overhead with a sharp rap. He’s toying with the big one. True, perhaps, but he doubts if it will be obvious to Sansa.

The warm-up was shot to shit the moment the little bird came into the gallery in the first place, and neither of them wants to fight, so they’re exchanging blows like a couple of knights at a demonstration rally.

“The pretty one smiles a lot,” says Lady Mormont. Sandor agrees with her, on this point at least. “He smiles like he always knows something you don’t.”

“He’s very good at playing mind-games.”

Sandor swivels slightly, sees an opening.

Arya’s voice is definitely warm, there’s almost a purr in it. “And he always knows something you don’t.”

Sandor gets a hit in, right across Jaqen’s upper arm, and the man actually staggers back a step. Hah!

“Hard to concentrate,” mutters Jaqen.

“The big one’s arm is very strong,” comments Lady Mormont.

“He carries me around,” says Sansa, thoughtfully, “as if I weigh nothing more than a piece of
Thwack. Jaqen’s turn, to give Sandor a nice bruise across the lower midsection.

Alright. No more listening, or I’ll have a cracked rib or two to show for it.

“Women everywhere,” says Sandor. “I will grant you though,” the staves clatter against each other again, “these ones are something else.”

Jaqen ducks under a blow, reverses his staff for a quick jab at Sandor’s back, which avoids by the simple expedient of stepping away.

“Perhaps we should ask them to stop, politely,” says Jaqen.

He’s not breathing too hard yet. A few dozen more passes like this, I’m going to start panting like a damn bellows.

“Ah, let them do it,” says Sandor.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow, somehow managing to look sly despite his long, dishevelled hair, the beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. “Rare experience for you, friend, being a choice cut of meat in a butcher’s window?”

“After everything,” says Sandor, thwack, thwack, against the top of the staff, “that they can still talk about men…” thunk --the butt of his staff is forced against the ground, he twists it back up, “makes you think the world isn’t fucked to hell after all.”

“A man doesn’t need to tell a friend to go slowly…” Jaqen tries some fancy turn, twisting the staff behind his back then around, “very slowly…with a man’s sister.”

There is a spectre that hangs between them for a moment, of the blood-soaked linens they burned in secret a two-day ago.

“Not going at all,” grunts Sandor.

“But Lady Mormont has already decided the red-headed one is getting the ‘ugly, big one’, and that is most definitely you, friend.”

“Do you always listen to little girls?” asks Sandor. Better end this soon. “Oh, that’s right, you do, you’ve been doing the wolf-bitch’s bidding since she was what, eleven?”

The sly-blade smiles. “It goes both ways.”

“Horse-shit,” says Sandor, a sneer plastered over his face, though the moment’s distraction earns him another bruise, this time across his leg. “She’s got you wrapped around her little finger, pretty one.”

“She does,” says Jaqen. “And she knows it, but she still obeys as needed.”

“Obeys? Are we still talking about Arya Stark?”

Sandor pauses, panting, he raises a hand but Jaqen has already lowered his staff. Sandor leans forward, rests his staff on his knees for a moment before straightening and heading to the water-jug on a small table in the corner.

Jaqen follows; there is a quick tussle, that Jaqen wins with a “you’re a Stark knight, Sandor, show
some graciousness,” and so the sly-blade gets the first drink. Sandor replies by taking a few big
gulps and then pouring the rest over his head to cool his overheated body, and Jaqen has to dance
backwards to avoid being splashed.

“You’re done?” asks Jaqen.

Sandor takes a deep breath, checks the tightness in his leg. “I’m done,” he says, shaking his head.
“We’ve been going at it for a watch.”

“Hmm.”

“You’re a younger man, more stamina, but even you can’t go for much longer,” Sandor points out.
The sly-blade...it almost looks like he suppresses a smile.


“My apologies,” says Jaqen; a habit, by now. He looks up at the balcony, as if he’s just noticed the
women. He cocks a finger at Arya.

She nods, and heads to the circular wooden stair that leads down to the hall floor.

*Looks like we’re going to see her fight after all.*

“Sandor,” calls Sansa, her voice echoes, *they really didn’t know they could be heard down here.* “I
have to meet with Maester Samwell. Can you help, or should I send for--”

“Jaqen needed a break,” says Sandor, throwing the sly-blade a warning look. “I’ll be right up.”

He wipes the water and sweat from himself as best he can, not good walking around smelling like
he does, but a bath will have to wait, he puts his shirt on again, clenches his jaw, and walks,
slowly, so as not to give away the limp, to the stairwell. He passes Arya on the way down, and she
presses something into his hand.

“Problem’s in the ligament,” she murmurs, quietly.

He looks down at the small jar in bemusement, but she’s already gone.

Shaking his head, he makes his way up the stairs, and picks up the little bird. She really *does* weigh
about as much as a few sheets of parchment stuck together. It’s the *dress* that’s made of lead.

“Where to?” he asks.

“Maester’s study,” she replies.

Thankfully, that’s just a few corridors away.

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Once he leaves the little bird and Lady Mormont in Maester Samwell’s care, he makes his way
back to the training room.

He’d hoped to observe them without being observed in turn--his curiosity is eating away at him,
but both of them pause for a heartbeat, look up, when he enters the room.

He limps his way down the stairs, and takes another drink of water, glum.
Killing strokes against the other, almost each and every one of them, with naked blades. Which means the motions are choreographed, to be parried so perfectly each time.

It’s as much of an actual fight, as much useful “training”, as his own matches with Jaqen.

*They’re flirting with each other, is what it is.*

“Figures,” he mutters. “Talk while you fuck, fuck while you fight.”

Another half-watch and they’re done.

*She’s trained but in the wrong thing. There’s clearly too much rote-learning, fancy swordwork that won’t hold up in a real fight. Looks impressive, and she’ll hold her own against a poor fighter, but against a trained one… Sandor almost disapproves. He’s her husband, he should teach her better. But it’s not his place to say anything.*

And then it’s time to head back to the *politicking*, for more last-minute discussions and instructions for the gathering that looms over the next day.

The talking, talking, with the King, some wildlings, Davos Seaworth, then with the Maesters, it goes on and on and on. *How does the little bird sit through all of this?*

It doesn’t stop till the nightmeal is called, and Arya doses her sister with a stronger-than-normal draught.

Puts the little bird out like a candle in a stiff breeze.

Sandor lays her on her bed, draws the covers over her, and retreats to his customary sleeping spot--the chaise outside her door--with his sword drawn and held ready across his body.

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**JAQEN**

The “day” of the moot is indistinguishable from the night before it, save for the increase in the number of lanterns lit in the corridors.

He’s taken to riding with Jon in the mornings while Arya sees to Sansa. Looking for wights--the last one they’d found, it was a soulless, shambling thing. Re- *animated*, no ressurected; no need for the god to take a hand.

The riding, the hunt, it had relieved some of his inexplicable restlessness as that woefully constrained sparring had not; the only surcease he gets is in bed, it seems, as he sheathes himself in his bride and rides her to oblivion when he can.

*North. It calls me North.*

But haring off into the great white wight-filled expanse without a plan, without a direction indicated beyond some vague uneasiness towards the pole--it is not something Jaqen H’ghar does. So he must needs grit his teeth and wait.

*Something must break, soon.* Arya had known of whatever this thing is that eats at him, that grows day by day, before he did. She keeps a watch, and he’s seen her playing with a breeze on their balcony, tasting it for any sign of Brandon Stark.
And now the kingsmoot is upon them, and they have official roles to play.

Greedy for some last moments of solitude, the family (and Sandor, with Sansa in his arms) take their bread-and-cheese to the small dining room attached to the children’s wing, where messengers and servants unfamiliar with Winterfell will take a while to find them.

“Littlefinger came yesterday,” says Jon, as if making idle conversation.

“He left,” says Sansa.

“Piece of shit,” mutters Sandor, “should have let me run him through.”

Jon grits his teeth, but he does not ask anything further. Trust, in the face of secrets and unknowns, after he has already been killed once by treachery…the Starks are capable of many impossible things.

“Baelish has been discouraged for now,” warns Arya. “But he is a viper--he will raise his head again.”

Jaqen considers this. “If he actually offers harm, to the family,” he murmurs. “Not strictly a concern of the House of Black and White.”

Sansa and Jon look uncomfortable, each for their own reasons. But they at least understand.

“So you won’t assassinate him?” sneers Sandor. “What use is an alliance with you people--”

Sansa interrupts her “ugly bird” with a gentle touch. “Not what he said, Sandor.”

“I know that--I’m trying to get him to say what he means,” Sansor grumbles.

Arya rolls her eyes.

Jon sighs. “Let’s deal with the White Walkers first.”

“One thing, from my side,” says Jaqen, swallowing the last of his bread.

Jon gestures for him to continue.

“The Ironborn.”

Jon blinks at him.

“There is a potential...complication,” says Jaqen.

Sandor groans.

“We make no peace with Euron,” says Jon.

“Asha Greyjoy and Theon Greyjoy are allied with Daenerys Targaryen, whom you will marry,” says Jaqen. He raises a hand to forestall argument. “They oppose the King of the Iron Islands. But Euron Greyjoy was voted into power by his people, and the rites were followed--he was drowned, and revived--the vote was ratified by the Drowned God.” Reluctantly. Still.

The drowning is not an acceptance by the god, as is assumed by the men of the Iron Islands. It is a
tug-of-war, between the prospective king’s will to live, and the inexorable sea. And Euron Greyjoy has defeated the sea, time and time again--he’s had practice in it.

“Another god?” asks Jon, eyes troubled.

“There is only one god, and his name is Death,” says Arya. Her brow is furrowed. She understands. She sorrows--they have spoken much upon the Iron Islands.

This complication is naught to do with the House of Black and White, with the Faceless Men, with Braavos. This is thing of the Drowned God and his bride, she who dregs the deeps.

“It is a subtle thing that must be navigated,” says Jaqen. “We, Arya and I, we cannot cast doubt upon the legitimacy of Euron Greyjoy’s kingship. And doubting the count of the votes that got him to power, or that there was some chicanery involved in his drowning, that will be Asha Greyjoy’s first move. If she is allied with the Starks, we may be called upon to support her position...”

We. That, too, is understood by all present (though Sandor may reject such understanding)--this is a family matter, broached in a family gathering.

Trust is given freely between all here, without the need for the speaking of things that should not be spoken of. Him of the Many Faces does not need to reveal Himself. Enough, that it is known that Jaqen and Arya serve the Many-Faced God.

“We must not support her claim,” says Arya, then thinks. “If the moot resolves to do so, that’s the North’s problem. Starks are not the only voice, after all.”


“Nothing is ever simple, is it?” asks Jon. “What if Euron attacks us, like his father did?”

“Kings go to war--that is the way of things,” says Jaqen. “That is not a concern. The god’s word pertains to Euron Greyjoy’s kingship--it is as legitimate a kingship as it is possible to have.”

“More legitimate than mine,” mutters Jon.

“I understand yours was also a vote,” says Jaqen. “An acclamation.”

Jon looks up, a wry smile on his face. “And will your god ratify the bastard king?”

We are here, are we not, Jon Snow?

“The alliance with Daenerys must overrule all other considerations,” says Sansa. “We need her dragons, we need dragonfire, against the White Walkers. Asha Greyjoy’s fleet enabled Daenerys to cross the Narrow Sea. The Queen will probably demand support for her ally.”

He watches the wheels turn in Sansa’s head, the glance she exchanges with Arya. They both look sidelong at Jon, then say nothing more.

Espionage, fraud, murder--these things are not discussed by the Stark sisters in Jon’s presence. Quite extensively discussed, when it’s just them and Sandor and Jaqen.

Sandor, the man who thought he’d heard it all, has begun to realize how shallow his understanding of such things had been.

The Hound saw machination driven by incestuous desire, fear, a hunger for power, a hunger for chaos and retaliation--all this in a summer court, when coin flowed like water and cruelty was
matched and overmatched by an abundance in resources, where no thought was given beyond the
morrow because the summer would last forever...

Machination by those that have no attachment at all to power, machination driven by loyalty and
trust and a desire to order the universe--the brutal efficiency of it, in a winter court where coin
must be balanced against unborn lives, where plans must be laid for a generation that will never see
the sun, where one wrong word in the right ear can mean not simply humiliation and censure by
other nobles but being eaten alive by the undead…

Sandor is learning the nature of true, indifferent cruelty--expedience--whether he likes it or not. By
the expression on his face at the moment, caution of all things, he’s caught the look exchanged by
the sisters, and knows it does not bode well for someone .

Jaqen queries Arya with a miniscule twitch of an eyebrow. She smiles at him. He extrapolates the
direction of her thoughts, and his eyes narrow.

The Drowned God has already taken Euron Greyjoy once; He cannot do so again by His own
hand.

*The Faceless Men are not so bound.*

A contract for a Greyjoy...such was accepted for Balon Greyjoy’s life despite all of his drowning--
the Faceless Men have their own rules, their own votes, the God’s vote is one amongst many and
His veto only applies to the fate of those within the order.

A contract, fully paid for, *would* provide the necessary distance between the god and the death of
Euron Greyjoy. The North cannot afford the price at the moment, but Jaqen H’ghar, like Sandor,
has learned something new as well--that Arya and Sansa Stark’s sheer resourcefulness cannot *be*
overestimated.

*No.* It is a command; Arya drops her eyes.

In this Jaqen H’ghar cannot skirt the bounds of His function--He *is* the Drowned God, and He
cannot even suggest the initiation of such a contract. Neither, by extension, can His bride--as they
have both learned, the Weirwood cannot differentiate between His name and Arya’s.

*Not even an insinuation, beloved*, he warns.

Arya places her hand on his thigh; comfort, not seduction this time.

“We don’t have much reliable information about Euron--rumors,” says Sansa. “He has styled
himself the ‘King of the Isles and the North’.” Sansa pauses, swallows. “Would he accept Sansa
Stark as rock wife to make peace?”

“No!” Jon and Sandor speak together.

“No,” says Jaqen, more quietly. “As in, yes, he might since his suit to Daenerys Targaryen has
obviously been rejected. But he is ten times the vile creature Ramsay Bolton was, with a greater
capacity for violence, and he has been a hundred times more successful in it.”

“Why does your god support such a man?” Jon demands.

Arya answers for them. “Death does not judge,” she says quietly. “Or no righteous soul would ever
die...”
“...and what is the measure of righteousness within a soul, save the soul’s conviction of its righteousness? How then do we thrash wheat from chaff, the repentant from the unashamed?” murmurs Sansa. She blinks, looks up and meets Arya and Jon’s amazed gazes. “I was quite devout, in King’s Landing,” she says, smiling bitterly. “The ‘discourses upon the Stranger’ in the Seven-Pointed Star. I read from it as Stannis Baratheon’s fleet burned in the harbour.”

Sandor Clegane sneers. “Gods and philosophy and discourses. Euron Greyjoy is scum, like most men. We can go to war with him, but we can’t call him a usurper or a fraud. Is that all?”

Jaqen rubs at his face. “Yes,” he says.

“Then why all this fuss? Just say it,” snaps Sandor.

“Arya,” says Jon quietly, “you will not speak of your god, but can you not ask Him to...send a sign, something to Euron—the Night’s King, the Long Night, these are not simply the North’s problems. Iron Islands will suffer, and suffer, and eventually the wights will reach them too.”

“Euron Greyjoy does not believe in the Drowned God,” says Jaqen. “His brother, Aeron, a drowned man, chosen as the god’s voice...Euron Greyjoy ties his brother to the prow of his ship in lieu of a figurehead. No signs will be listened to, Jon.”

Silence greets his words.

Then Jon speaks. “Your god is harsh, to allow his own priest to be treated in such a manner.”

“Death is not required to be easy, Jon Snow,” says Jaqen, “only inevitable.”

“The Drowned God is the hardest of all the gods, Theon used to say.” says Sansa.

“He has always been such,” replies Jaqen.

“Soft as the sea, deep as the sea,” says Arya; observation, not disagreement. She is caressing Jaqen’s thigh under the table. “The god’s chosen are far stronger, in both body and will, than mortal men. Aeron’s time will come.”

And on that ominous note, breakfast winds to a close.

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**JON**

The moot must start at noon; hard to tell by look alone, but there is an old orrery-like device in Samwell’s keeping that serves much the same function as “looking at the sky”.

Noon has come and gone, and everyone is still milling around.

His father’s chair has been replaced on the dias by a large wooden structure. Jon hesitates to call it a throne only because there’s not enough carving on it. The visual reminder of his kingship, a substitute for the crown he does not have, it is necessary, but he hates the thing. Never, in any of his dreams of the future had he ever wished to sit where he sits now.

*Father, Robb, Rickon...* He prays, half-heartedly, in the Godswood sometimes, that he doesn’t have to add Bran to the list.
He focuses on the here-and-now. Ghost sits beside him, head down, nose resting between his paws. Ghost is drowsy after the massive deer haunch a liveried Manderly man brought him—the man is very fond of hounds, and wolves. And direwolves. And yet the man is not the Manderly’s hounds-keeper. A story, there, Jon thinks. Wonder how old his blood is?

The sounds of settling-in: benches being pulled back with a screech, shifting, low-voiced grumbling and greeting by turn, slowly, these begin to die down.

Jon surveys his “court”.

The distribution of those in attendance, it skews to the too-young or too-old, and the feminine. As the Starks have been decimated, so have others. The North has been unmanned, and by one of its own; the consequences of Bolton rule will cascade down through history, ripples, spreading in time.

Only the heads of houses great and small, their heirs and immediate kin throng the benches on the ground floor before the throne. Others watch, from the observational gallery running on the inside of the Hall’s second storey.

Samwell finally, finally clears his throat—the Maester sits, by tradition, to Jon’s left—and raises his voice.


Somewhat ragged in their timing, the court repeats after him, and the last word is a reverberating echo.

“So begins the kingsmoot.”

Finally.

Samwell clears his throat again.

“Have any dispute with the king, take blood-oath or vengeance against him, come now.”

Silence.

Another tradition they have decided to revive. The theory of it is that no one will act for the benefit of the kingdom when they hold in their hearts a grievance against the king. Better to have it out in the open, out of the way, before such wounds have a chance to fester and infect others.

“All here stand witness. Come now.”

The ritual formula is all well and good, but the North has been subjugated to the Iron Throne far too long—to issue a personal challenge to the King is...unthinkable.

They need to stop thinking within the boundaries of southern fear. Doubly important, that it is established that the dignity of any ruler is not sacrosanct, before dragonwings are heard over the battlements of Winterfell.

All this subtlety, Jon thinks, and I would betray every one of them, bend knee myself, if she delivers us from the Night’s King.

There is no assurance that Daenerys Targaryen will marry Jon (her terms, as they stand, are unacceptable) let alone lend him her “children” to use against the armies of the undead.
But it is a chance. And a chance is more than what they had before.

Again, Samwell calls for challengers. On the third such call, there is a clatter and a commotion to his right, and a large, bearded wildling stands up, his bronze-ringed armor glimmering in the candlelight. Luckily, for Jon, there are wildlings amongst his subjects.

House Thenn has been primed.

“Jon Snow issued insult to my niece by refusing her suit,” says Sigorn, the newest lord in the North.

Everyone knows that such a suit would have had to be refused no matter what. The point is not the obviousness of the ploy, the point is to get people used to the process.

“Your niece?” asks Jon, his voice clear, “I thought you were offering me your horse!”

All the Thenn surge to their feet, rattling their shields.

Jon and Sigorn grin at each other, and then Jon stands. Sam offers him a short blade—not Longclaw, not for this—and Jon shrugs off his fur cloak, stepping down from the dias and onto the floor.

Some of the lords look confused, others draw back. Speculation, in some eyes. Irritation and annoyance directed towards the Thenn.

The combatants exchange the ritual slap to the face, then pace off.

Sigorn doesn’t give Jon a chance to take his bearings. He charges, blade flashing towards Jon’s head.

Jon doesn’t dodge. He catches Sigorn’s down-swing edge on, near the hilt. The hall resounds with the sound of the clash, Jon pushes the Thenn back, Sigorn’s bronze blade notched where it met Jon’s.

More shouting.

The King must draw first blood, validating the insult, or there will be some embarrassed shuffling as everyone tries to find a way to back out of the now-obligated marriage of Jon Snow to Sigorn’s sister’s daughter.

The niece in question hurls insults indiscriminately at everyone from the balcony overhead, and some of the King’s riders, Mormonts in particular, are getting into the spirit of the fight, shouting insults right back.

Another clash of blades, and Sigorn ducks under Jon’s over-indicated sideways swing, kicks Jon’s leg out from under him. Jon falls to the ground, rolls out of the way, narrowly avoiding getting pinned by the tip of the Thenn’s blade.

Again Jon catches the downswing, but this time he angles his parry, so Sigorn’s blade sides off Jon’s own, away from the guard. The blade slides, and Jon twists, elbowing Sigorn in the gut. Not enough to stagger the man, but enough for Jon to rise to his knees, reverse the parry, and score a line with his blade’s edge across Sigorn’s forearm.

“First blood!” shouts Samwell.
“First blood!” calls Lady Mormont. “First blood to the King!”

Sigorn pulls back, then proffers his arm to Jon. Jon grasps the hand of the First of the King’s riders. He surges to his feet, his blade held high, and cheers and jeers rain down upon them from the balcony.

He allows himself a small grin—even the most bored of the watchers, the most cautious, their eyes are wide, some few look flushed and not a little eager for a fight themselves. Jon’s muscles are loose, his heart beats in a familiar rhythm; the air doesn’t feel quite as cold as it did before.

The combatants exchange the Kiss of Peace, a short pressing of lips to the cheek that had been slapped, and Jon returns to the dias.

And so begins the kingsmoot.

“The first item on the agenda,” says Samwell, the strident tones he had used for the calling of the challenge melting away to those of a well-studied Maester’s, “is a proposal of marriage, from Daenerys Targaryen to the King in the North.”

Silence again.

Comprehension is dawning on many faces—the chair to Jon’s left, usually occupied by Sansa as Lady of Winterfell, the chair is empty. Sansa herself observes from the balcony overhead, the scarred face of Sandor Clegane looming behind her.

Murmurs, building to demands for the Maester to speak further.

Jon remains silent upon the throne, waiting. Bit by bit the hubbub dies away, and eyes swivel to the doors of the Hall.

A lone woman stands there, dressed in silken trousers and doublet, a blade at her side. A man stands at her side, grey trews, grey shirt, a sword-belt cinched around his waist, the hood of his grey cloak drawn deep over his face.

Her back is straight, and she holds a deep blue velvet cushion in front of her. An off-white oval sits on top of the cushion.

Jon knows, he knows this is coming but his breath deserts him—he has not actually seen the egg until now.

Rumor, that Daenerys’s own dragons hatched from just such a betrothal offering. A moment’s pity—his prospective bride-to-be had been but ten-and-thirteen when she was married off to a barbarian warlord. And now she gets a dead man pretending to be a Stark, a guard pretending to be a king. The gods have not written kindness into Daenerys Targaryen’s fate.

There is hushed silence in the hall—Arya’s boots ring on the stone floor as she walks forward, purposeful, until she stands before the throne. Jaqen, hooded, remains two steps behind her, exuding the sort of foreignness the court expects from an emissary’s escort.

She kneels, down on one knee, like a Bravo from Essos.

“Brother mine,” she says, “I bring a proposal, and a gift, on behalf of Daenerys Targaryen, from the Free City of Braavos. Will the King in the North hear the proposal?”

Subtly worded, her plea. They can dance, between “brother” and “king”, “emissary” and “Stark” as it suits.

Arya rises.

Jon raises his voice. “Does the North hear this proposal?”

The Hall is quiet, save for a few mutterings.

“Might as well,” says a voice from the balcony, loud in the silence, and Jon almost grins—he recognizes the voice, Wylla Manderly, always forthright, “I want to see what that gift is.”

Humor glitters in Arya’s eyes. “Braavos sends the King in the North the egg of a dragon, preserved since the fall of Valyria.”

Murmurs, building to an uproar of excitement this time.

The egg is a betrothal gift—Arya plays fast and loose with the truth, waiting for the sheer avarice, the fascination with a dragon’s egg of their own to take a hold of the hall, to take a hold of the North, before mentioning that they don’t get to keep it unless Jon marries Daenerys.

Jon has not Sandor’s impatience with subtlety, but an entire day of managing expectations, egos, while he himself sits on the throne without the ability to intervene—the king’s intervention is a warhammer, when a jewelsmith’s tap-hammer is required-- this is going to take a very long time.

But as the moon rises and casks of ale and crocks of mead are breached (get them drunk before eating, makes it easier to hide the dried and stringy meat under rich sauces), Jon Snow is ready to offer the North’s terms to the Queen of Meereen, that they may be wed.

Long past midnight, the King in the North finds himself alone on the battlements, Ghost at his side, staring out into the vast fields that nurture snowdrifts and nothing else. And he feels the despair, the futility of it all, rising from the very stones around him.

In the end it wasn’t arguments about dragons, about an alliance against the Lannisters, the ever present threat of the wights, that had swayed the lords towards a Targaryen alliance.

It had been one sentence, offered almost as an aside, by whom he knows not (and the unknowing of the speaker is good because Jon’s rage rises along with the despair).

“The point,” this someone had said, “is not to win the Seven Kingdoms for the King.”

The last obstacle had been one of titles and privileges—many had been adamant that “their” king should be styled as King and co-ruler in the south, and not simply King-consort, though such a claim to the North must not be extended to Daenerys Targaryen.

“The point,” this someone had continued, “is not to win the Seven Kingdoms for the King! The point is to win an empire for the King’s son.”

Have they learned nothing? Centuries of Targaryen rule, the lessons of every “empire” before that.

Men are all the same, it seems, Northern or otherwise. If power is within reach, there will invariably be an attempt to grasp it. Jon grits his teeth, and looks out over the snow.

He can feel the silent, solid presence of Ghost beside him, less drowsy than before, but just as
Can a dead man have a child? Does it matter, since Daenerys Targaryen cannot? That comes from the House of Black and White, a truth that must be held close to the family. Jon is glad, in a way—Sansa’s children, or Arya’s, they will inherit Winterfell. Eddard Stark’s mistake will die with Jon. And there will be no empire for anyone.

“Forgive her,” says a soft voice to his right. The hooded figure of his brother-in-law comes to stand beside him.

Jon looks over his shoulder. “Not angry at Arya,” he says bitterly. “She found me the best thing anyone could have. She might have saved the North.”

“She makes it look like you have no choice. Kings seldom do. But Jon Snow always has a choice.”

“It is done,” says Jon, his mood blackening further. “The negotiations will continue. The end is inevitable—I will concede, and concede, and concede until Daenerys Targaryen lends me her dragons, or teaches me how to hatch mine.”

“Kings seldom choose,” Jaqen says again, and there is a shift in emphasis there. “Jon Snow always has a choice.”

“Who is Jon Snow?” asks the King in the North. “I don’t remember what he was like. Sometimes I think I never really knew him at all.”

“Months, till the formal betrothal, if not years,” says Jaqen. “Time enough to find answers to the questions you do not voice in front of Arya.”

All the assassins of Braavos are priests, Jon thinks, that they draw such accurate conclusions about the state of a man’s soul.

“Apart from Father,” Jon whispers, and him and Catelyn had their own disquiet, a now-unrecognizable boy named Jon Snow, “you and Sigorn are the only men I know that have a happy marriage.”

“Love has something to do with it,” says Jaqen.

“I don’t need love.”

Jaqen snorts. “Think you will be unfaithful to the memory of Ygritte if you allow yourself to need it?”

“Memory is all I have left,” says Jon, willing form to the random, chaotic patterns of the wind playing over the snow. He grins, darkly. “Love lies in a land beyond hope. Twice in one lifetime? I think not. But peace would be nice.” He turns to Jaqen. “What sort of peace do you think the King in the north and the Dragon Queen can have between themselves?”

Jaqen tilts his head to a side, and a smile tugs at his lips. “Peace is a state defined by the absence of war,” he says. “War needs at least two sides. Should Jon Snow choose not to go to war, can there be anything but peace?”

“So simple? It cannot be, Jaqen--If one side holds to peace, and the other to war, it is a slaughter, not equilibrium.”

“And so the metaphor breaks down, somewhere before that point,” sighs Jaqen, then reconsiders.
“One can hope. Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon were two that took to metaphor as literal truth. As instruction.” The look he gives Jon is...considering. “For what it’s worth,” he says, “Irrespective of politics and Arya’s scheming, were I to act in Brandon Stark’s stead, seek a match for my brother, make a list…” Jaqen smirks, “Apart from one or two I know…”

Jon raises an eyebrow. “One or two you know?” he asks. “Have you a Braavosi woman that would fast for me?”

And now a true smile spills out of Jaqen’s mouth. “Well, one of us will go to the Sealord of Braavos,” he says, “why not the King in the North?”

An impossibility, but Jon finds his mood lightening with the humor of it. *What has my life come to? A magical assassin-priest of the God of Death would be less of a complication than a blue-blood woman of Westerosi origin.*

“Pity Sansa wouldn’t take it well,” says Jon. He grins. “You wouldn’t be immune either, she’d take it out on both of us. And then Arya would get a turn, for fucking up her plans.”

Jaqen blinks. “Do not even think it anywhere near Arya,” he warns. “She might be a bit too taken with the idea, and damn all her plans to hell. For Jon’s Snow’s sake.”

“What’s good for the goose is good for the gander?” asks Jon, amused.

Jaqen narrows his eyes. “Something like that. One must explain to her, somehow, that ‘assassin’ is not a synonym for ‘happiness’.”

Jon chokes, and his amusement turns to full-blown laughter. “Only Arya,” he says eventually, dashing tears of mirth from his eyes. “Dear gods. Or poor gods, if she’s ever unleashed upon them-your Many-Faced God needs to watch his back around her.”

Jaqen snorts. “I’ll advise him of that. But, jest aside, were I to make a list of women for my brother....not unlikely, that Daenerys Targaryen should be found near the top.”

The mirth flees from Jon.

“What happens if I do come to love her then?” he asks quietly. “Or her, me? Robb...now Arya. They gave up their oaths, their families, their duties, for love. What if I am cut from the same cloth?” There is no answer to that, only precedent.

*Ygritte.*

And the memory of her (the last one of her he has), it may yet drive Jon to choose love over everything else.

Driven by fear, he may be coward enough to back away from that abiding, yawning pit he has learned to call “loss”. *How much will I concede of me, of the North, if it is not simply necessity that demands it, but love?*

He gives Jaqen a twisted smile. “I don’t have nightmares while I sleep anymore, thanks to Arya and Sansa, and you, but waking fears...Arya is going to leave, and someone with her name is going to marry the Sealord of Braavos. Once you are gone, I will never run down the hall, shouting ‘Arya get back here’ ever again.” Jon shakes his head. “I bawled like a baby, when that hit me.”

“He hasn’t hit her yet,” says Jaqen. “May not, till Winterfell disappears over the horizon.”
Jon leans over the parapet. “I don’t want to constrain her, bad enough Sansa is chained to me by my need.”

“A choice,” says Jaqen. “You are responsible for your own, others, for theirs. Walk Arya’s path or Sansa’s, Robb Stark’s. Or Jon Snow’s. It is your choice. That is the luxury kings have—the ability to ignore constraint, though they may suffer the consequences.”

Jon looks over to see Jaqen petting Ghost.

“He doesn’t let anyone do that.”

“I knew his sister,” says Jaqen, and Jon detects a hint of sadness in his voice.

“Who are you, Jaqen H’ghar?”

Jaqen doesn’t look at him, just continues running his hand over Ghost’s fur. “On your side, Jon Snow. On your side.”

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NO ONE

The next time he wakes it is because he can feel the shuddering of the wood under him, around him.

The ship has docked in Volantis.

The one who is no one wears Arya Stark’s face again.

Night falls before Jorah Mormont comes, lifts her up from the floor of the rat-infested hold, cradles her in his arms. She remembers to hang limp, not to fight, to take fast breaths of fear.

“Where are you taking me?” her voice is a hoarse whisper.

“You are not Arya Stark,” says Jorah, his voice gruff, “but you are someone. There is a message, in the port—they’re looking for you. A young girl, dark hair, speaks many tongues. Taken by slavers.”

She closes her eyes. Hope...a cruel thing, and it shows how far gone she is, that no one can feel both “hope” and “cruelty”. “Did they say my name?”

Jorah Mormont grunts. “Daorys,” the messages said. “Is that your real name?”

She lets her head hang back, and cannot control, for the life of her the smile that blooms on her face. “Daorys” is “no one”, in High Valyrian.

“It is,” she murmurs. “It is.”

The smile transitions into something else...a blurring of the world, she cannot draw her head back up, she cannot focus.

She is dimly aware, of being transferred to something that moves.

“Thank you, sir, thank you for finding her!” grovels an obsequious voice.
She is aware of words being exchanged.

“What is your name, good sir.”

“Jorah Mormont. I will take from you the gold for her passage from Merrytown.”

“But of course, sir!”

She gathers the will to speak. “He has stoneskin. A debt is owed. I am not Arya Stark.” The control required to open her mouth at all has exhausted her--the bleak hunger that is her, it shows in her voice.

“She is not Arya Stark,” says the voice. It has shifted, suddenly, to a neutral, assessing tone. The one who is no one thinks, muzzily, that she would have really liked to see Jorah Mormont’s reaction to the shift. “A debt is owed,” says the voice. “This girl’s...employer. He assumes the debts of all those that serve him. A cure can be found for you.”

Jorah Mormont is also full of despair. “I have searched, and searched, and all my searching leads me to Asshai. Your employer, he will come to the same conclusion. So I thank you, but no.”

She finds himself transferred to another set of arms. And then the smell...the clean smell. Thyme...

She is no one, and no one should not be disappointed that she does not smell the almost metallic tang of black-poison and blood (the old man won’t leave Braavos, it should not be expected). There is another smell that would have been nice, but that smell belongs to Arya Stark’s memories, along with the pine from no one’s hallucinations.

“Brother,” she grins, tries to grin, eyes still closed against the too-bright light. “Valar morghulis.”

Thyme, thyme by itself is wonderful.

“Valar dohaeris,” says a voice that does not match thyme.

“Valar dohaeris,” says another voice, and yet another.

None of the voices are familiar.

She tries to smell something, but they are too far away...and yet, and yet (some use, to having your mind ripped open by sorcerers, you can sense things...problem is shutting those things out) she knows she would smell lemongrass and dirt after rain, and harissa, and sage.

The light is cut off, abruptly, and she sighs in relief.

The Faceless Men have come for her.

“Sorcerers,” mutters Jorah Mormont. “You are sorcerers.”

“Some have called us such,” says the one who holds no one. Some things cannot be spoken of, to those that are not Faceless Men. But a debt is owed. She clutches at her brother, and he speaks the thing she wants to. “This is all we can say--there is one who can cure you. You are invited to come with us, to him. This girl also needs his help.”

I can feel the darkness in me. And yet I get worse every day. I am beyond even Jaqen’s help.

“A choice,” rasps the one who is no one. “Your Dany. Close to her. Asshai is far away.”
Jorah Mormont’s voice is hard, when he speaks again. “I have no reason to trust you, I have no idea who you are, who this girl pretending to be Arya Stark is.”

“Blind trust,” says the brother holding no one to him. “As this one trusted that you would not kill her, rape her, when she slept, even after you knew she was not Arya Stark.”

“No. I go to Asshai.”

A choice. And it is made.

Her self-appointed protector leaves.

The gratitude of Faceless Men takes many forms—they’ve given Jorah Mormont coin as a “reward”, that is the kind of gratitude he understands. But a debt is still owed—the order will learn his name.

“How did you know I would land here?” murmurs the one who is no one, as he surrenders Arya Stark’s face to the darkness. There is no answer.

He finds himself laid down somewhere. A bed. His eyes refused to focus. *What is wrong with me?*

“There is being a corruption to your blood,” says the brother. “Ambraysis dreamed for you. The sorcerers fed you upon the flesh of the phosphorescent fish from the Ash. There is no cure.”

Despair.

*The fish...unclean, unclean* no one knows very well there is no cure—it is not an infection, not a disease, it is a poison that contaminates everything it touches.

“Mercy, then, if you would please.”

“Not yet,” says his brother. “Not without the Many-Faced God taking a look, in person. You will be needing to see Jaqen.”

“We should not speak the name behind that name,” he whispers. *Thyme* is a Braavosi scent, but thyme will still understand. “Not unless he is ready to let us know.”

The other brother, *lemongrass*, he snorts. “Oh, He let us know—not that most of us hadn’t figured it out already, but He let us know He knows. Demanded you be taken to Him, no matter how the vote turned.”

“About time, I am saying,” says his Braavosi brother. “Not fair, his having two votes for hundreds of years, just because he didn’t want to think about it.”

*Vote. They voted on mercy.* “Didn’t pass?” asks no one, stripping his voice of any disappointment he may feel.

“Was pretty clear which way it was going to go,” says *harissa*, “got nullified at the last minute.”

*Jaqen intervened.* The thought should *not* please no one.

It does.

*Some of our brothers get so attached. Vote to deny me mercy, will they? Jaqen will give me what I am owed, at his own hand.* Loyalty, repaid, blood for blood. There is a pleasing symmetry to it—Jaqen recruited him. Jaqen will let him go.
“To Braavos, then,” whispers the one who is no one.

“No. Jaqen H’ghar is in Winterfell. With Arya Stark.”

Ah.

Made the wrong choice, Jorah Mormont--in Winterfell you’d have found a cure and a pardon if our sister’s name has any influence there still. A chance at the lordship of Bear Island, a chance at the hand of Daenerys Targaryen, not just her bed.

Instead you went to Asshai.

The one who is no one chuckles; the chuckle turns into full-blown laughter, breathy and uncontrolled, and frankly, hysterical.

Chapter End Notes

Holy hells.

Done. Take it. Tell me how you liked it? The dealing with Baelish (not done yet, but he won't show up again until the Dorne arc).

Will consolidate all parts of "Politics" into one chapter over the weekend.

Winterfell Stark Reunion Arc is almost finished :)

Next comes the "No One" Arc.
TYRION

The dwarf paces on top of the council table. The Queen’s Council--no set roles here--it has expanded. The Greyjoys, the Sands...

Lady Olenna Tyrell regards Tyrion with the kind of expression reserved for earthworms in her garden: disgusting but useful, and, ultimately, squishy. Tyrion ignores Varys’s wariness, or the open disgust on the face of the beautiful but insane dornish girl-child he’s been offered, tentatively, as a bride.

I’ve spoken the last vows I’ll ever speak. Though that’s neither here nor there, the one the vows were spoken to was married to another, then widowed by her own hand.

They are discussing--and by “discussing” Tyrion means they are disagreeing --on how they may amend the terms of Daenerys’s marriage to Jon Snow.

“This is useless,” says Ellaria Sand, glaring daggers at one of the pieces of parchment in consideration. But she will not raise her eyes to Tyrion.

Forgive me, Marcella.

He cannot afford punishment, or vengeance, or any one of the thousand things that child deserved. She deserved to live, dammit! But Tyrion sent her to Dorne. He trusted in many, one of them the woman that sits before him, to hold their hand in protection over the last innocent left in the world.

Ellaria Sand and Tyrion Lannister exist in a state of armistice; he holds the moral high ground, he balances on the sharp apex of a mountain. She has made an overture: her daughter, offered in veiled innuendo. He has made an overture: Ellaria Sand is still alive.

“I agree,” says Olenna Tyrell. “Snow and ice everywhere, damn barbarians in furs, what kind of agreement is that ?”

“Stupid, stupid, stupid, not a one of you is a strategist,” says Tyrion. “The biggest weapon in any commander’s arsenal is surprise. Do what the enemy does not expect, do what they would never expect. Landing in Dorne--and let’s not forget, our dear Asha’s uncle is sinking one in three ships in Dornish waters--land in Dorne, attack from the south. Cersei expects us to do that, since she has a cache of Wildfire ready to unleash upon Blackwater Bay as I did. Everyone expects us to land in Dorne.”

“So we must not,” says Dany.

Tyrion’s mouth twitches.
They underestimated the Queen, in the first few days--her beauty, her deceptive fragility. Her quietness, sometimes.

She is not quiet. She listens.

Grey Worm purses his lips, leans forward in that strange, intent Grey Worm way of his. “This is a good plan,” he says.

Tyrion sighs. “The Starks have always been excellent military commanders, and Jon Snow seems to be no different.”

“It’s a trap,” says Olenna Tyrell.

Tyrion snorts. “If there’s one thing you can rely on, it’s a Stark’s honor.”

Varys’s turn to speak. “The War of the Five Kings could have been avoided, had Eddard Stark fled the dungeons of King’s Landing.” He looks to Daenerys Targaryen. “He threw the Hand’s broach in Robert’s face, over the attempt on your life.” Varys shakes his head. “The Starks are honorable above all else.”

“And yet,” says Olenna Tyrell, her tone caustic, “it is Eddard Stark’s bastard,” she raises a hand in Ellaria Sand’s direction--not apology, not from Olenna, just an acknowledgement that she does not disparage the state of bastardy, “the bastard he sired on some whore that we argue the merits of.” She snorts. “Not as honorable as all that. This,” she gestures to the papers, “this is a trap.”

Tyrion exchanges a glance with Dany, then Varys. They know. It is time for the others to know.

There is a woman, one of many, that covers her head in the red of R’hllor’s novitiate. She goes by the name of “Tara” now.

Tyrion had known her as Jyana Reed.

Varys, who knew her first of all, knew her under a different name altogether: Ashara Dayne.

“I know everyone likes to talk,” says Tyrion, “but this will not be talked about outside this room.” He pins each and every member of the Queen’s council with his gaze. His voice lowers in volume, in timbre--a whisper commands where shouts go unheeded. “Everything--Daenerys’s claim to the crown of the Seven Kingdoms, Jon Snow’s support in the North, everything goes up in smoke if what we are about to tell you leaves this room.”

Trepidation. Calculation. Speculation. Many things ending with “ation”, but not even a flicker of jubilation, the thing that would have marked a traitor about to receive a gift.

So.

Varys sighs, looks down at the table-top as he speaks. “Eddard Stark did not sire a bastard.”

Looks, exchanged around the table. Surprise. Curiosity. Theon Greyjoy seems to be the most disturbed. His foster father.

“Eddard Stark,” says Varys, “did something unspeakably honorable.”

“Aegon,” breaths Ellaria Sand. “He saved Aegon Targ--”

“No,” interrupts Tyrion. He feels for the dornishwoman, sometimes, her fixating on that name is more proof of the depth of Ellaria Sand’s attachments. Elia Martell’s son, Ellaria’s lover’s nephew.
Did you think killing my niece balanced the scales? Then why kill your own nephew? He wonders if she has learned the truth of the world by now--killing doesn’t level the playing field, it digs everyone in deeper.

“He saved the son--the *legitimate* son--of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.”

Tyrion lets everyone have a few moments to digest the news.

“Legitimate?” asks Asha Greyjoy. “I thought Robert’s Rebellion…” Kidnapped and raped, that was the story.

“He loved her,” says Dany, introspective. “And she him.”

*Ashara Dayne wept, when she spoke of it.*

“Jon Snow does not know,” Tyrion says. “He has no way of knowing. I traveled with him to the Wall--he has no idea who his mother is, but he does not even suspect Eddard Stark was not his father. But he has precedence as heir, not Daenerys.”

Theon Greyjoy has lowered his head onto the table. *Didn’t treat him well, did you, Theon?*

“Obviously, our nephew has a kingdom of his own,” says Dany, “a kingdom he will not hold if news of his dragon blood is made common knowledge.” She smiles, tilts her head to a side. “I have walked barefoot through war and fire and blood to claim my crown. First in line, second in line, these things are minor--this is not the Dance of Dragons, all the dragons are mine. So all that this knowledge can be used for is to take the North out from under Jon Snow’s feet.”

“We will tell him, and soon,” says Tyrion. “I have the proofs.”

Olenna Tyrell is looking at Tyrion with new appreciation. “Trust in the Starks’ honor,” she murmurs, “*and* hold a hammer over their heads.” She smiles. “Good.”

“Our armada will make for White Harbor,” says Tyrion. “Winter is already upon us, and our cavalry is entirely unsuited to fighting in snow.”

“So is the infantry,” says Grey Worm. “So are the irregulars.”

Tyrion nods. “Jon Snow’s people will provide the training. Winterfell will provide the equipment. In return, we will bring them raw materials, food, coin as needed, thanks to the *selflessness* of the Iron Bank.” Sarcasm.

“I will also bring Cersei Lannister something,” says the Queen, and one side of her mouth draws up. “A surprise.”

Tyrion grins. “Nobody expects a Targaryen to attack from the *north*, after all.”

Dany smiles back at her Hand. “Snow and ash,” she murmurs. “We will rain down upon King’s Landing, and we will bury the Iron Throne. Once and for all.”

*Together, we will break the wheel.*
Most of the keep is asleep by the time the riders return. Winterfell has returned to its somnolent state, with the closing of the moot, the departure of the lords and their respective retinues.

It’s the first night Jon and Jaqen have joined the riders on patrol, and they’ve lost one of their number--three wights, one that lay still upon the ground until Natan relaxed his guard.

_Have the dead learned cunning?_

The Karstarks, then the Umbers. It needs to be soon--a moon, two at most, and the King must ride to war.

First, a visit to a small hamlet at the edge of the barrowlands, when their circuit takes them there. Bones, to be returned to Natan’s mother. A poor return, for the living, breathing son she entrusted to Jon Snow.

“Valar morghulis,” says Jaqen as they dismount from their horses (no Sansa with a horn tonight, too late). “There is a response to it, as well.”

“Melisandre used it once or twice,” says Jon. “I don’t...quite remember the words.”

“Valar dohaeris. All men must serve.”

Jon closes his eyes, lays his head against the side of his horse. “Wish they didn’t have to serve me.”

“Jon Snow also serves,” says Jaqen. “Who else will?”

Jon straightens. “The ones that could--wouldn’t wish it on them,” he says. They pass through the inner gates, cross the second courtyard, towards the family quarters. “The ones that _want_ it--can’t let them have it.” He grimaces as they come upon the innermost courtyard, with the King’s Tower at one end, the children’s wing on the other. “Will you join me for supper? Or will you to bed?”

Jaqen considers it, looks towards his own chambers--dark, all dark, no lanterns left burning. “A man must eat,” he says. “I will join, if it is not an imposition.”

“Your company would be most welcome,” says Jon. “Usually Sam stays up with me, but with Gilly in the keep…”

“The Maester has duties,” says Jaqen with a smirk.

A cold supper again, thin strips of dried meat and mushrooms, a loaf of bread they cut thick slices from. Many bottles of wine. They sit at the “war” table; Jaqen uses a Karstark marker to rest his knife against; it makes the king almost smile.

Jaqen supports _Jon_. Jaqen does not advise the King, he is _allied_ with the King and yet apart. A subtle distinction, but Jaqen and Arya make it all the same. _There is a simple solution to the Karstarks and Umbers_, Arya had suggested--such is the alliance offered by the House of Black and White, assasination, not advice. Sansa has a different ploy in mind to win Jon his war.

The King in the North has asked both his sisters to stay their hand.

Murder, poison, propaganda--Jon _will_ use these things, if the necessity arises. And yet he still holds out hope, that with his army arrayed before Karhold, they will submit. _Hold to honor until_
His father held to his honor until his head was on the chopping-block, can Jon Snow do less?

The talk turns from the repairs of Winterfell’s defenses, and Jon finds himself deep in discussion on a topic he has given much thought to over the past year.

“...a _set_ period of time, enforced abdication when it is done,” he is saying as he uses his teeth to pull the cork from yet another bottle.

Neither Sansa nor Samwell nor any of his riders even attempt to understand. “A _republic_,” Sansa had said, in the same tone she used for “rat droppings”. Most of the riders had just been baffled.

Jaqen is nodding. “This is the problem with the Free Cities as well--ruler for life.” He smirks. “The Faceless Men would lose many customers, of course, if the ambitious could just wait out a _set_ term.” Always a darker truth, with Jaqen.

“A world without assassination,” says Jon, wry. “However would we live?”

Jaqen chuckles. “I am not fond of kings,” he says. Neither is Jon, truth be told. “But democracy is not without its problems. The election process itself.” He shakes his head. “A pretty face, persuasive rhetoric--humans are susceptible to these things, more so when there is a mass of them that must be swayed.”

“This is it,” says Jon, pointing at Jaqen emphatically. _Too much wine, I’m using my hands to talk, like a dornishman_. “When an unpopular decision has to be made--we’re going to have to start rationing soon, people will _not_ like tightening their belts--if the King in the North had a limited term, the man who _next_ wants the crown could simply promise to eliminate the rations, get elected king.”

“People made a choice,” says Jaqen, shrugging. “Nobody but themselves to blame--no mad king whose doorstep the trouble may be laid at. _Eventually_ they will learn.”

Jon snorts. “In my experience people never blame themselves, and they never learn because anyone that _could_ have learned starved to death.”

“Valar morghulis,” says Jaqen.

Jon groans. “Is that your answer to everything?”

“Well,” says Jaqen, leaning back in the chair, “sometimes I say Valar dohaeris.”

Jon chortles, and it _is_ the wine because he cannot stop. “ _Valar_...” his eyes have closed, he’s laughing so hard, and Jaqen is laughing alongside him.

“No, Jon, no, listen,” says Jaqen. “I have an idea.”

“Alright, alright,” Jon attempts to focus. “I’m listening.”

“Haven’t discussed it with Arya yet,” Jaqen says. “But what if...it was the _mode_ of government that changed, so you don’t get too much of any _one_ evil? Kingship, tyranny, a republic, complete anarchy, theocracy.” He waves his hand. “And the mode _had_ to change every _set_ term? And then the appropriate ruler just...slotted into place? The bluest blood for King, the strongest arm for a tyranny, an election for the republic?”

“That’s _insane_,” says Jon. Shakes his head. “Everyone would just spend five years planning on
how they could be at the top in the next five.” He waves his hand, “fasting and praying if the next mode was a theocracy, building up an army for a tyranny.”

“Random. Make the mode random.”

“Long term, Jaqen,” says Jon. “We’ve got Long Night to deal with, how would anyone plan anything for the long term?”

Jaqen looks crestfallen. “Point,” he concedes. “Good I didn’t discuss it with Arya. Half-baked ideas…” he shakes his head.

There is something Jon wants to say, about Jaqen’s idea, but it’s a slippery thought, it slides out of his reach.

Jaqen is still talking about Arya. “She’d find a way to implement it, whether or not it should be implemented, and convince everyone it was the best thing to do. Like this Sealord thing.”

Jon raises an eyebrow. “You are not in support?”

“She convinces everyone, as I said,” Jaqen. “And yet I am divided. Political marriage is not the sort of service that should be expected of a Faceless Man.”

“Just a cover,” says Jon. “Didn’t you say that?”

“Something like that,” says Jaqen, then sighs. “Coming to terms with the Sealord tangle is easier than coming to terms with your marriage.”

*Truth in wine. I don’t like it either. Still have to do it.*

The other man sighs. “To my mind, an assassin, a prostitute, a mercenary--no difference between them. Death, sex, war--all products of the body, offered at a price. A clear transaction. It is honest.”

Jon blinks. “I...can see how it would be,” he says. He can, truthfully, but his thoughts may not be reliable. *Eight? Nine glasses?* He hasn’t been keeping count.

“But some political marriages,” says Jaqen, pouring himself another glass, topping up Jon’s, “nothing but prostitution where one or both parties end up giving everything--their bodies, their autonomy, their offspring, and they don’t get paid for it--some other entity, ‘family’ or ‘kingdom’ or ‘faction’ benefits.” A bitter smile twists Jaqen’s mouth. “There’s a word for similar arrangements, in Essos, and the word is not marriage.”

Jon thinks about this. Then he nods. “I am going to be Daenerys Targaryen’s sex slave.”

Jaqen’s turn, to give a bark of laughter.

“Getting paid in dragonfire,” offers Jon. “Hopefully. And she gets...what did I offer her again?”

Jaqen throws his head back against the chair, looks like he is trying to recall. “Surprise,” he says. He levers his head upright. “She’s also getting Jon Snow.”

“A bastard,” says Jon.

“She’s a Valyrian,” says Jaqen, and this time it is him that sounds like he is saying “rat droppings”, as if Jon is getting the poorer end of the bargain here.
Jon purses his lips. “I hear Valyrians were very pleasing to the eye,” he offers hesitantly.

“She is rumored to be the most beautiful woman in the world,” Jaqen replies, and his sardonic smile is back.

“You don’t agree.”

Jaqen shakes his head. “I married the most beautiful woman in the world. You can have the second-most,” he allows generously.

“*Theocracy,*” says Jon, leans his elbows on the table. “That’s what I wanted to say earlier. About your idea. Make it a theocracy, and people can vote on the religion they want to follow—religious laws, all of them. Moral, just, all of that.”

Jaqen is peering at him as if he’s lost his mind. “You want people to change their religion every five years? Nevermind that religious laws are some of the most unethical I’ve ever seen?”

“No, no, it would work,” says Jon. “All the gods are the Many-Faced God, right? So every five years you can choose—the Old Gods are clan-gods, clan hierarchy. The faith of the Seven supports Baelor’s mode of kingship, the Braavosi death god for democracy and so on.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” says Jaqen. “It somehow takes my terrible idea and makes it worse.”

But Jon is not done. “...and there would be long-term plans because the god will oversee everything. God of death, Jaqen, fear would keep all the rulers in check.”

Jaqen looks appalled. Horrified, actually. “What did he do,” he asks plaintively, “that made you hate the Many-Faced God so much?”

That sets off Jon’s laughter again. Jaqen opens his mouth, but he pauses mid-word, his attention caught by something over Jon’s shoulder. Jon follows Jaqen’s gaze. Flickering light—lantern moving. *Arya’s room?*

“Arya’s awake,” says Jaqen, and his brow is furrowed. “She’s coming here.” They exchange a look, and get to their feet. Unsteady.

Holding the wall from time to time, Jon makes his way down the stairs, hauls open the door. The blast of cold air to his face sobers him. Not much.

*Arya* is running across the courtyard. *Bare feet.*

She halts in front of the door.

“Boots!” Jon says. She’s not wearing a cloak either, *has she been at the wine as well?*

Jaqen comes around Jon’s side, and his gait looks steady, doesn’t need to hold the wall at all. *Assassin. I’d call “unfair” but he had less than me. I think. Maybe more.*

“You’re drunk,” says Arya, staring at Jaqen. “You’re actually drunk.”

“Yes, lovely girl,” says Jaqen, a trifle impatient. “It drowns the thing.”

*Not just to keep me company then. What thing?*

“You are better,” says Jaqen, apologetic now, “break you, if it goes on much longer.”
Oh. Jon flushes. No. Didn’t hear that.


Cold wind, blowing over his thoughts, it freezes the wine, the muzzy-headedness, into focused thought. “A warg dream?” asks Jon. But she lost Nymeria.

Arya raises her hand, helpless—she doesn’t know.

“How many Heart Trees beyond the wall?” asks Jaqen.

Jon’s jaw clenches at the thought, at the search required, impossible, if it is a true dreaming. “Very many,” he says.

“Weirwood,” says Jaqen.

“I’m coming with you,” says Jon. They turn on him, in unison, considering. “I’m coming,” he says.

Arya nods. “Another warg,” she murmurs. “Could be helpful.”

“Doesn’t matter if I’m helpful,” says Jon. “I’m coming. It’s Bran. And you—boots, cloak, are you mad running around the snow in bare feet?”

They kneel before the Heart Tree, and Arya has her hand upon the face, her head bowed.

“Nothing,” she says. “Except the murmuring.”

Jon has already had a turn. He doesn’t even hear this “murmuring” she speaks of.

Arya moves aside, and Jaqen kneels beside her, his turn, to raise his hand to the face carved into the wood. Might as well, can’t hurt to try.

“Too many,” Jaqen murmurs. “Cannot tell which one, where.”

Jon blinks. Still drunk? Him? Me? No. A cold certainty snakes up his spine, straightens his shoulders. There is some strangeness to Jaqen. He has magic. A sorcerer?

Another thought: a priest, of the Many-Faced God, as Melisandre was a priestess of R’hllor.

Of course he has power. Jon curses himself for not making the connection before.

“Warg,” says Jaqen, and his voice is a command not an observation. “You will smell him. I cannot.”

“Warg into what?” Arya asks.

“Me.”

“I could barely warg into Nymeria on command by the end, you want me to enter you?”

Jaqen’s brow is furrowed in consternation. “Stark blood calls to Stark blood.” He looks at her. “I can provide a conduit. A girl must try.”
“No,” she says, “When I warged into Nymeria, I had access to her senses, not the other way around. A girl has a better idea,” she says. “Jon,” and Jon finds himself startled at being addressed, “turn around,” she commands.

“What?”


“What are you going to do?” he asks in a whisper.

“Wights are after him, Jon, we don't have time!”

Jon nods, stifles all questions, closes his eyes. And he turns his back on them.

This is Jaqen, and Arya, and still his shoulders crawl--he no longer sits with his back to doors, to open windows, does not allow people to corner him in narrow places.

Jaqen, and Arya.

And still some part of him knows he just turned his back on two assassins, and there are multiple knives upon their person.

A cold, cold wind suddenly rises--the trees break the wind, most often, he does not know where it is coming from. It rises, and terror rises with it.

*Turn around, turn around.*

“*And do not look behind you, no matter what happens,*” she had said.

He chants the justifications in his head, to avoid giving into the fingers of cold dread stroking his neck: they are using dark magic to find Bran. *They are on my side...Bran’s side.*

The wind rises to a howling gale, whipping up snow around him; the world is blinding white, and Jon thinks he couldn’t have turned around now if he’d *wanted* to, such is the force of the wind pushing at his back. But beneath the wind, like shadows creeping up upon him, a sense of vastness, a gaping maw.

A sudden scent. Ginger, and cloves, like winter-wine spices from the south. A *cacophony* of scent, carried on the wind, scents he has no name for. The snow is howling around him now, and there should be light, *some* light, the lantern in his hand is still burning behind its protective glass shields, but it gives off no light.

There’s something behind him, some fell creature wrought of the night, of the gnashing of teeth and blade, and it will eat the whole world.

*Don’t look. Don’t look.* His skin crawls.

In the end the justification to not give in, it comes down to their names: *It’s Jaqen, and Arya.* He repeats it over and over in his mind: *just Jaqen and Arya, doing strange magic. Nothing else. Jaqen and Arya.*

He holds his ground.

The wind drops off.

And he hears Bran’s voice. *Almost, almost* he turns.
Don’t look. Don’t turn around.

“Don’t kill Jon, don’t kill Jon,” Bran is pleading, a whisper, a breathy, unsteady whisper.

“That is not to be allowed,” says Jaqen.

“They’ll chain him up, they will burn them all, Arya, tell him not to kill Jon.”

“He cannot hear me,” says Jaqen.

“Shut up, Bran!” Arya finally snaps. “Just shut up and tell us where you are! Nobody is killing Jon.”

“North of the Wall,” says Bran. “Seventy-nine dead men are watching me.” The last is a quiet whisper, fading.

“Bran!” Arya calls. “We’re coming to get you. We’re coming, you hear? Don’t you fucking dare die on me!”

Silence.

There is a rustle behind him, cloth.

“You may look, Jon,” says Arya. Her voice sounds cold, so cold. Jon turns, and finds both Jaqen and Arya as he’d left them, on their knees before the tree. Arya is buttoning up her blouse; Jon consigns that to the least strange thing that has occurred here--there are tears freezing upon Jaqen’s face. Arya looks unmoved. Almost cruel, the glint in her eye.

“He’s dead?” asks Jon in a whisper. Please, please no. Not in the cold.

Jaqen shakes his head, looks away, then rises to his feet in a single, smooth motion. “Alive. For now.” He smiles at Jon, and there is such desolation in his eyes, Jon wants to weep and he knows not why. “All magic has its price, Jon Snow,” says Jaqen--he has interpreted the look on Jon’s face. “This one is more benign than most, a few tears, sadness. It passes.”

“Just an illusion, is it?” asks Arya, her voice devoid of anything at all, as she gets to her feet. “You are a liar, Jaqen H’ghar.”

“Told you I had no idea what I was doing.” He touches her forehead, tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, so very, very tenderly. And then he turns to Jon and all trace of vulnerability has vanished from his eyes. “He is within sight of the wall. That narrows the area that must be searched. We must ride out tonight.”


“Wights, it seems,” says Jaqen. “He may be able to hide from them.” There is bleakness to Jaqen’s words, as if he is already consigning himself to failure.


Footsteps, crunching through the freshly disturbed snow.

Sansa, holding a lantern aloft.

“Arya? Jaqen? Sentry came to tell me you’d left the Keep...”
She comes into view, looks startled to find Jon there as well. Neither Arya’s bluntness, nor Jaqen’s
evasive, suggestive answers will do...Jon preempts their explanation. “Arya dreamed of Bran,
Sansa, we rushed down here--he’s alive.”

Joy. Uncertainty.

“She’s north of the Wall, near the Nightfort.”

“That place,” Sansa whispers, a hand rising towards her mouth, stopped, lowered.

**Accursed.** More uncanny magic, more horror. “We ride out tonight, and we will push the pace as
much as we can,” says Jon.

And that’s when Samwell runs up, huffing and puffing, snow soiling, crusting on the hem of his
robe as he holds his own lantern aloft. “So,” says Samwell Tarly, “What did I miss?”

They take a mount and a remount each--a troop of four. Him, Samwell, Jaqen, Arya.

Take too long to muster others, sort through them for loyal men that have been north of the Wall
before, ones that will not soil themselves at the mere thought of going beyond that icy defense.

**The king is being irresponsible.** Sansa’s tight-lipped silence speaks volumes, but Sandor makes his
opinion known, loudly, and often. The king cannot risk his life, the life of the Maester, to go north
of the Wall, the place where the wights come from.

**The king is gaining a reputation for foolhardiness.** Stupidity. Jon Snow doesn’t give a fuck. It is
the first time he has used the full weight of whatever imagined authority he has to coerce Sansa
(not fair, Bran is her brother too), Davos, **everyone** into cooperation.

It helps, Jaqen standing there, visibly armed and armored. Waiting. The story of Harrenhal,
extracted in dribbles from Arya (and still not complete). *How many men has Jaqen killed?* Jaqen’s
presence, dark, Arya’s beside him: **Queen Nymeria in the flesh**.

The King in the North gets his way.

They make no camps, the sleep upon the snow in bedrolls, chew hard-tack out of saddlebags, drink
when the horses do, out of buckets of slush.

Ghost lopes beside them; there will be no wolves to deal with, no wights that will come upon them
while they are unaware.

“Fifteen days, if we push,” murmurs Jon. The snow is unbroken in many places, the pace slows to a
crawl.

“Then who knows how much after, searching for him,” says Arya.

And that is all the conversation they can have before they must ride again.

Jon sets a relentless pace, Rickon’s face fixed into a death-grin in his memory. At the next stop, he
is surprised that everyone is keeping up. Samwell has not been softened too much in Oldtown; he
is taking a battering, but he keeps up.

The moon sets, and they must slow, then stop entirely. There are traps under the snowdrifts, the
footing is not certain without at least the moonlight to guide them; what use, finding his brother, if
he loses his sister in the process?
Arya builds a hollow in the snow, and coaxes a small fire out of the tinder and wood-shavings. Jaqen lights a torch from the fire, holds it aloft as she works.

She suspends a small, black crucible over the flame; the walls of the hollow protect the flame from the wind.

She’s melting snow. The snowmelt boils, eventually, and she pulls a vial from the bandolier she wears under her cloak. One, two drops from the vial.

The water turns an oily, lurid green under the yellow of the torchlight.

She counts. “...four. Three. Two.” She removes the crucible from the fire using the hem of her cloak to protect her hands, then divides about half of it into the horse-buckets. The rest has cooled—she takes a sip, passes it to Jaqen. He, too, drinks, and the crucible is handed to Jon.

“Two mouthfuls, no more,” she says.

Jon takes a deep breath, then drinks. One. Two. Sweetness, and salt underneath it, a cloying taste that is not...unpleasant. At all. He passes the crucible to Sam.

“Dare I ask what this is?” asks Samwell.

“A stimulant,” says Arya. “It will keeps us from needing to sleep, from feeling fatigue.”

*Fire in the veins.* His mind is clearing, his eyes, dry and burning from the cold, feel as if they’ve had three nights of good sleep. He can rise, fight a dozen wights.

“*Fuck,*” Jon breathes.

He lurches to his feet, and the pain, the saddle-numbness, the weary ache of his joints... *gone, all gone.*

Jaqen speaks up. “It is very addictive,” he says. “And we will have to keep taking it every night, increasing the dosage each time. When it stops...you will fall to the ground and sleep where you lie. For days.”

Arya crouches before the fire, and considers Ghost. “I don’t know if it’s safe for him,” she says. “Wolves, dogs, they don’t respond the same as us.”

Jaqen considers it, then turns to Jon. “He’s much smaller than Nymeria,” says Jaqen. “Will he keep up?”

Jon purses his lips. “He can, but not...not for fifteen days, with us switching horses every few leagues.” He smiles at Ghost. “It is no matter. He will find me eventually--sometimes he goes off, I don’t see him for a month.”

Arya smiles, a quick flash of white teeth. “Nymeria was like that too. Couldn’t make her *listen.*”

Jaqen snorts, and Arya throws a small handful of snow her husband’s way, which he avoids with ease.

Jon stretches, and Jaqen speaks again. “Be careful Jon,” the assassin warns. “The stimulant only makes it *feel* as though you are fine. Your body is going to push itself beyond its normal limits; you can damage yourself and not realize it.”

*Does it matter, if we can find Bran?*
Samwell is looking at the crucible dubiously. He looks up at Jon, standing straight.

“Drink it,” Jon says.

Sam drinks. The horses slurp happily from their buckets.

“The horses will have to be put down, once this is done,” says Arya. “I’m sorry.”

“They would have to be put down in either case,” says Jon. “As hard as I was planning on riding...As long as we find Bran...”

_You make the impossible possible. Ask your god to intervene for us, Arya._

Jon has never asked for intervention from any god before, not unless half-hearted wishes wished at a Heart-Tree counts as “prayer”.

_Ask him not to take Bran yet._

Their god is real, this much Jon believes. And surely the Many-Faced God will not be as helpless as them, Jon and Arya and Jaqen and Sam, riding through the dark night, trusting to blind luck and their horses’ instincts to keep them alive.

_Please don’t take Bran._

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**HIM OF THE MANY FACES**

The Wall looms before them. It has been growing in his mind for the past ten days, it was a line of white fire at the horizon, but now it _looms_.

The Wall murmurs at Him, it shouts, it whispers, entwining about Him.

He has pulled up the reins, stopped short.

“Jaqen?” Arya calls. She’s turned her horse, she’s coming closer. “Jaqen?”

“The dead,” He whispers, and some part of Him knows He speaks High Valyrian, He has fallen to the speech-patterns of his birth and He cannot find it in himself to care. “They chained the dead.”

His awareness, it reaches out, spools out of him like threads pulled mercilessly into a loom. He stretches towards the Wall.

First He crosses Jon Snow, who has wheeled his horse around, and stands facing Him of the Many Faces.

Jon Snow has stopped breathing, he is staring, shock-still, into the god’s eyes.

Jon Snow is the smallest of His concerns at the moment.

The god is drawn. Drawn and quartered, between His body and the pleas, his bride, and _rage_.

She moves.

She reaches, covers His eyes with the soft, sword-calloused, fragrant skin of her palm.

He swallows air like water, chokes on it, and winds Himself _in_ , around her, she is the spindle of
Him, and he winds till He rests within the boundaries of His own flesh once again.

She draws her hand away from his face.

Too late.

Jon is looking at him. “I know you,” Jon whispers. “I know you.”

“Why did we stop?” Samwell Tarly has ridden up. “What’s going on?”

Him of the Many Faces finds in Himself no fortitude to manage Samwell Tarly’s sensibilities, to juggle secrets and right-to-know.

Her hand is on His shoulder, steadying Him.

“Dead men in the Wall,” says the god, and His words are meant for Jon. “Corpses in the foundation. The dead, to guard against the dead!” He wheezes with laughter. “No dead thing may pass.”

“There’s that legend,” offers Tarly. “Seventy-Nine Sentinels.”

The Many-Faced God throws His head back and laughs, black laughter oddly muffled by the snow, it has no resonance to it, just dull, staccato, percussion that is absorbed by the stark landscape around them, carried away by the wind. “Seventy-nine?” He asks.

Jon is silent, and horror is swiftly overtaking the stunned, wondering look on his face.

“Buried alive,” offers Him of the Many Faces, a smile distorting his face. “Dead, and brought back, and chained to the ice. Forever suspended between dying and darkness, held at the pinpoint of tension that the Wall may hold.” He grins. “For eight thousand years.”

Arya leans over the side of her horse, retches. Once, twice, before she regains a hold of herself.

The god closes his eyes, listens to the whispers. “They can sense you,” He murmurs, “when you walk on their graves, up high on the ramparts.”

The King in the North finally finds his voice. “How many?” asks Jon.

“Anyone the builder could get his hands on,” says Him of the Many Faces. A hundred leagues of wall. “Thousands, Jon Snow.”

“It is abomination,” Arya snarls. “It must be torn down.”

Samwell’s head snaps to her, stunned, as if he cannot believe what he’s just heard.

“You can’t tear down the Wall!” Tarly is frantic. “Even if you could, what’s wrong with all of you?”

“I am weak here,” says Him of the Many Faces to his bride. “Death, denied. As in Asshai. I will have no power once we reach the Wall.” He chuckles, shakes his head. “We ride towards it to find Brandon Stark, and yet only the Maester here,” and he gestures to the horrified, bewildered Tarly, “only he can find him. You, and I, and Arya, King in the North, we cannot pass beyond the Wall.”

Jon’s gaze crosses the god’s again, and it is as if some part of His vision, some forgotten memory in Jon Snow, it bridges the gap between them for a moment.
A white field under their feet, a black sky overhead, and the shadows of the dead, straining towards the darkness.

Jon Snow strains with the dead.

He lowers his head into his hands. “Before Arya came,” he says, “before she and Sansa wept over me. I would see a parapet, and see myself jumping from it. Even now duty carries me forward, but I long to lay it down, and sleep and never wake up.” His voice breaks. “Death is better. Don’t you understand, Sam? Death comes for us all, in the end. The wights are puppets, reanimated corpses, but even they are better off than me.”

Dismay, on Samwell’s face, utter dismay.

Sympathy, on Arya’s, and fear. “Jon,” she whispers, “if you jump off a parapet, you may break every bone in your body but you’ll keep coming back. R’hllor’s ‘gift’,” she spits on the ground.

Him of the Many Faces is moved, despite Himself. He walks His horse forward, lays a hand on Jon’s head, His fingers rake through the curled, dark hair, wet with snow. He bends down, whispers in Jon’s ear. “You have but to ask.”


“I forgot you too,” murmurs the Many-Faced God, and pulls away, his horse side-stepping to Arya’s side.

Samwell is looking back and forth between them, he could not have heard the exchange, he can only try to read the looks on their faces.

Him of the Many Faces lets it be. Arya offered Samwell Tarly a choice, went against My will to do so.

“We were so proud,” says Jon bitterly. “Bran the Builder! A Stark!”

“Jon, what are you saying?” asks Samwell, he’s begging now. “Listen to yourself!”

The god listens to the Wall.

There must always be a Stark. They look for the blood. They seek it. To hurt, to rend?

No.

Few and far between, those wisps of coherence, most of the voices have forgotten how to speak, forgotten everything except a primal screaming that tears at His ears.

But the few coherent whispers that are left…

“They seek their King,” says Him of the Many Faces. “For as long as there is a Stark on the Wall, surely, surely their suffering will come to an end soon.”

Who is their King? You, or the Other beyond the Wall? Who will claim the damned and the betrayed?

The Many-Faced God’s mouth twists as he looks at Jon Snow. And He sees a thing in the King--

Jon Snow twists with the god as well as the dead.
They are, all of them, all chained to the cold ground.

“*I am the King in the North,*” says Jon, his mouth a grim, hard line. He turns back to Sam. “Every man has a limit. Ground he will not surrender. I will surrender *everything,* Sam, but this is *my* stand. My limit.” Jon straightens his spine. “The Wall must fall.” The King’s words are stone, stone and steel. “Even if the Night’s King takes us all in the end.”

*Ratified, Jon Snow.*

*Ratified.*

*And Anointed.*

---

**SAMWELL**

The familiar thrill of finding himself in the presence of something magical is entirely absent in Samwell’s panic. The White Door inset into the Wall at the Nightfort, the speaking of the words, it almost doesn’t register at all.

His mind churns with fear, gut-rotting despairing fear. What has Jaqen H’ghar done to Jon? Magic. Some magic to control Jon’s mind. But Jon is still Jon. Jon must be made to listen.

“Who is he,” Samwell had pointed to Jaqen, “a murderer, just...nothing...who is he to tell you what is and is not inside the Wall? *Think.*”

Jon’s brow had furrowed in confusion for a moment as he looked towards Jaqen H’ghar—for a moment Samwell had had hope. And then Jon spoke, and though Jon still sounded uncertain he spoke with a strange conviction Sam hadn’t been able to penetrate. “He is a face of the Many-Faced God,” Jon had said. “I will not question the validity of his word.”

*A face of the Many-Faced God?* Samwell scoffs. He’s found no evidence that any god except R’hllor exists. Lady Arya--she has done what the Red Woman couldn’t (despite having resurrected Jon). Lady Arya has managed to convert the King to this cult of death.

*The old ways. Jon has to return to the old ways, for the North.*

There shouldn’t have been enough *time* for them to indoctrinate Jon, not enough to draw him away from his people.

Cold horror: *Jon said he wanted to take down the Wall! If that* doesn’t count as being “taken away from your people”, Sam is not sure what *does.*

Jon turns had turned to Sam, and it was as if his friend was no more, absorbed by the thing Jon had always called a fiction: *The King in the North.* “We will make for the Nightfort,” Jon had commanded, then immediately contradicted his own tone. “I will not ask it of you--it is too much to ask of a man alone. We will see if we can see any sign of Bran from atop the wall.”

*Jon’s still in there somewhere. Jaqen H’ghar will not kill my friend, not again. I will not allow it.*

“I’ll do it,” Samwell had said. “I’ll go, Jon, I’ll go. Range beyond the wall to fetch your brother. But you’ll owe me. And you will listen to me.”

Samwell leads his horse a ways from the Wall, looks over his shoulder. Too dark to see anything—but there is torchlight, far above, casting a shine in long, furrowed ridges down the Wall.
He curses himself—all that time in the ravensloft, time spent planning with Lady Sansa when he should have stuck to Jon’s side like a shadow. All the times Jaqen H’ghar rode to “find wights” with Jon, all the meals, and the conversations on the battlements, the sparring --he knows Jon had joined the assassins’ “training”, along with Sandor, thought nothing of it at the time.

All this time, Jaqen H’ghar was burying his hooks deeper into the King.

And the king’s own sister, she made it possible, she encouraged it, she caused it. A Stark, betraying another? Jon used to speak so fondly of Lady Arya, less so of Lady Sansa. A reversal. Jon was obviously never the best judge of character. The “cruel and aloof” sister works tirelessly on Jon’s behalf, the “fiercely loyal” sister works to shred Jon’s reason.

Jaqen H’ghar killed Pate, and took his face. This has been all but confirmed by Lady Arya. I have to tell Jon. Every single thing he knows about Pate, the murder, the blackmail.

The face of a god? Jaqen H’ghar is no such thing. He is a murderer, a sorcerer, a manipulator of men.

Samwell Tarly mounts his horse, and heads towards the Weirwood closest to the Wall. The plan is for him to see if Bran is there, then ride back to the Nightfort; he can ride again the next “day”, to the next further Weirwood.

Samwell Tarly is not interested in following a plan Lady Arya came up with. He compromises—he drinks the potion she has given him, dribbles it drop-by-drop into his mouth when his strength flags.

I’m going to find Brandon Stark. No matter how long it takes. Alive or dead, I’m going to bring him back. And then Jon will forgive me anything. He knows the weeping, the self-recrimination over Rickon’s death. If I bring Bran back, Jon will forgive me before I even start speaking.

He keeps an eye open for wights, for White Walkers, for Coldhands, the strange person that had helped him and Gilly before. Surely Coldhands can help him find Bran.

Samwell Tarly forsook the faith of the Seven when he joined the Night’s Watch. He will pray, he has decided, as he has not since he took the black. He will beg the Weirwood for a way to defeat Jaqen H’ghar.

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HIM OF THE MANY FACES

They find shelter for the horses—the stables are one of the first buildings Stannis Baratheon repaired, and a year’s worth of neglect has not yet made them uninhabitable.

Arya had ridden beside him the rest of the way to the Wall. “Beloved,” she had said, not High Valyrian, not any language Samwell Tarly would understand, “we need answers before we take action.”

She’d raised her hands, cupped the Wall, horizon to horizon, in the hollow of her palm, and He had known: she is the wind.

“Why was the Wall built in the first place?” she’d asked. “The wind believes no human managed that magic, though humans may have gone into the making of it.”
“There is a similar structure in Volantis,” He had replied. “Dragons were used to forge it.”

“Others, then, by elimination” she’d said. “Their magic, winter and ice and cold. And why would they help build it if the whole purpose was to keep them out of Westeros?”

And there, there had lain the key, the twist, the thing that detached Him from His domain.

She’d summoned objectivity out of Him of the Many Faces.

_I am no one._

And so the whispers, the pleas for mercy, they still call out to the god, but the god is nowhere to be found.

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**ARYA**

Half-hearted repairs, under Stannis Baratheon’s rule, they still litter the Nightfort. They’ve found a room with a solid floor, a hearth already laid for a lord that will never come to this place again. Jon’s turn, to light the fire. He says he thinks Ghost is close now, but he cannot be sure. He will send his direwolf north in Samwell Tarly’s trail as soon as Ghost makes his way to the Nightfort.

She hopes Samwell Tarly will be in a better frame of mind by the time he returns. Paranoia has made him a creature entirely opposite to the Samwell Tarly Jaqen had known--this Samwell makes assumptions without asking questions, he revels in his biases. Twice more she had sought him out, at Winterfell, offering truths. Twice more he had refused to listen. _You have a clever mind, Maester. Use it, save us the trouble of having to replace Jon’s right hand._

Jaqen pretends he doesn’t care what Samwell Tarly thinks, says that if the Maester will be a problem, well, _he_ at least can be granted a swift death.

_Then bring him back, and see how he likes it._ The wind is a cruel thing but even for her the statement is but a sour jest.

Her beloved lies with His head in her lap, His feet stretched out before Him, towards the center of the room. Their roles have been reversed, it seems--He cannot hold on to the nothingness, He cannot play at being no one with any consistency.

_The dead keep finding him._

Jon sits in the corner closest to the hearth, propped up against the two walls.

She strokes, strokes, strokes His hair; she makes a small breeze whisper things into his ears that would have made even her blush, had they been said aloud.

“Don’t stop,” he murmurs, when she pauses to see the effect she is having. She cannot see any of the telltale signs of desire in him, he is not no one, she should see _something_. “Don’t stop,” he says again.

She continues. _Want you to fill all of my holes, fill me up with your seed. Want you to take me back to the Crossroads, bend me over Gendry’s anvil and fuck me till I bleed. Want you…_

And she realizes what she gives him is _noise_, calibrated, calculated to counter the sound of the
dead. Each neutralizes the other, sound and sound somehow adding to nothing in Him.

She is relieved. I am helping.

The breeze continues whispering into the god’s ear. She would have blushed, had she to do this without the wind, because Jon is watching them. But she is more wind than Arya Stark, the wind is stronger here and she is not entirely certain it could not cross the Wall.

Jaqen has been wrong before.

“You are a...priest, of the darkness, Jaqen? I saw...I saw it in your eyes. I do not understand.” The mantle of authority Jon wears, the “king”, her brother has left it at the door.

He is a face of the Many-Faced God, Jon had said.

Jon recognized the darkness but he could not have known its form, its structure, not unless he was told. Jon described Jaqen in a way that could be made to fit a priest, or an agent of the god. And in so speaking, all unknowing, her brother spoke the thing that is most true of all.

Jaqen opens his eyes, looks up at her. “Beloved?” He’s asking her for permission? No, not permission. Consensus.

“Everything,” she says. “As you see fit.”

Jaqen shifts--head still in her lap, but face turned towards Jon. “Not a priest,” He says gently. “Me. In the flesh, as it were.”

Jon exhales, and his eyes look a little less bewildered. “I thought so,” he says, shakes his head. “But you’re…” he gestures to them. “Lying in my sister’s lap.”

“Even a god is allowed to be comfortable,” says Him of the Many Faces, quite reasonably.

Jon snorts, despite himself. “You are dead, like me?” he asks Arya. Trepidation, for what he expects the answer to be.

Jaqen replies for her. “Not like you,” he says. “I do not know what was done to you.” Sadness. “When I kill one of my own they enter the darkness for the space of an eyeblink--”

“Felt longer,” Arya says.

“Yes, it was for you,” He replies, looks up. “You didn’t let go.”

The memory is still soft, blurred, but she remembers: an eternity, walking beside Him in the darkness, nothing-and-yet-not, the idea of them, like arc-lightning each time their gaze fell upon the other’s. A vast forest of white trees with black leaves, the face-- their face, carved into each one. Yours. Mine.

“The torment you describe, Jon,” she says to her brother, “I do not experience it.” She places a hand on her breast. “Here. I carry the darkness within me. All Faceless Men do. It...” she tries to find the words, “Like the others, I pledged my service to the god in exchange for vengeance. The darkness taught me mercy, it taught me to be fearless.”

At least, it did, until we learned there exist things worse than death. Their brother who came out of Asshai--the terror in him, it is not a spell, she thinks, it is a response to having had that “worse” thing shown to him in the faces of his brothers.
“Didn’t think you needed to be taught fearlessness,” says Jon, wry. His humor is returning.

“More courage than sense,” says Him of the Many Faces. “Arya Stark has ever been so.”

“You…” Jon makes a vague gesture with his hand, “My Lord? Div--”

“Have a heart,” interrupts the god.

“No bowing and praying then?” asks Jon, wry.

Jaqen’s turn to snort. “You start that, I will retaliate, and you will drown in the ‘Your Majestys’ and ‘Your Graces’.”

Arya had sensed her brother and husband had been growing upon each other. But she is mildly surprised at the extent of it. He is still “Jaqen” to Jon. And Jaqen, Jaqen has found the equality He so craves for the most sacred of His faces.

“If ‘Jaqen’ was good enough for my mother,” says the god, “it’s good enough for everyone else.”

“Mother?” asks Jon. That word is a sharp one for her brother, the line of a knife upon his skin.

“Hmm.” Him of the Many Faces settles against her.

The wind still whispers to Him; it’s affecting her, she can feel the wetness between her legs, the subtle tingle of His touch through layers of clothes, everywhere. He is merciful, Him of the Many Faces, he will reward her patience, she thinks.

“I was born in Valyria,” the god begins. “A few decades before its fall…”

Jon listens, rapt. Asks fewer questions than she would have, but then nobody tried to make it into a coherent story for her, just lessons and half-truths she had to puzzle out in the wake of disjointed memories. The training of one who is meant to be Lorathi, she realizes now.


“Somebody named their dragon ‘Valgorix the Crusher’?” asks Jon, incredulous.

“No sense of subtlety, Valyrians,” says Jaqen.

“But you rode your Bantis,” says Jon. “You were a dragonlord.”

“I suppose,” mutters Jaqen.

He’s focusing quite a bit on Valyria, far more than is comfortable for Him. He does it for Jon. The god has decided to tell her brother, then, of his parentage. She does not disagree; the time for lies is over.

He will come to know his mother, at least.

We will take away his father in exchange.

And so Jaqen gives Jon something, a connection to Him as a brother, some unspecified kinship of blood, of a people. Compensation for Eddard Stark. Not poor compensation at that, but then “father” is a very, very hard thing to compensate for.
“Bantis was a strange creature,” Jaqen says, “couldn’t make flame--he was capable, he’d do it if startled into it as a dragonling, but he could be startled less and less as he grew.” Jaqen’s mouth twists. “It happens, such anomalies--cripples, runts. It was only unusual that it happened to a H’ghar,” and there is so much disdain in that name out of His mouth. “Tried to make me make him, and all that.” Jaqen dismisses a decade of abuse, the thin white whip-scars on His back, with a wave. “One thing led to another, found myself in the slave pits.”

“They prayed for death in the pits,” says Arya. “though they called Him by many names. And Jaqen gave mercy, and the god awakened in him.”

Jon’s brow is furrowed. “But there was death before…” he trails off.

“Arya had better explain,” says Jaqen. “She explained it to me in a way even I would understand.” Jaqen’s hand rises, clutches at her hair for a moment before letting go. “This mind of hers,” he shakes his head. “She dances circles around me, most times.”

He is allowed his delusions, as long as they are mild ones.

“Sheer luck, that the Stark blood dominates.” The god mutters the last under His breath. It has been confirmed, surreptitiously--Jon is not immune to fire, but he feels the frigid air less than he should. The mingling of Stark with Valyrian blood is on both of their minds--she bled, this last sevenday, a relief to the both of them; a piercing sorrow, shared, for a might-have-been.

She continues to forego the moon-tea, he continues to spill his seed within her.

Thoughts for another day.

He has assigned her a task.

So.

“The forces that underpin the world,” she says, “do not require worship. What goes up must come down. What is alive must die. These things do not require men to exist, but they have no minds of their own either. The next part I do not comprehend the entirety of it--there is this brother we have, he’s in Leng?” she asks Jaqen. Jaqen makes a noncommittal sound. Fair, the whereabouts of Varro Massag are not Jon Snow’s to know, “a mathematician,” she continues, “a theoretician of sorts, he’ll be able to help me figure it. But in the meantime, what I understand--human worship, human anthropomorphization, it forces complexity onto the natural force. Layer upon layer, attribute upon attribute. This complexity is centered--like a knot--around certain places. Events. The slave-pits in Valyria, where hundreds of thousands prayed for death. And then should a mind come that can match the knot, complexity for complexity, unravel its core,” mercy, “and enough blood is spilt, the god will awaken in that mind.”

There is something else to it. Something that is missing. Who prays to the wind? Did she just step into the absence created by His withdrawal from the world? Where role does the blood-sacrifice play?

Why does R’hllor not awaken?

Bran may have the answers. Legends are not to be trusted--they’re not accurate, for a warg, so why should one expect accuracy for a greenseer? And yet, and yet Jaqen believes Bran is the key. And so she believes with Him.

Jon is thinking, intent upon the floor as his finger traces patterns in the dust. “Men create gods?” he says.
“Men are gods,” adds Jaqen.

*One* man. All extrapolations, all theories, built around a single point. A line of reasoning, by its very nature, requires at *least* two such. She is not a proper point, she thinks, she cannot make herself count—if the Wind is but another face of death, she is a god only insofar as she wears His aegis around her shoulders.

“Well,” says Jon, “if a *god* is telling me that it must be true, right?”

Jaqen grins. “Must be.”

She must intervene before these two run the idea into the ground. That Blind God “all men are gods” rot that Jaqen used to study under the guise of poetry.

“The god is *localized* in Jaqen,” she says, “the god is *concentrated* within Jaqen, the god’s consciousness is Jaqen. But death is everywhere, and in everything. The god is both man, *and* a natural force, *and* the personification of every complexity men have worshipped into him—the Drowned God, the Stranger, the Lion of Night.”

Jon exchanges a look with the god, she cannot see the expression on Jaqen’s face.

“You have my sympathies,” says Jon.

“Wanted to make a god-king out of me,” accuses Jaqen.

*What have these two been up to?*

Jon ducks his head. “Sorry,” he mutters.

Arya rolls her eyes.

“Surely you can do two things at a time,” her god murmurs to her.

Her turn to apologize, the wind’s whispering has become somewhat monotonous, oft-repeated endearments that are too soft, too gentle to stand against the dead. She abandons thought, gives the breeze access to the core of her, and lets it loose.

Want your tongue in my cunt...Want to draw shapes upon your back with my blade and lap up the blood that spills from the cuts...

“Better?” she asks.


Jon has come to the end of some train of internal thought. “*My sister*,” he says, “is married to death.”

*And so we come to it.*

“Not your sister,” says Jaqen, gentle, gentle.

Jon looks up.

“Your cousin.”

All expression drains from Jon’s face, and she must reach, reach for the tightly-folded parchments
she keeps in her inner pocket, draw out her mother’s jagged tears to her, and her father’s eloquent, elegant letter to Jon.

“From father,” she says softly, and hands it over.

Silence, as Jon reads. Then silence after, for a very, very long time.

“Jon?” she asks.

He is staring into the flames. “Rhaegar Targaryen. Who raped Lyanna Stark.”

“No,” says Jaqen. “This much at least I know--they eloped, in the Riverlands. The abduction was a Petry Baelish invention--he had been rejected by Catelyn Tully, was looking to cause hurt, sow chaos. The sickly boy from the Fingers, he ingratiated himself into Rhaegar’s trust. Rhaegar and Lyanna trusted him enough to explain it everyone once they’d fled. But he explained nothing, invented...much.”

This, she had not guessed. Did Sansa?

Jon’s jaw clenches, unclenches. “Could father be lying?”

Oh, Jon. You’d rather believe father was lying to save his posthumous reputation, no matter how little sense that makes, rather than believe he was not your father.

She doesn’t answer.

“Why did you keep it from me?” Jon asks.

“I didn’t believe it myself,” she says.

“She lies,” says Jaqen, giving her a warning look. “She believed. But she did not want to lose her brother.”

The silence stretches, taught.

“Lyanna Stark,” says Arya, willing Jon to focus. “Your mother.”

Jon’s visage grows darker. He can calculate just as well as Arya can. Extrapolate--death in childbirth is the first, the simplest explanation, though Eddard Stark spared Jon a confirmation. “She died,” Arya’s father had written.

“I killed her then,” says Jon eventually.

Arya gives him a sad smile. “See, even in that you are my brother.” I killed my mother too, Jon.

The reminder is enough, to draw Jon out of his despair, into the dark siblinghood, blood-yet-not, shared by the others in the room.

But he asks no more questions, and eventually, he sleeps.

Arya draws Jaqen away to the far side of the keep, to a wall that is half in ruins, and she braces herself against it as He fucks her from behind.

She takes her pleasure in it, compels pleasure out of Him, again and again and again, goading Him with fingers and tongue, with whispers and pinpricks from ice-laden wind, until He has left only enough strength left to stumble back into the room with her, and no strength at all to listen; He
must curl up in Arya’s arms, away from the firelight, and sleep.

They take turns, standing atop the battlements, and it is a shell-game she plays, balancing what little sleep she needs (the Blue Pearl courses through all their veins still, is renewed every night) against the need not to leave Jaqen alone.

Or Jon. 

*I would see a parapet, and see myself jumping from it.*

The Maester has disobeyed; he does not return. He may be dead. He may be a wight by now.

Jon does not speak of his parents, of his Targaryen heritage.

The god of all dead things does not speak of the dead whispering to him.

Arya Stark does not speak of the fear clawing at her insides. *Jaqen. Jon. Bran. Their brother who has no name* (If he dies along the way, will Jaqen be able to reclaim him in this place that leeches the god of His power?). *Sansa* (Gilly is not *trained*. Can she spot the signs of infection, know what to do if it happens?). *Her brothers* ( R’hllor has been reduced, will they seek more Faceless Men to feed him?). *Aeron Greyjoy* (What is Euron doing to him?). *Gendry Waters* (she has sent for him by raven, will he be smart enough to take an armed escort with him if he decides to come to Winterfell?).

*Jaqen.*

Arya paces.

**Chapter End Notes**

Instead of inflicting you with a 20k word chapter, I’ve broken it up into two and posted simultaneously.
Bifurcation

HIM OF THE MANY FACES

He stands on top of the Wall, whispers of the dead rising around them. Jon shares the watch with Him, and Jon does not speak.

Arya is wrapped around His wrists, His tongue, the base of His cock. And even her power to hold Him, ground him in the world of the living, even her power over Him wanes.

Four days since Samwell Tarly rode out.

Tonight. He will ask Arya to be the wind tonight, to drive into ice and rock. It can be chipped, it can be eroded, it can be cracked, the ice of the Wall is just that--ice.

The Wall will come down.

He will take each soul that has been denied to Him for so long.

Whatever fell thing this barrier was raised against, it will ride south.

Many will die.

Valar morghulis.

“Who all know?” asks Jon quietly. That he speaks now, there can only be one thing he speaks of.

“You, me, Arya. Brandon Stark will know, I think.” The god considers Jon Snow. “Your choice, to do with it what you will. Your father protected the knowledge till long after his death.”

“My uncle, not my father,” says Jon bitterly. “My father was a Targaryen.” Shock, numbness.

He does not know what to feel.

“If I were you,” says Jaqen, “I would be grateful that when I say the word ‘father’, it is Eddard Stark’s face that forms behind my eyes.”

Jaqen H’ghar knows something about unwanted fathers. The grace of Arya Stark, of others in the order, whose fathers were men worthy of the appalation, that I understand the other side of it.

“Your choice,” says the god. “Four names to choose from now--Snow. Stark. Sand. Targaryen”.

Lyanna and Rhaegar were wed, in secret, this Eddard Stark has confirmed, though the tone of his words indicates he believes Lyanna was pressured into it.

“Jon Stark,” says Jon suddenly. “Jon Stark. I am Jon Stark. I have wanted that name since I can remember, and I will not let it go.”
Him of the Many Faces nods. “It is to be expected. You are my bride’s brother; she would not let
go of her name either, no matter the nature of the persuasion applied by her teachers in the order.”

The god understands the true intent underneath Jon’s claiming of the name, despite his stated
intentions a moon ago to keep the “Snow”.

A choice.

The Snow was not a choice, the Sand will be what he gets in the absence of documents attesting to
the Prince’s marriage. The Targaryen would have been foisted upon him had such documents been
found.

Robb Stark’s choice, Robb Stark’s unequivocal bestowal of brotherhood--Jon does not fight Arya’s
claiming of him either, the god has noticed.

“A Stark” is the only name Jon Snow has no right to by birth. “A Stark” is the only name Jon can
choose for himself, and Robb Stark has made such a choice possible.

“Jon Stark,” says Him of the Many Faces. “It suits. And a man is getting rather tired of snow.”
Snow all around them, falling in fat flakes from the leaden sky.

“I have two letters now,” says Jon, touching his palm to his breast. In conscious or unconscious
imitation of Arya, Jon keeps his papers close to his heart as well. “One from father.” Not “my
father” any more, simply “father”, no need to define whose. It is a name now, not a relationship.
“One from his wife,” continues Jon, “...after she died.” Jon looks at Him of the Many Faces. “Arya
told her about me, didn’t she?” His voice is bitter. “This is not an apology to me, it is an apology
to her husband, by proxy.”

“There are the mechanics of such a thing to consider,” the god says. “Her brain was decayed, her
body halfway to decomposition when it was resurrected. Arya told her about Roose Bolton as well-
within a watch, Catelyn Stark had forgotten Roose Bolton was dead. Arya told her about you. She
did not dictate your letter for another two watches. What was it that she called you?”

“Son of my heart,” says Jon. The words, it seems, are engraved upon him.

“The brain decays, the body decays,” says Jaqen. “Machination, apology-by-proxy, searching for
redemption--these are complex things, Jon Stark. Has Arya shown you her letter?”

Jon is shaking his head. “I didn’t know there was one.”

“There isn’t,” says Jaqen. “Just parchment, torn to pieces because Catelyn Stark insisted on writing
Arya’s herself, did not realize she had forgotten how to write.”

And Jon’s eyes brim with sorrow.

“Vengeance, that seeks beyond the grave. Love, that loves without understanding why. These are
the things that were left to Catelyn Stark at the end. Son of my heart . It is a powerful thing, to
be such to someone.”

Jon Stark trembles as he looks out over the northern landscape, and the tears freeze upon his face.

Vengeance is instinct; forgiveness, a choice.

“Daenerys Targaryen is my aunt,” says Jon. “Arya would have me marry my aunt ?”
“Yes. She wouldn’t have told you this thing, not unless it served her schemes.”

Jon looks sidelong at Him. “Are you telling me not to trust Arya?”

“Trust her,” He says. “She is the only reason you live, the only reason I am not a slave to R’hllor’s prophecy.” He considers His next words. “Trust her, with everything and anything you want, but do not make the mistake of assuming that she has no agenda of her own. She does, she spins a web, and I am far more caught in it than you are. Arya Stark is not to be underestimated.”

The thing that Arya Stark is focused on now is the tearing down of the Wall.

The knowledge of it makes the air between them heavy.

“Ask, Jon Stark,” murmurs Him of the Many Faces. “Ask what it is you want.”

“Will you abide a delay?” asks Jon.

No.

“Only until I marry Daenerys,” says Jon. “And I am granted use of her dragons against the Night’s King.”

The god closes his eyes. He listens, to the whispers under him. Eight thousand years they have waited. Every day is an eternity of torment.

Jon Stark seeks a solution that serves his people in truth--the living and the dead. Jon Stark will sell himself into bondage for it.

By His choice, the god has bound Himself to this king. Anointed him, in My name.

Some bindings are a choice. They may be regretted, later, grow onerous but they were a choice when they were entered into.

The whispers seek their king with outstretched arms. There must always be a Stark at the Wall. The other half of that bargain, promises that were made to them. The dead bound themselves willingly, though they knew not what they were binding themselves to.

The gift must be given.

A man does not control the timing of it.

“Death can abide a bit longer,” says the god.

Jon gives the god a half-smile. Gratitude. Resolve. “I will ask Sansa to expedite the negotiations. And the Horn of Joramun the Windcaller, Mance Rayder believed it has the power to take down the Wall--I do not know how it is to be found, but we must try.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “I heard the story--thought it burned. Assumed it was a Dragon Horn, that R’hllor’s priestess did the world another favor, all unknowing.”

“Wun Wun said the one she burned was a Giant King’s battle-horn,” says Jon.

“The Horn of Winter,” murmurs Jaqen. “A lot of horns around--your Maester took one to the Citadel. Also not a Dragon Horn.”

Jon gives the god a startled look.
“There are reasons Samwell Tarly hates me,” says Jaqen quietly. His gaze trying, trying and failing to find pillars of black fire in the distance that should mark Weirwoods to His eyes. He can see them inside Himself, but not in the world beyond the Wall.

“You’ve met before,” Jon surmises. “But there is no reason to hate—”

“You will understand his reasons better than most—he believes I murdered his friend, betrayed him in the guise of friendship. He is not wrong. I chose, as did those that betrayed you—some of the brothers that killed you, they too were doing their duty as they saw fit.”

“How did you betray him?” Jon asks. A cold look about him—he does not like his friends ill-used. Loyalty cuts both ways, after all.

“That is Samwell Tarly’s story to tell. The rift between him and me, between him and you for that matter, it will be served far too well by a one-sided telling.”

Jon takes a deep breath, begins gathering silence around himself, then pauses. “How did you know about the Horn of Winter? About the acclamation, Bran heading north of the Wall? About Ramsay...you came to us better informed than Petyr Baelish.”

“Hmm.”

Jon sighs. “I trust Sam.”

“As you should.”

A smile plays about Jon Stark’s mouth. “I’m not sure he would tell me the same for you.”

“From the look on his face when he rode out,” says the god, “he will tell you I should be fed to Daenerys’s dragons the moment she lands in White Harbor.”

“You’re getting it wrong,” says Jon. “Men are to be sacrificed to gods, not the other way around.”

Him of the Many Faces snorts. “That’s the way R’hllor does it. So clearly it is the wrong way.”

But Jon’s mind has found a distraction. “How much can such an alliance be expedited? It’s not just vows and a feast, there’s fleets to move, grand gestures…” Jon sighs.

Him of the Many Faces considers whether He should speak. Arya Stark has plans. But Arya Stark is still working within the framework of the game of thrones.

*Let us shatter this framework.*

“You do not need to marry her,” says Jaqen.

Jon looks at him in surprise.

“An accord can be transacted without exchanging people. The Free Cities do it all the time. An alliance, bound and sealed, ratified by what witnesses are needed. These are not the days of clan wars and blood feuds, though Westeros seems to be stuck in that mindset. Like the Dothraki. Offer her a pact, Jon. Concede something further—a permanent garrison for her, if she wants, you have the Dreadfort sitting half-empty, moldering. Give it to her. Keep yourself.”

“You advise me to do this?” Jon asks.

A careful question—at Winterfell Jaqen had made it clear before the moot that he would not advise
the King, that he was on Jon’s side, but that Jaqen H’ghar would not provide advice that could
direct the course of the North.

*A raven will be needed*, the god thinks. *The House of Black and White will have to send a more
neutral representative to Winterfell.*

“Knowing the situation as I do,” says the god, “I would so advise.”

Jon exhales, sways. The god reaches out, grasps hold of Jon’s arm. “Careful, now.”

Another binding, tying Him to the North, to the Starks. It will only be severed when Jon asks for
mercy, when the king returns to the darkness of his own accord.

Him of the Many Faces looks down, at the ice beneath Him, at the crowd of souls standing chained
to the wall, each raising pleading hands to Him, to Jon Stark.

Each weeps.

The god has decided to wait; it comes with a clarity of mind, a lessening of urgency. It will not last
long, but for now the keening of the dead has a break in it.

“There are many kinds of brothers in the world,” says Jon quietly. “The ones that come to the
Wall...this is how the story is supposed to go, right? Repudiated by blood-brothers, accepted by the
brothers of your calling.” Jon shakes his head. “And yet here I am, betrayed by those that called
me brother in my calling, exalted to heights I do not deserve by those that call me brother by
blood.”

“The inverse *is* far more common,” says Him of the Many Faces. “But it seems the Starks are very
good at being *un* common.”

And the epitome of uncommon, she sleeps in a small stone chamber off the hearth-heated hall. The
picture of her in His mind’s eye—the shape of His thoughts shift, grow darker. Hungry.

“Need to find Arya,” He says.

“They are getting louder?” asks Jon, guilt and concern and grief warring on his face.

“They are as they have always been,” says the god.

It is not the dead that drive him to his wife’s bed now. He wants to have her for himself, for her
pleasure and his while the world is muted; soon the screaming will start again, and he will have to
bury himself in her seeking mindlessness.

“Surely she can mix you multiple doses at once,” says Jon. “*A potion,*” Arya had said, when Jon
had asked last time about the whispers.

It was meant as a polite fiction. Jon Stark has taken it at face value.

*Dense. The Stark men are dense.*

“It loses potency with time,” says Him of the Many Faces.

Jon nods. “I will keep watch.”

*Yes, because you are far too young to be exposed to what I am about to do to your sister.*
“Be careful,” says Jaqen. “One stumble, and it will all be for naught— if you slip you will fall on the wrong side of the Wall, and you will lie there, broken and undying and utterly outside our reach.”

Sufficient warning, the god thinks, to forestall the thing that Arya worries about.

“Arya worries too much,” Jon mutters, as Jaqen retreats to the keep proper.

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**BRAN**

He lies under the boughs of the Heart Tree.

_We’re coming to get you. We’re coming, you hear? Don’t you fucking dare die on me!_

The last of the dried rations are gone; he sucks snowmelt from the corner of the blanket that covers him.

A shape sits at his side, wide-eyed, frozen.

Sometimes he talks to her. She answered, till the very end, though words were mumbled, incomprehensible.

He hears something through the ground.

Hoofbeats.

A shape, against the moonlit snow. A dark shape. Large. _Have they come for me after all? Or is it an Other?_

Bran’s vision is blurred, dimming at the edges.


“Help,” Brandon calls. His voice is frozen. “Help.”

The man dismounts, he’s running up to Bran. He kneels beside him. “Brandon Stark? Oh dear gods, Bran, are you alive?”

He knows this man.

Bran breathes, as loud as he can. The breath rattles in his lungs.

“Thank the gods,” gasps Samwell Tarly. “Alright, alright, we can manage this. We’ll get you home.”

Bran tries to focus his vision on something. _We?_

“Come on now. Open your mouth.”

Gently, Bran finds his mouth levered open, drops of something, it feels hot but he knows enough to know it is just warm from resting against skin, drops of something are dribbled into the side of his mouth, his throat stroked till he swallows.

He finds himself lifted off the ground.
“My friend,” he breathes. “Please. Don’t leave her for the Others.” His voice has firmed by the last words.

Something floods his limbs—it is not warmth, he is just as cold as he has ever been (he does not remember being warm) but it is something.

He tests his fingers. They curl into a fist on command.

Samwell Tarly is levering Meera’s corpse onto the horse, it has frozen in place, no good way to take it with them, but Samwell Tarly is determined. He lashes her to the horse.

*He brought two horses*, thinks Bran. And then he sees the “we”—*Ghost!* The direwolf pants beside the horse. *Big. Smaller than Summer.*

Samwell Tarly then lifts Bran into the saddle; Bran slumps forward, but not for long. Samwell climbs onto the horse himself, the steed steps sideways, but steadies quickly.

“All right then,” says Samwell, and the brother of the Night’s Watch is *cheerful*, of all things. “Time to go!”

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**JAQEN**

He closes the door behind him, a single candle in his hand. A small room—a scribe’s domain, this, Stannis Baratheon’s stores’ master, if Jaqen reads the disorder in the papers correctly. A wooden cot against the wall.

She sleeps upon the cot, limbs akimbo; she has thrown off the covers. The candlelight sweeps down her curves, glances over the hollows of her form where shadows pool.

She slept once like this upon his bed in the Citadel; the similarities are undeniable.

Mine now, to do with as I please.

He places the candle upon a table, and moves beside the bed.

He stands over her, a grin tugging at his lips. His power is denied to him, for the most part. But there is darkness in her as well. He breathes over her, commands, and a tendril of darkness slithers forth from her breast, snakes upwards, entwines itself around her throat. It enters her mouth, and she inhales it deep into her lungs.

Her eyes move under her lids. He has been either unaware of it, or asleep, all the other times he has sent the dreaming to her. He is not entirely certain how to control the *content* of it while he wakes.

But he has touched her.

His responsive bride, her eyes flicker under closed lids; she makes a dream of her own at his touch. She spreads her legs.

“*Jaqen,*” she moans, and the sound of his name spreads through him like a wildfire. His cock remembers what he had wanted to do the last time she had spoken his name like this.

She does not make him wait long; her eyelids flicker, and she wakes. She sees him, standing over
her, utterly impassive. A moment of panic, just like before, though it is not him but the re-assuming of the fears she carries within her. For his sake.

He smiles, to banish the fear. Slow, sardonic. *Intention, my bride, do you see it?*

She does. The panic dissolves, and her expression settles into serenity as she turns, draws her limbs under her, kneels on the bed.

He reaches, undoes the front of his britches, frees his achingly hard member with a hiss of relief.

“Kiss it,” he commands.

She moves slowly, never breaking eye contact. She leans forward and briefly touches her lips to his cockhead. He can feel warm air brushing against his hardness; her breath trembles. He looks down and memorizes the image: his cock against the perfect bow of her lips, her liquid black eyes, glazed over with lust, looking up at him. The gaping neck of her blouse, giving him a glimpse of her nipples, hard, jutting out.

*Waited. Could have taken her then.* He reaps the reward of it now, rewarded a thousandfold each time she comes to him unafraid, unfettered. All his savage need he can vent upon her, within her, she takes it and begs for more, slakes her own need upon him, uses him as she wills. *Because I waited.* It would have been an unequal partnership; he would have treated her like spun glass forevermore, had they begun to lie together when the both of them were still uncertain of who they were.

Her soft pink tongue snakes out, licks at him. His eyes roll back in his head, but he wants to see her mouth wrapped around his manhood, so he must needs look.

He opens his mouth wide for a moment: an instruction. She mimics him, and he takes himself in hand, puts his cockhead between her lips. Her mouth stretches to accommodate his girth; her eyes are grinning at him, her tongue is hard at work licking at the base of his cock.

He grabs her hair, forces himself deeper down her throat. She chokes. He pulls back, and her hand rises to take a hold of his shaft.

“Like this?” she whispers, hoarse. She licks at his cockhead again, catlike.

“Mmm. Suck, Arya.”

Instead she grazes him with her teeth.

“If you bite,” he warns… *I’m going to fuck your cunt until you beg for me to stop, for once.* Then he thinks *better not tell her that, she might take it as a challenge.*

Her eyes glitter with mischief. “I won’t bite,” she says, “too much.” A cold breeze blows around him as she takes the tip of him in her mouth again before drawing back. His member is slick with her spit and the precursor to his seed; a strand of it stretches between her lips and him.

He throws his head back, groans.

“More?” She asks.

“Please,” he breathes.

“Beg.”
“Please, please, *please* suck my cock.”

Her warm mouth engulfs him again. Hands return to his shaft as she pumps him in time with the suction of her mouth.

The fog, frenzy, he grabs her head again, forces his cock deeper. She makes a deep sound of approval, angles her head so the passage to her throat is open to him.

He moves her head upon him, again and again, until he cannot bear it and his release pulses through him, erupts from him into her mouth. He forces his eyes open, looks down. Some of his seed has escaped out the corners of her mouth; she swallows the rest.

Spots dance before his eyes.

She grins up at him, gathers up the seed at the corner of her mouth on her finger, sucks at it.

His breath stills in his lungs.

“I’m the cat that ate the cream,” she murmurs, eyes dark, fixed upon his.

*Who do I pray to when I think I’m about to die?*

He pushes her down on the bed, parts her thighs. Wet, so wet, the scent of her musk surrounds him, encompasses him in her need. He groans, and his mouth descends on her, and it is her turn to clutch at his hair.

He feeds on her core, alternates sucking on her engorged clit and lapping up the honey flowing from her.

“Please, please, please.” Her turn to beg.

He raises his head. “Please what?” he asks.

“I need you in me, I need something in me, I need to be fucked, please, Jaqen.” She is sobbing with it.

“No.”

He returns to her womanhood, and this time his mouth goes nowhere near her entrance. He laves her clit with all his attention, his intention, focused upon that tiny nub that makes her squirm and gasp and tremble under his mouth.

She comes, as he knows she must.

He looks up to see her glaring at him.

“A girl hooked a man upon his obsession with her mouth,” he says. “Made a man beg. Only fair, that she *not* be hooked upon hers, that her pleas be denied.”

Her gaze grows contrite. “How may a girl make amends?” she asks. “Please, a man must tell her.”

“Mmm.” He abandons the Lorathi. It is too pliable a thing, that language. “You are entirely an obsession,” he says, “but two parts of you stand out. Do you know what they are?”

She points to her mouth, hesitates, puts two fingers on her nipples.
He smiles in approval, rises, straddles her stomach. “I’m going to fuck your tits,” he says. “And you will lick, when and how I tell you to.”

Immediately she arches, presenting him with herself.

“And when my two obsessions have been satisfied,” he says, “I’ll consider, consider fucking you where you want.”

Her mouth trembles, she licks at her lips. “Yes,” she says. “Jaqen, please.”

He reaches down, grabs her breasts, draws them together, even as his thumbs circle her nipples. Then he moves forward, slides his cock between the mounds of her tits, the warm, soft valley between them. He slides his cock forward till it is in range of her mouth. She bends her head forward and licks.

He saws, forward and back, her hands clutch at his hips, pull him forward each time he pulls away, and the wildfire, banked, it begins to escape the edges of his control.

“A girl has been very, very good,” he purrs.

“Mmm.”

“Where do you want to be fucked?” he asks, gently, softly.

“Everywhere.”

It’s the answer he’s been looking for.

He moves off her, lays himself at her side, and his hand cups a breast. “My love,” he whispers, “my heart--”

A violent knocking at the door. “Jaqen? Arya?”

His eyes narrow. “Protect Jon, yes?” he asks. “Not kill him.”

“Protect, definitely,” she replies, though her voice holds as much irritation as his--all that foreplay and no reward, neither Arya Stark nor Jaqen H’ghar are quite reconciled to that.

A moment to see what he wants, and then we will shut the door in his face and he can construe what he likes from it.

“A moment!” she calls, and Jaqen hastily dons his britches, even as she draws the covers over herself.

He throws open the door.

The grim expression on Jon’s face suppresses Jaqen’s lust far more effectively than a simple interruption would have.

“Riders from the north,” says Jon. “Sam, and two others--he’s lashed them to the saddle. They don’t move with the horse’s gait. I don’t think they’re alive.”

SAMWELL
Bran slips in and out of sleep, and his eyes turn up in his head, white, and it seems to be out of Bran’s control.

Sam has ridden through the night. The horses are faltering, the one under him will have to be put down even before they begin the journey back to Winterfell.

Thanks to Ghost--the direwolf led Samwell to the snow-blanketed copse, to a Weirwood Sam wouldn’t have found in the darkness--Sam has found Brandon Stark.

He will tell Jon everything, and Jon will banish Jaqen H’ghar like he banished that other priestess, and everything will be all right.

The horse with Meera Reed’s corpse on it follows him, as it has for leagues.

Torchlight flickers, far overhead--they’ve seen him coming. He dismounts, and opens the weirwood door. He takes the reins of both horses in hand, and leads them through the dark portal and into the Nightfort at a slow trot.

Jon and Lady Arya are waiting for him in the courtyard. Relief--Jaqen H’ghar must have been the one lighting the torch atop the wall. It’ll take the man some time to descend.

Sam takes a deep breath, but Lady Arya forestalls him by rushing forward, reaching for Bran.

“Bran, Bran, wake up,” she’s murmuring as Jon helps untie the boy from the saddle.

“To the hearth,” Lady Arya commands. “You too, Samwell Tarly, you’re falling over despite the stimulant.”

He sees the sense in it, and Jon is already carrying Brandon Stark up the stone stairs, so he follows, jaw tight.

The warmth of the room is almost painful, but so very welcome. Lady Arya presses a bowl of something in his hands. He pretends to eat. They don’t need me now, whatever they are, assassins or priests or both, they can just get rid of me before I have had a chance to speak.

He takes a deep breath, but Brandon Stark is stirring.

Jon has propped him up against a wall, and Lady Arya ladles what looks like warm water into his mouth. Laced with something, no doubt.

Bran’s eyes flicker open, and his gaze lands on Jon. A smile breaks out over the boy’s face. Something about that face...it is a mixture, between Jon’s and Lady Sansa’s, but there is such dignity in the planes of it.

Sam wishes it could stay like this.

He opens his mouth, and hears footsteps--Jaqen H’ghar strides into the room. Samwell grits his teeth.

Very well. It will be a confrontation. So be it. I’m ready to die if I need to.

Another smile, on Bran’s face for Jaqen H’ghar, this one tinged with something Samwell cannot identify.

“Brandon Stark,” says Jaqen H’ghar, and his voice is warm.
Bran bows his head. “Well met, Stranger,” he smiles a wan smile.

Samwell hears it. Not stranger, Stranger. Cold fear settles in Sam’s guts. What did Lady Arya tell him?

Both Jon and Arya are watching, and Samwell cannot help but stare as Jaqen H’ghar walks forward, goes down on his knees; his hand brushes over Bran’s head.

“Champion,” says Jaqen H’ghar, and his voice is gentle, more gentle than Samwell thought this man could ever be. “Well met.”

Bran lowers his head. “Jojen died. Hodor died. She died. She didn’t want to eat, she gave me everything and she died.”

Meera Reed.

The same reserve that Sam has seen in Lady Sansa, that same serenity and gathering of the self, it is in Brandon Stark as well. He does not weep. And yet the assassin’s arms are around the boy, and he is stroking Bran’s head. “It is not cold where she is,” murmurs Jaqen H’ghar.

Sam feels eyes on him--Lady Arya is watching him, intent.

“You haven’t eaten your stew, Maester Samwell,” she says.

Sam flushes, looks at Jon. Jon is studying him in turn. Sam cannot hold Jon’s gaze, he looks down, fiddles nervously with his spoon.

“I gave her a dream,” says Bran, “as she was dying I gave her a dream and she took it into the darkness.”

“That’s why I finally dreamed of you,” says Lady Arya to Bran. “She took your dream into the Weirwood, and it came to me.”

Warg dreams? But why the Weirwood?

Bran sighs, pulls back, and Jaqen H’ghar lets him go, rocks back on his heels.

“It was meant for him,” says Bran to Arya.

“The Weirwood does not differentiate between me and my bride,” says Jaqen H’ghar. “Thankfully so, because I was getting drunk when I should have been sleeping.”

Sam cannot quite make sense of that. They are married so he’s a warg as well? It doesn’t work like that.

Bran’s gaze looks over Jaqen H’ghar’s shoulder, lands on Sam. And when Brandon Stark smiles at him, something lightens in Sam’s chest. Some forgotten spark of wonder.

A greenseer. A real, living, greenseer.

“Thank you,” says Bran to him. “Twice now, you’ve helped me, Samwell Tarly. Thank you.”

“Sam is my right hand,” says Jon.

Oh, Jon.
Jaqen H’ghar turns, sits beside Lady Arya. “We owe you, Maester Samwell,” says the assassin. A smile twists at his mouth. “Owe you more than you think. Ask. If it is in my power to grant it will be granted.”

Sam’s entire world is tipping, tipping sideways...he realizes he himself is leaning to the side, about to fall over.

Lady Arya is beside him. “You didn’t finish, you stupid…” she shoves the bowl in his hands. “Eat. Or you will fall asleep, and an entire flight of dragons will burn the keep around your ears and you won’t wake up.”

Sam cradles the bowl to his chest. *Faceless Men keep their word.* Slowly, he starts spooning the now-cold stew into his mouth.

“A true answer,” he mumbles around a mouthful. “No evasion, and you have to say it in front of Jon and everybody. *Valar morghulis,*” he says for good measure. “Faceless Men are supposed to keep their word.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “Arya offered you answers. You refused them. Why do you wish to ask now when you could have asked for so much more?”

“Because Jon is listening now,” says Sam.

“Sam,” says Jon, “there are no secrets between us.”

“*He* is a murderer,” says Sam, and points at Jaqen H’ghar.

“Yes, Sam, we know,” says Jon gently.

“No! You don’t know. He killed Pate and took his face, and *blackmailed* me--with Gilly and Sam, he *threatened* them, Jon--and I--” Sam’s voice breaks, there are tears coursing down his face. “I did it. I told him things. Things I shouldn’t have told anyone.”

He looks up to find Jon glaring at Jaqen. The surprise at that, when Jon should have been angry at Sam, it cuts through the cacophony of emotions in him, emotions he doesn’t even know what they’re called.

“You threatened Gilly and the baby?” asks Jon.

Sam cannot help but admit that it doesn’t *sound* like Jon’s mind is being controlled by magic. *Unless that’s what they want us to think.* But he looks at Brandon Stark again, and the serenity, the quiet certainty about him, as if the world is somehow more real, more dense around him…

Sam focuses on breathing. In. Out. Even. *Pate taught me that,* how to wrest control of his emotions so nothing shows on his face.

“Unspecified threats,” Jaqen is saying, “Sam’s imagination did the rest.”

*Just* admitting it? *And what do you mean “my imagination”?*

“But you know what we are, Jon,” says Jaqen H’ghar. “Maester Samwell, we are not *nice* people. We try not to kill outside the parameters of the duty, but it is necessary sometimes.” He shrugs. “Murder. Fraud. Lies.”

Sam takes in one gulp of air, then another. “You are sorcerers! You’ve turned Jon’s *mind,* to think
of destroying the Wall!”

“I have decided to delay the attempt,” says Jaqen H’ghar. He nods towards Jon. “Until Jon has his

dragons.”

Sam’s thoughts are fraying; he doesn’t know what to think.

“There is another--” Lady Arya turns to Jaqen. “I would speak, beloved,” she says.

The assassin closes his eyes, leans his head against the wall. “As you will,” he says and his voice

sounds tired.

Lady Arya looks at Sam, and he feels a cold shiver run down his spine at the look in her eyes.

“We were contracted to kill Jon,” she says. “We told you that. The alternative to blackmailing you,

setting you to watch him, was to kill you and take your face to finish the contract. As you.”

As you...as you...as you... A man that looks like a friend, killing Jon, Jon who trusts Sam beyond

reason...Sick, sick dread in his stomach, Sam is staring at her with wide eyes. It would have been so

ey easy.

Jaqen speaks. “Killing my bride’s brother was hardly going to endear me to her. A Faceless Man

knows their duty, but so does a husband.” He exchanges another look with Lady Arya, then smiles

sadly at Jon.

“And a friend must not be murdered unless there is no other way?” asks Jon. Not angry anymore.

“Just so,” says Jaqen H’ghar.

Sam bows his head. He must accept, he must, that they are on Jon’s side. Even if they are not on

Samwell Tarly’s, even if his trust has been betrayed, Jon’s hasn’t been.

He closes his eyes, and tries to let go the anger, the hate, the sorrow. It doesn’t work of course.

And so he forces an abeyance onto them.

It is how he survived the Citadel, its politics, the rabid slaughter of so many things dear to Samwell

Tarly’s heart, so many of his principles. Fraud, murder. Lies. These things do not just belong in an

assassin’s arsenal--they belong to Maesters as well. And they belong to Maesters at an institutional

level--the deliberate illiteracy of the highborn, so only the Maester may know, only the Maester

may control communication. The ways to ensure a conception does not occur, administered

without anyone being the wiser. The slow, gradual weakening of dragons, Robert’s Rebellion, the

illicit researches, the public condemnation of Qyburn, the private jubilation when he was made

Cersei Lannister’s Hand.

Wait. Watch. Learn.

Another thing he learned from Pate. Ironic, that.

“Spent a year and a half at the Citadel,” Jaqen H’ghar is saying, “looking for bastards with blood

similar to yours, anyone that could have fulfilled the prophecy of Azor Ahai in your stead.”

Bran looks up, looks at Jaqen, his brow furrowed. “But Jon’s not Azor Ahai!”

Jaqen peers at Bran. “I am quite certain, Brandon Stark. The lengths R’hllor’s spells went to, to try

to force a confrontation between me and him. Jon Stark is the Prince that was Promised.”
Slowly, slowly, Samwell’s thoughts are turning around; _lumbering_ around, as his body does. Clumsy and broken. But still _his_ thoughts. _The Prince that was Promised is a Targaryen prophecy._

_Jon’s mother._

_They know who Jon’s mother is._

_A Targaryen, she must be._ That’s _why Pate was so interested..._ And Sam’s thoughts stop short.

_A year and a half_, Jaqen H’ghar had said.

_I...I never knew Pate._

“Yes,” Bran is saying impatiently, “Jon is the Prince.”

“Wonderful,” Jon mutters.

“But he’s _not_ Azor Ahai--Daenerys is.”

Sam knows that expression, that stunned look, that Jaqen H’ghar wears. The last time he’d worn it... _he’d been in the ravenloft, right after Rosey left him._

“How...?” asks Jaqen.

Bran jerks his chin towards Sam. “The Maesters, with the suppression of magic, the destruction of the last of the dragons. Magic...frayed. Strands that were laid--even mine, from the end-times of dragons--they’re weak, they stretch, they break. The prophecy _bifurcated_ at its weak point. The Prince that was Promised was not an original part of Azor Ahai, the Targaryens didn’t even _exist_ when the Azor Ahai prophecy was made.”

Jaqen’s fingers are steepled.

Now that Sam knows what to look for, he sees it. Over and over again. Pate’s mannerisms. Pate’s humor.

His heart is breaking into little pieces anew.

_Never knew Pate at all._

Lady Arya speaks first. “If that was the weak point,” she says, “then _R’hllor_ did not make Jon his champion. The Prince was _grafted_ onto Azor Ahai, like...other things were grafted onto R’hllor.”


Jaqen nods, even as Lady Arya spits on the floor. “A false god,” she says, vicious.

“A _sleeping_ god,” murmurs Jaqen. “And powerful for all of that--a resurrection, from the other side of the world? I could have managed such before I was bound, but not anywhere close to the Wall.”

Sam almost bites through his spoon.

Jaqen raises a sardonic eyebrow towards Sam. “Have you thought of a question you wish to ask, _Maester_ Samwell?”

Another habit of Pate’s, this, to give a man just enough rope to hang himself, and then mock him for it. _But he always gave true answers._ The trick with Pate was to _think_, and ask the _right_
question.

Samwell thinks. He does not have to think long.

“Who are you, Jaqen H’ghar?”

The fire in the heart suddenly grows dim, the candles still burn by the light of them seems less than before. Jaqen H’ghar’s eyes have changed. Black. Black-in-black, there is no white in them at all.

An obsidian candle. Darkness, coiling in the corner of the room.

“A wasted question,” says the Stranger softly.

Light suddenly floods the room, and Sam finds himself pressed against the far wall, trembling in the grip of some unnamed fear.

No, the fear is not unnamed.

Death.

He leans his head against the wall, the empty bowl of stew in his lap as his hands, limp, lose their grasp on it.

And then he laughs.

Laughs and laughs and laughs.


“All this time,” Samwell wheezes, “all this time you would argue that Magic wasn’t real. You plotted for Vinegar Vaellyn.” Sam has doubled over with laughter. “All this time you...you were a fucking god.”

“He’s not very reverent either,” remarks Lady Arya.

“North’s not known for kneelers,” says Jon.

“Knew there was a reason I liked you people,” says the Stranger.

Tears are running down Sam’s face. His breath comes in short gasps, and he cannot stop laughing.

“I think you broke him, Jaqen,” says Brandon Stark.

At that Sam gathers what remains of his wits, tries, tries to stop the hysteria bubbling out of him. He looks up.

“I mocked you--you were obsessed with Lady Arya--I mocked you so much for it.” There is a little bit of horror creeping its way up Sam’s spine.

The Stranger’s smile is smug as he puts an arm around Lady Arya. “Who’s laughing now, Samwell Tarly?”

Sam thinks. “Still me, Stranger.”

“Jaqen,” corrects the god.

Jaqen. Well, there’s a right odd set of syllables, won’t fit too many of the hymns in the Septs.
“He’s not broken?” asks Bran.

Jaqen snorts. “That’s what passes for normal in his head, as I read it.”

“Good,” says Bran. “Then I don’t have to go back and fix it.”

“Go back?” asks Jaqen, at the same time Lady Arya says, “Fix it?”

“Coincidences,” says Bran. “Making people choose. I can reach back through the visions sometimes. The toss of a coin. A left fork when the right would have suited just as well. I’ve been trying,” he says in a small voice. “Can’t go back more than the last Long Light, can’t leave Westeros.”

And now Samwell is so far out of his depth, he cannot even see the land. *Means I can learn everything. A greenseer and a god and death magic and wargs. A small grin blooms on his face. And I get to listen in.*

“You prepared the barrow,” says Jaqen. “When I ranged east.” He is looking at the boy in wonder.

“It was you all this time?” Lady Arya sits down, shakes her head. “I almost turned us back because there were so many coincidences in our path—thought it was R’hllor.”

Bran looks at her mournfully. “I had to scream so loudly to make you turn north,” he whispers.

Her turn, to put her arms around him.

*Two years younger than her,* Sam thinks. Brandon Stark has oscillated throughout this conversation, between boy and sage, between uncertain emotion and serenity. And yet again tears come to Sam’s eyes at the thought of what the Stark children have had to suffer. *They’re still standing.*

A new thought: *And a god stands with them now.*

So there is at least *some* balance in the world, some redress.

“How long have you been manipulating us, Brandon Stark?” asks Jaqen H’ghar. His tone is at odds with his words, amused.

“Since you started dreaming with Nymeria. Didn’t see you before that. *Couldn’t.***

“A bridge,” Jaqen murmurs. “Fitting.”

“Then I lost Summer,” says Bran. “And Nymeria is the White Weeping, can’t go near her, she won’t recognize me, she’ll eat me.”

*Thought Lady Arya’s direwolf was dead.* “White Weeping?” asks Sam.

“A plague,” says Lady Arya absently. “And she won’t eat you, Bran—you’re Jaqen’s *Champion.*” Lady Arya snorts. “R’hllor’s prophecy is good for *something.*”

Sam has studied the fragments of the Azor Ahai prophecy that Maesters in the past extracted from various sources, some nothing more than stories.

*And the Champion of the Great Other will make a bridge to the realm of undying night, and demons shall pour into the world through him.*
The God of Death. The Great Other, the personification of darkness, the enemy of the Lord of Light... It makes sense. So much sense. Are we supposed to be the villains? A bastard king, assassins, a woman that murdered her own husband, a dark god. We fit the playwright's bill, all right.

I’m in the middle of it.

Sam doesn’t know whether he should dance for joy, or run screaming from the room.

What else was there? Lord of Light, Lightbringer, something something... Does that mean Jon, or Daenerys, or both, they’re the Champions of the Lord of Light?

“This makes no sense,” murmurs Sam.

“A prophecy is not real, Sam,” says Jaqen. “According to R’hllor’s own priests, a prophecy is a self-fulfilling story, with magic dribbled into it to make people fit into the mold the story provides for them.” Jaqen grins. “Not very cooperative, some people.”

“R’hllor sleeps,” says Lady Arya, and her gaze is fixed inwards. “R’hllor sleeps, the man underneath that monstrosity sleeps. How could he have grafted the Prince that was Promised onto Azor Ahai? And a resurrection needs some conscious intervention--Jon, Beric Dondarrion...” She turns to Bran.

Something passes between the siblings then. Nothing has changed, nothing shifts, and yet for a moment it feels like they are neither of them of this world.

Something magical, that, it’s the same heebie-jeebies I felt the first time I saw a White Walker. Sam shudders.

“Whose will, Bran,” whispers Lady Arya. “Whose will controls R’hllor’s?”

Bran’s voice trembles, his eyes brim with tears. “The woman in the mask,” he whispers. “The woman in the mask. I have to hide from her all the time.”

Lady Arya tilts her head to a side “A sorceress then.” A smile blooms on her face, cruel, and Sam gulps. “The wind will flay her and I will make a cloak out of her skin to put around my brother’s shoulders.”

Jon looks taken aback, rightfully so. There’s no Bolton blood in Lady Arya, is there? And which brother does she intend to dress in that particularly macabre garment? But Jaqen is smiling fondly at her. Of course he is. Besotted, man or god, that part hasn’t changed. And Sam gets the strange feeling that Death is somehow safer to be around than his wife.

Then Lady Arya shakes her head and the cold look melts away from her face.

“Bran, Sam gave you the stimulant as well?”

At Bran’s nod, Lady Arya’s brow furrows. “I don’t dare give you more. You look malnourished and who knows what else. You need to sleep. Soon. Is there anything at all that is urgent, that cannot hold a sevenday?”

“Meera,” says Bran promptly. “I need to--you need to help me bury her.”

“We’ll take care of it,” promises Jon. The first words he’s said in a while.
Bran gives another weak smile. “She carried a sword out of the grove,” he says. “Said you should have it, when I told her about you.”

Lady Arya raises an eyebrow.

“Dark Sister,” says Bran.

Sam knows that name.

Already, Bran in yawning. “Heard Jaqen promise you a Valyrian Steel Sword,” he mumbles.

Lady Arya’s eyes narrow. “What else did you hear?”

Bran flushes. “Always ran away when you did that.” He looks at Jaqen. “You do that a lot,” he accuses.

What’s that now?

“We’re married,” says Jaqen, dry.

Oh. That. Sam exchanges an uncomfortable look with Jon. And the shared discomfort, the embarrassment...suddenly, everything is at it had been. And it still isn’t right.

Lady Arya is arranging Bran on a bedroll, tucking him in. “We can’t take down the Wall,” mumbles Bran.

All hail the Champion!

“Night’s King has the horn.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“How much time do we have till he gets to the wall?” asks Jon, at the same time, “There’s no other way?” asks Lady Arya.

But Bran doesn’t answer either of them. The boy’s eyes have closed, despite himself, and soon gentle snores are heard from that direction.

“I’ll take care of Meera,” says Lady Arya. “Only fair.”

Jaqen nods, and Lady Arya strides from the room.

“Night’s King has the horn. He’s coming,” says Sam. And the god that’s on our side wants to take down the Wall?

Sam can see the deep unease settle around Jon, and even Jaqen looks a bit nonplussed.

Jon sighs. “We’ve known he’s coming for a while. Can’t do anything about it yet, horn or not.” Jon shrugs. “If he takes down the Wall for us, that’s one less problem for us to worry about. As long as he does it after we have dragons.”

Sam blinks at Jon. “Still don’t get it.”

Jon purses his lips. “Pray you never do,” he says tiredly.

Oh, Jon, Jon, I need to make this right between us.
“I betrayed you, Jon,” Sam says quietly. “Even after Gilly and Sam were safe, after I left the Citadel. Sent ravens.”

“I know,” says Jon.

Sam’s heart stutters.

“You always looked so guilty,” says Jon. “I knew you were communicating with someone. Didn’t know who. Knew you wouldn’t say anything that...shouldn’t be said.”

Sam groans. “I did, Jon, I did.”

“You didn’t tell them about my dying,” Jon says. “You didn’t tell them about the wounds. You told them things that were common knowledge around Winterfell.”

Tears prick at Sam’s eyes. He feels wretched, somehow more wretched than before.

“I trust you,” says Jon. “Always have. Always will.”

Sam bows his head.

“All Starks are insane, Samwell Tarly,” says Jaqen H’ghar. “Might as well accept it and move on.”

“Careful, Jaqen,” says Jon, and his voice is light, teasing. “Malign the Starks too much, I’ll make you one too—I can, I’m king, I’ll issue a Royal Decree—and you’ll have to accept it and move on.”

“It’s you who has to be careful, Jon,” says Jaqen in turn. “Try that royal decreeing in my direction and I’ll unleash your sister upon you.”

“I think Arya’s going to be far too absorbed in the new love of her life—the Valyrian Steel—to give you much mind.”

“The other sister,” Jaqen clarifies. “Sansa likes me. And she won’t stand for the Stark name bestowed upon a commoner.”

“Commoner?” asks Jon incredulously. “Whose family used to call Targaryens ‘riff-raff’?”

“No more Valyria,” says Jaqen smugly, with such self-satisfaction that it sounds like it’s his doing. “No more House H’ghar. Commoner, dear brother.”

“Alright,” interrupts Sam. I’ve had it. “Pate, Jaqen, Stranger, I’m sorry if this is irreverent, I’m sorry if this irritates you, and I don’t give a fuck if you are laughing at me. Covered everything?”

Jaqen nods, an amused gleam in his eye. He knows when Sam’s been pushed too far—an old pattern of theirs.

For the first time in a year, Sam doesn’t feel the twisting, the pain, when he thinks of Pate. Irritation, though, he feels aplenty.

“So I want you to explain how you are a god. I want you to explain how you are a Valyrian. I want you to explain why you are married to Lady Arya Stark.”

Jaqen grins. “I am married to Lady Arya Stark because we fell in love. That’s it. No cosmic reason, no magical prophecy, nothing else except two people recognizing the mirror of their souls and claiming each other. Clean. Our choice.”
Jon is listening, rapt.

“I am a Valyrian,” continues Jaqen, “because I was born in Valyria, a little more than four hundred and fifty years ago.”

Going to need a stiff drink. Ale. A lot of ale. Or ask Lady Arya if she has some kind of intoxicating poison.

“I am a god because men make gods out of things they do not understand, and the gods they make are a trap, and if a man with the right disposition wanders by, he falls into the trap. You want more, ask Arya.”

“When she’s in a good mood,” offers Jon. “And you’ve got a tankard or two in you.”

“Breach a cask,” mutters Jaqen. “Bifurcation.” He shakes his head. “We have an eye on her, at least.”

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**PATCHFACE**

He can see the brothers of the Night’s Watch gather behind him, speaking in worried tones. He’s sorry, he’s so sorry, they’ve been good to him.

“Patches,” says a brother, coming up beside him, “Patches, what’s wrong?”

“It was supposed to be me,” the Jester says. “I was on this side of the Wall. I called and I called and he heard me and he was coming.”

“Who was coming?” asks the brother.

“I was going to be a Champion,” says Patchface sadly.

And then he jumps.

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Chapter End Notes

And this ends the Stark Winterfell Reunion Arc. Phew.

Don't worry, we're still in Winterfell for a while, but the Stark reunion's done since they've all been "found" now.

A couple of weeks of hiatus for me, I'm traveling and some work stuff. Plus the No One arc is not finished writing, it's also longer than expected. See the chapter count going up? Yeah, I've decided to break things up a little to prevent things like 20k word chapters. Too long to write, too much to edit, too much to read...

Anywho, what did you think? I want to know! The whole reunion arc, everything! Ask questions!

Love you all!
should also mention that there is a *ton* of detail-based stuff here, from the books and the TV show, things that might have been missed:

1. Ashara Dayne, who probably attended Jon's birth, presumed dead, body never found -- going with the theory that she married Howland Reed
2. "The Dark One has his eye on her", w.r.t Daenerys in Meli's visions, Bran as the Champion of the Great Other, also from Meli's visions
3. Dark Sister--Valyrian steel sword that bloodraven brought north of the wall, picked up by Meera Reed in the grove. Tiny detail.
4. We haven't gone into all the reasons Jaqen was in Westeros--Death of Dragons, dragonhorns, all of that is coming shortly, but we quickly cover the three horns we know about--the giant horn that Meli burned in front of the Wildlings that Mance claimed was the Horn of Joramun, but wasn't, then we have Euron's dragonhorn, and the cracked and broken horn given to Sam by Jon. I'm going with the assumption that none of these are the Horn of Winter, because I expect better of GRRM :) 
5. More Grand Maester conspiracy details, and the effect the death of dragons would really have had on prophecies held together by magic.
ARYA

She is the lightest rider--Bran rides tied to the saddle in front of her. He sleeps most of the time, and so he is spared the phenomenon that is Samwell Tarly.

“So, how do Faceless Men change faces?” he asks.

“I cannot tell you.”

“How did you know Jaqen was a god?”

“I cannot answer that.”

“What kind of god-like things does he do?”

“I cannot tell you.”

And so on.

She has not the shared experiences with Samwell Tarly that Jon has, nor Jaqen’s conversational finesse (nor his patience), to gently turn the questions aside, turn them into reminiscence. And somehow, Maester Samwell doesn’t seem to want to ask those types of questions of Jaqen.

The Valyrian Steel at her side, Dark Sister, she thinks much on it every time Maester Samwell rides beside her.

Jaqen usually intervenes, sends Maester Samwell off to discuss something “important” with Jon for a bit.

“No one is moved to murder,” she growls at her husband. “Eight days, Jaqen. He’s your friend, you keep him.”

Jaqen raises a hand to his heart, answering the spoken and unspoken.

“Soon, lovely girl,” he murmurs.

She sighs. “Once, maybe twice, before we must sleep like...like the dead.”

He chuckles.

The timbre of his humor, dark, like the bands wrapped around her heart, it holds her, for another few days.

“So what kind of magical training do Faceless Men get?”

“I cannot tell you,” says Arya Stark from between clenched teeth.

“Religious services?”

Actually, Maester Samwell is so fucking magic-obsessed, he wouldn’t know what to do with a true answer if he was given one. *The last religious service I performed was with the god on his knees before me.*

At least Bran’s asleep.

*Four more days*, she thinks. Four more days to Winterfell, almost a full moon gone.

Jaqen rides up, tells Maester Samwell Jon wants to know how many Maesters are trustworthy. A long discussion; Samwell falls back.

“Give him a problem to chew on,” offers Jaqen, amused beyond all measure. “Keeps him occupied for at least a couple of days.”

Four days, two days quiet per problem, that means she has two problems she can dump on Samwell Tarly.

“Maester,” she says sweetly the next time he rides beside her--Bran is with Jon for the moment, awake, and talking. “I have a question for you--something I have been puzzling at to no avail.”

“Of course!” says Maester Samwell. “What is it?”

“There is a curse on some women of House Stark,” she says without preamble.

“Um…a lot of misfortune, but--”

Arya shakes her head. “A magical curse of some sort, Maester. Even death,” and she looks over her shoulder at Jaqen, silhouetted against the snow, “even He could not break it in its entirety. It--” she draws a vague shape in the air around her. “It floats still.”

Samwell Tarly purses his lips, listening.

“Great-Aunt Branda,” says Arya. “She liked the blades and the horses. A scandal--Septa Mordane used to taunt me with it, when Mother wasn’t listening. The princess Vaella. Not simple-minded, it seems, that was the story put out to account for…her deviance.”

Samwell Tarly blinks at Arya.

“It ended in tragedy, if you call a Stark jumping into a river a tragedy. Ended in death, anyways. After Branda Stark was forced to choose, between a Targaryen and a Baratheon.”

“Harrold Rogers, of the Stormlands,” says Samwell Tarly, swallowing his surprise. “More Baratheon than Rogers, by blood.”

She nods. “The curse doesn’t seem to care about names.”

“Haven’t proved there’s a curse yet,” says Samwell. “Just saying.”

“Lyanna Stark,” she continues. “She liked the blades and the horses too. Chose, between a Baratheon and a Targaryen.” A bitter smile. “One would be hard-pressed to deny that *that* ended in tragedy.”

Sam is looking ahead, his gaze focused on something much further away than the horizon.
“Me,” says Arya.

Sam’s head snaps back at her.

“Would have been forced to choose at some point. I saw it.”

_The day I died._

Samwell is staring at her.

Arya’s mouth twists. “A god was needed to tip the balance of fate, Samwell Tarly. I chose _Him_ before the curse had a chance to make me choose anything else.”

“No Baratheons left, Lady Arya, and um,” Samwell pauses. “Jon and Daenerys. Not really candidates.”

“The smith that will hopefully make Valyrian Steel for us,” says Arya, “Gendry Waters. He is Robert Baratheon’s bastard.”

An intake of breath.

“Jon is my cousin by blood, not my brother. And the Targaryen line has never cared for such distinctions. Daenerys...I was in Essos. Our paths could have crossed.”

_Had I fled the order and gone seeking the one woman that was as interested in killing Joffrey and Cersei and all the rest as I had been._

She shrugs.

The Maester’s eyebrows have climbed into his scalp, almost. If she had to guess--she cannot see in the dim light--she would guess he is blushing.

_That_ at least tickles the Lorathi in her. “Blades and horses, Maester Samwell. And Daenerys Targaryen is supposed to be a very beautiful woman.” The Faceless Man that watches Daenerys has reported: a slave-courtesan, from whom Daenerys learned the arts of the bed, for Khal Drogo. Asha Greyjoy, once, for curiosity. Camaraderie.

Arya’s thoughts turn. “Perhaps we should arrange for some instruction for Jon as well; I’m not sure how well-versed his Wildling Lady was--passion leaves all skill in the dust, of course, but such may not be the case here.”

Samwell Tarly has regained himself. “Jon’s not marrying Daenerys Targaryen,” says Samwell.

Arya rounds on him.

“Um.”

“_Tarly_,” she hisses.

“That’s why I keep coming up to talk to you, I know you’re not going to answer anything,” he says. “Jon and Jaqen have been spending time, haven’t they, coming up with an alternate alliance. I’m the _distraction._”

Arya cannot help it; she giggles as all irritation evaporates. A ruse is so much better than mindless badgering. Arya Stark _adores_ ruses. “Well done, Spymaster of Winterfell.”
“You’re not angry?”

“I did not expect the conspiracy to bloom quite so quickly,” she says. “Always misjudge the timing,” she mutters.

“It won’t work, will it?” asks Samwell.

“For Jon’s sake, I hope it does,” she says.

“Then it won’t,” says Samwell, gloomy.

“No.”

He sighs. “Should we tell them?”

“Let them be. Keeps them busy. We have real problems to solve.”

“You don’t think the king’s love life is a real problem?”

Arya snorts. “He has nothing now. If he does not love Daenerys, or her him, he will have nothing later. Null change. Wherein lies the problem?”

“I don’t think they see it like that,” murmurs Samwell, meaning Jon and Jaqen, of course.

“That’s because they’re romantics,” she says.

“You’re in love with your husband! I’ve heard the story.” He’d have nudged her with his elbow if he could have. “A Princess and a god-assassin, counts as romantic in my book.”

“And if I had left it up to him, I’d be thirty, wed for fifteen years and on my tenth lover before the great ‘god-assassin’ decided that a short missive by raven, asking after my health, would be an appropriate gesture to begin the courtship.”

Samwell Tarly has no intelligent rejoinder to that.

“Let them conspire,” she says again. “You and I, Maester Samwell, must turn our heads to curses.”


She thinks. “Met a woods witch once.”

“A real woods witch?”

Of course he wants to know about that.

An answer she can give him, at least.

“Old, stunted--albino, I think, her eyes were red. Strange creature. She saw Jaqen in me, gave me compliments.” She had been a bit baffled by that, truth be told. Dark Heart. Blood Child. She chuckles. “Apparently she always asks for the same song from those that visit her--Tom called it Jenny’s Song.”

“Jenny’s song?” mutters Tarly. “Is it this one?” He hums: “High in the halls of the kings who are gone”
“That’s it!”

“Song’s about Jenny of Oldstones,” he says. “Married Duncan Targaryen, who threw over Lyonel Baratheon’s daughter for Jenny.”

Arya blinks. “I did not know that.”

“It gets obscured, in the whole Summerhall story.”

“Summerhall?” she asks. You are cruel to come to my hill, cruel. I gorged on grief at Summerhall, I need none of yours. “Maester, Maester, she said it to me-- I gorged on grief at Summerhall.”

Samwell Tarly’s eyes are wide. “Pate’s...um...Jaqen’s studied Summerhall,” he says. “He knows a lot more about the Targaryens than I do.”

Arya purses her lips, considers it. “He needs a distraction right now. Un planning Jon’s wedding is good enough. We will save this for a later time. It is not critical--the curse is still confused, hovering over me.”

Samwell looks at her askance. “But it worries you.”

Arya sighs. “It keeps coming back to the Starks. Why are Stark women stuck in the middle of a tangle between Stag and Dragon?”


“Winter is coming,” she whispers. “Winter is coming.”

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JAIME

Cersei twirls the stem of her wineglass as they sit in the “solar” above the Queen’s gardens. What is the point of sitting in a solar when the sun does not rise?

“...far too expensive,” Cersei is saying.

Euron Greyjoy drains his wine, makes noises of agreement.

Jaime hasn’t touched his glass. Wine tastes like ash in his mouth. Everything is ash. Rage is ash, desire is ash, ash like the bones of my children, ash like Cersei’s soul.

The Mountain stands behind her; Euron Greyjoy occupies the chair Robert Baratheon used to favor. Jaime and Qyburn are consigned to the Queen’s left.

“She will come into Blackwater Bay,” says the King of the Iron Islands.

An alliance now, thinks Jaime bitterly. That moved quickly.

Cersei has found a willing co-conspirator, who matches and over-matches her appetite for sadistic machination.

He did not believe it, when Qyburn told him. Still doesn’t, but every time he sees Cersei with Euron, the suspicion digs its vine-hooks deeper into him.
Did my son take his own life because of what his mother did?

“The wildfire is sufficient deterrent,” says Cersei. “My dwarf-brother knows this better than anyone. They will land in Dorne.”

“We expect them to land in Dorne,” counters Euron. “So they will not.”

Cersei gives the king a mocking smile. “So what shall it be, Euron Greyjoy? Divide your fleet...lose it all. Pick one, or the other.”

He smiles back, just as mocking. “I have someone that can help make such decisions.” He gestures to one of the men--more sailor than soldier, but rapist pirate most of all--standing behind him, who bows, takes his leave.

Jaime is silent. Watching. Waiting.

Euron doesn’t make them wait long. His pet pirate drags in a man in tattered robes, encrusted with salt and sweat and stinking of the sea. The man is pilloried, his arms and neck held by a length of wood he must carry, and chained to it for good measure. Like a dog.

“My brother,” says Euron Greyjoy softly. “Tell the Queen where the Targaryen bitch’s fleets will land.”

Aeron Greyjoy, for this is who this wretch must be, given Victarion is still on Essus, Aeron Greyjoy opens his mouth--his lips are stained blue, his face is unnaturally pale around his mouth and chin. Same as his scalp. Shaved, and recently. Forcibly, by the nicks and blood-encrusted sores around his lips, his ears.

The man’s head is dragged up, though such force is barely needed, and a cupful of some viscous, blue liquid poured down his gullet while the pirate holds the man’s nose, forces him to swallow.

The procedure looks practiced.

The man staggers, falls to his knees, and his eyes, dull so far, look up and glitter with hatred.

“What will her fleet land?” asks Euron again in that soft, restrained, silken voice. But then he turns to Cersei, and the king’s voice is warm bass again. “And now we play a little game, my brother and I,” he explains to her. “Will he lie, or won’t he?” Euron grins, boyish; the expression does not reach his eye.

“See you the waves upon the deep,” gasps Aeron Greyjoy. “Dorne. The Mother of Dragons comes to Dorne.”

Euron smiles. “So we will position ourselves in Blackwater Bay.” He shakes his head. “My brother lies. He always lies. Told our parents lies, when he was a child, and he lies now.” Euron gestures, and his pirates haul Aeron to his feet again. “No food for three days,” the king instructs.

For a moment, Jaime’s gaze crosses that of Aeron Greyjoy. Brother to the King, brother to the Queen, both chained.

Aeron Greyjoy looks at Jaime with pity.

Jamie cannot help the bitter smile on his face, that stays until the chained man is dragged away.

“So,” Cersei says, “may I interest you in some sport, Your Grace?”
“Sport?” asks Euron. “Do tell me more, Your Grace.”

“Peasants,” she says. “I confiscate the pretender’s coins; they hold on to them.”

Euron shakes his head mournfully. “Filthy, filthy traitors.”

Cersei sighs. “The things I must suffer for my kingdom.”

“Speaking of sport,” says Euron, “Petyr Baelish. He accuses me of having him crippled.”

“Did you?” asks Cersei, and she looks delighted.

Euron shrugs. “My raiding parties range everywhere, who knows?”

“How crippled?” asks Cersei.

“I hear his legs are useless now.”

“So he cannot run?” she purrs. “Pity.”

Euron Greyjoy raises an eyebrow.

“Sport is much more fun when they can run.”

Euron considers the Queen. “You know,” he says, “that’s a very good point, Your Grace.”

She stands, and he mirrors her motion, offers her his arm. Almost in unison, the two turn, and walk towards the doors.

Qyburn and Jaime exchange a glance. In this, at least, they are of a mind--this man breeds violence, and disorder, wildness. They cannot afford these things now.

But they need his ships.

“Ser Jaime,” says Euron Greyjoy over his shoulder. The King’s voice is velvet, a serpent that slithers around Jaime’s shoulders. “Won’t you join us?”

Jaime feels again for the absent weight of a sword at his belt.

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**JAQEN**

Winterfell is a dragon, Jaqen thinks, a strange dragon of stone and snow that spreads its wings and claims those that fall under its shadow.

He has never had enmity with dragons, beasts that they are, only dragon riders.

Sansa runs down the steps, horn in hand, though the mead is ending up upon the flagstones as she runs.

*She has healed some then, enough to run without pain.* Even with Arya’s poisons in her, Sansa could not manage more than a controlled walk before they’d left.

Jon dismounts, helps Arya untangle Bran from the saddle. The boy is light--too light. Jon carries
Bran in his arms, Sansa right next to him. Arya looks to follow in their wake, but Jaqen’s attention is snagged by Sandor, who tips his head to a side.

“A few moments, love,” Jaqen murmurs. Arya takes in Sandor, waiting, the trio up ahead.

“At your convenience, my lord,” she murmurs, eyes downcast, before she walks away.

*That* tone ensures Jaqen will deal with whatever Sandor wants quickly. As it is, his eyes are fixed on her retreating form. Heavy fur cloak, no sway at all to her hips, the sword at her side. And yet in his mind’s eye he can see every curve of her as if she is naked, the hollow at the base of her spine, the--

Sandor clears his throat.

“*Yes*, Sandor,” says Jaqen, turning to face the scarred warrior. “You have my attention.”

“‘Bout time,” grumbles Sandor.

Jaqen sighs.

“More of your people coming. Davos went out to White Harbor to receive them. Official ambassadors, apparently. Something you’re not telling me, sly-blade?”

*Volantis to Braavos to White Harbor. Exactly twenty-two days.*

“How many?” he asks.

“Two.”

*Our brother, and one more.* The choice of the second will be telling.

Whoever it is, they will have Arya Stark’s memories. Winterfell is dangerous, for a Faceless Man. But so far it has brought no sorrow into the world for them, no harm to the House.

For their brother of the frayed self, Winterfell might not be so bad a thing after all.

“I cannot see the entire picture,” he says to Sandor. “One of them is the brother Arya insists on attempting to heal.”

Sandor smiles. A rare thing. “The She-Wolf goes to war again.”

*Let us hope she does not learn defeat.* “She will try,” he temporizes. “We shall see what happens. Tell me about the Karstarks and Umbers.”

Sandor is taken aback. “The fuck happened to you up north?”

Jaqen snorts. “Starks.”

“Thought there was one sane man left, at least.” Sandor’s tone is mournful.

“Married Arya Stark, remember?”

“Not all fools are madmen, now, are they?” Sandor’s lips pull back in a grotesque smile. “Wights
have fallen off, for some reason. Think the Karstarks are preparing something new. The Umbers...we’ve confirmed it; Hothor died out there,” he gestures to the fields before Winterfell, “Mors died with Stannis. Tormund Giantsbane took Smalljon Umber, so nobody knows what’s happening out at the Last Hearth.”

“A son and two daughters,” murmurs Jaqen. “Green boys, that went with Mors to support Stannis; likely the son went with them. Daughters running the place then, one way or another.”

Sandor grunts. “Little bird’s not sure how complicit they were in handing over her brother to the Bolton cunt.”

*Baby Rickon.*

“Betrayal is a habit-forming drug,” says Jaqen. “Trust is not advised in this case. Tell me, Sandor, is there any reason we cannot field a small contingent to take the Last Hearth before the main army takes Karhold? Cut off the Karstark access to Eastwatch, stop them sending more wights south.”

“*We*?”

“I will ride with you,” says Jaqen.

Sandor just...looks at him. Then the scarred warrior exhales, a long, slow breath. “Good,” he says. “We need the Last Hearth. But we’re short men, and King’s not of a mind to send Wildling fighters.”

The single stone that started the landslide of hate, the abduction of an Umber’s daughter by a Wildling—some kinds of insult a king must not heap, even upon traitors.

“Last Hearth’s been decimated,” says Jaqen. The majority of Umber fighters went to support Robb Stark, died in the Riverlands. The Umber grandfathers fell to Stannis and Jon, and the Umber boys to Ramsay. The Last Hearth is an unlucky house, it seems; one usually supports both sides of a conflict in the hope that something survives. “Your greenhorns will do.”

“Almost two score, and not so green now,” says Sandor.

*Is that pride I hear?*

“They’re the ones dealing with the wights. The circuits,” Sandor is still speaking, “toughens a boy up, this riding about the snow, looking for the walking dead.”

“I’ll suggest it to Jon, then. The sooner the better,” says Jaqen. Stopping the incursion of wights must take priority. Then he lowers his voice. “All of us that went to the Wall, we must sleep overmuch for a moon. I will shorten my own recovery, but I still need a sevenday. You will have to keep the watch alone a bit longer.”

“So you’ll laze about like a noble, sly-blade, while the rest of us work, is that it?”

Jaqen gives the man a mocking, full-on court bow, then leaves in search of his bride.

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**PETYR**
He stands over Norbert’s bunk, the ship swaying under their feet, timbers creaking as the sails are furled. The man is slipping away, it seems. Not that Petyr cares. Norbert’s done his part.

Could have been me.

Euron Greyjoy. The name burns in Petyr’s breast, even as his thoughts calculate the trajectory of the blow that would have severed Petyr’s spine, crippled him, left him for dead. But a tactic aimed at deflecting Jon Snow’s retaliation instead served to deflect Euron Greyjoy’s preemptive strike; Norbert, dressed in Petyr’s clothes, seated upon Petyr’s horse even as Petyr himself wore armor…

Norbert is slipping away, and Petyr Baelish is still alive. And it seems Sansa Stark kept her word--no riders from Winterfell have been sighted.

Why would Euron target the Vale? Target me? The timing of it…

The King of the Iron Islands has discovered he has a rival.

Euron Greyjoy wants Sansa Stark.

A twinge of disquiet flares in Petyr’s breast: I can still feel what he did to me. Greyjoy is to Ramsay Bolton what a direwolf is to a stray dog. But Sansa is not stupid. She won’t make the mistake of accepting the Greyjoy’s proposal.

Euron Greyjoy would not care about rivals to Sansa Stark’s hand unless the Iron Islands suit to Daenerys Targaryen had failed. Petyr should have seen it coming: Euron has no rock wife, Euron claims the North for himself.

In Petyr’s breast, regret shares space with fury. Not regret for his decision, regret for the might-have-been. Sansa loves me, a little. As I love her. A little. But there are bigger fish in the sea than Sansa Stark; Sansa Stark had a chance to be a queen.

And with Euron Greyjoy pursuing Sansa, and Victarion possessing the grace of a beached whale, who will Daenerys Targaryen marry now?

“To Braavos,” instructs Petyr. There is no reason to go back to the Vale. He doesn’t believe in White Walkers and walking corpses, but the evidence of the longest winter in recorded history is all around them, the speed with which the waters of the Riverlands are freezing, the depth of the snow, the fact that the sun no longer rises, even in Dorne.

The Vale will starve itself to death.

Petyr Baelish intends not to be there when it happens.

“To Braavos,” he murmurs. He has a man to see about a king.

SANSA

It took four days for it to be explained to her, why Jon, the Maester, Arya, why they sleep away two-thirds of the day.

Half a moon since the four rode back from the Wall. Changed souls, all of them, all save Arya.
Bran; this quiet, sad child, she doesn’t know him at all.

He looks at her so, so sadly, and in some moments she is actually afraid of her brother; in some moments he sees through her as if she is not there at all. They should be a pair, Sansa and Bran, in the look of them, that same red-gold Tully hair, the eyes. As much a pair as Jon and Arya are, crowned in Stark black.

And yet Sansa and Bran speak only of small things, even as the large flow around them. The largest: Sandor and Jaqen rode north, and just... took the Last Heart. One Umber daughter survives, under guard in her own home.

She cannot protest--the majority of Sandor’s forces, a score or so, they man the Eastwatch now, and support will be sent there soon to prevent more wights from being pulled south of the wall.

An easy victory.

The suddenness of it. That is what unsettles her. As if between one eyeblink and the next, the war has started and the threads of control are slipping out of her hands.

She cannot even control her own shield. The excursion was discussed in vague terms, it seemed to her, and then the next day Sandor was just gone. He returned yesterday; she did not greet them--maybe Arya was awake enough to handle the duty, maybe not.

Sandor came to her bower, fully armoured, and went down on one knee before her. “Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission; is that it, ugly bird?” she’d asked. He had no response.

She wishes, now, that she had greeted them--a sight to see, she thinks, Sandor, Jaqen, warriors dressed in the Stark colours, returning triumphant, a thing she has not seen since she was a child.

She sighs, and turns to her plate. Just her and Bran, breaking their fast in the Great Hall.

“You are one of us, you know,” says Bran softly.

One of us? So many “us”, within the House and without, and she doesn’t know where she belongs anymore.

“If so,” she says, “will you tell me what happened at the Wall?”

Bran’s eyes are dark as they turn on her. “My friend died. Maester Samwell found me. Jon and Jaqen and Arya were there. We came back.”

Sansa’s mouth twists. Bran’s answering smile is wry.

“I feel left out.” Sansa’s voice is matter-of-fact.

Bran raises his hand, weak, bone and skin still--Winterfell rations, but she’s been putting as much food and drink in him as he will accept--he lays his hand on hers, for a moment. “Not the intention, Sansa,” he says softly. “There is much to assimilate.”

She toys with the remnants of her bread. “I suppose I must wait till Jon is more coherent.” He’d staggered off halfway through the last council meeting, they found him snoring in a chair in the antechamber.

Bran looks at her, looks through her. “I can tell you some things, if you would like.”

She shakes her head. “You should ask Jon for permission.” A good reason, if Jon hasn’t told her
yet.

“Not a child, Sansa!” snaps Bran.

The urge to soothe him, pat him on the head... *Ten and five now.*

He’s glaring at her.

No equilibrium between them, just...messengers with messages for each other, passing each other in the night, never meeting.

She begins to count ships in her head--boats, more than ships. Ice-breakers. A thing of the Free Cities, of Lorath, they go before fishing fleets to break open passages to open waters. Davos Seaworth things it will work, even upon a river. *I know how to hurt the Karstarks.* A grandiose boast--knowing and doing are two different things.

Bran is the first to break. “I see things,” he says.

She nods. *Greenseer.* She does not know what that entails. Does not know what *warg* entails, either, or whether she could be one. She has not asked.

“I know who Jon’s mother is.”

Sansa forgets to breathe for a moment.

“He’s wrapped up in himself, Sansa.”

She sees it, and she sorrows, and she feels even more left out. Clearly he’s told Jaqen. Maybe not Arya, no, not Arya or Arya would be *hovering* over Jon all hours of the day.

The thought mediates the resentment that has been growing in her breast. She is very well aware of her gender, after all. That unspoken camaraderie, between men, their closed circles. Even Sandor exchanges more information in a grunt with Jon than she does in an entire morning’s worth of conversation.

“His mother is the reason Jaqen’s suddenly *riding to war* for Jon?” she asks.

“Don’t assume things.”

She stills herself, focuses on Bran, arms open before her: *I’m waiting.*

Bran takes a deep breath. Looks to the side. “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

Foreboding crawls up her spine, twists at her. “No. Don’t tell me.”

“They’re conspiring, Jon and Jaqen,” he says. “*That* has to do with his mother. They’re keeping Arya out of it--avoiding you, too.” Bran’s mouth is suddenly cold. “It’s a knot, Sansa, and I cannot see where it leads. You need to know.”

She takes his example, takes a deep breath. Steels herself.

“Prince Rhaegar and Aunt Lyanna had a baby,” says Bran.

*A year, between her abduction and her death.*

“No,” says Sansa, flat. “No.”
Bran just looks at her, eyes infinitely sad.

Petyr Baelish speaks in her heart: “You are the rightful Queen in the North.” She snarls, and rips the Mockingbird out of her, shreds him to ribbons.

*Jon is my brother.*

*That* should have been her first thought. She is unbearably twisted, that it wasn’t. But it comes, now, the sorrow.

*Oh. Oh, Father, Father, what did you do?*

The regret.

*All this time, both Father and Jon found wanting by everyone. Even Mother, especially Mother.*

The pride.

*A Stark’s honor. Saved him from Robert Baratheon, from Tywin Lannister, from--*

“Jon is a Targaryen.”

Bran thinks for a moment. “Some part in his blood,” he says. “The rest is *ours*.”

*Oh dear gods.*

“The Targaryens,” whispers Sansa. “They take more than one wife.”

“Not for hundreds of years,” says Bran. “Until Rhaegar thought he saw a prophecy.”

Sansa closes her eyes, her thoughts whirling, heart thudding beneath her breast, and she must breathe, breathe. She reaches out, plucks a single thought out of the whorl. “Jon is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne.”


*What will be left, if I rip all their voices out of me?*

“Jon wants to be a Stark,” says Bran.

*Wants to be a Stark.*

She would laugh, if she wasn’t quite so ready to weep. *The Iron Throne, against a beggared, decimated, snow-bound landscape, with dead men to the north and Lannister armies to the south.*

*We don’t even have a crown for him.*

*Wants to be a Stark.*

She doesn’t need to snarl to rip Joffrey out of herself. Joffrey hears the words and chokes himself to death on them: *one of us.*

She plucks another thread out of the thought. “*Conspire,* you said. And they’re keeping Arya and me out of it.” The process of elimination is a trivial one. “Daenerys Targaryen is Jon’s aunt.”

Bran nods. “Jaqen says alliances don’t need people to be exchanged in the Free Cities.”
“Jaqen sees people, not titles,” she says. *An assassin’s skill. Flesh and blood and bone to them, all of us.*

“I have reached the end of the things I may speak of,” says Bran quietly. Something in his voice, his voice, it sounds a thousand years old, it sounds like the rustling of dry leaves in the autumn, like the silent rush of a river far below ice.

She lowers her head in her hands. “Gods,” she sighs, then looks up. “Is Jon scared to tell me?”

Bran nods. “He doesn’t want to lose another sibling.”

*Another?*

Robb. Rickon.

Their dead loom over them still.

*Would Robb have given Jon the name, had he known?*

She imagines the scenario. Robb, learning of their Father’s decision, the deliberate besmirching of Eddard Stark’s honor to keep his sister’s son safe, the slights Jon suffered for it.

Jon’s birthright as a Prince of the Targaryens. Jon’s hunger to be claimed by the only family he has ever known.

*Robb would have asked Jon what Jon wanted.*

Robb’s voice reaches out from the grave, from her diaphragm, up through her lungs, it expands, it fills her mouth. “Jon is a Stark,” she says; Robb’s voice reverberates in the air around them.

Bran is looking at something over her shoulder.

She turns.

Jon stands there, but a few paces behind her. Watching.

*How much did he hear?*

It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. She smiles at him. “Come and eat, Jon, you missed supper last night.”

“Not a child, Sansa,” Jon mutters as he comes closer, takes a seat between her and Bran.

She waits for the lines of tension to drain from Jon’s shoulders, for him to stop sneaking worried glances at her before she speaks.

“You still have to marry her.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“Jaqen says--”

“I hold Jaqen in high esteem,” she says, “but he is a man of the Free Cities, not a noble of Westeros. He supports Jon, not the King in the North.”
Bran shakes his head, “No, Sansa, he--”

Her upraised hand shuts Bran off as well. “Think. This three-way alliance that Arya brokered, it rests on Jon Stark wedding Daenerys Targaryen and Arya Stark wedding the Sealord of Braavos. Braavos is a Free City, think you that if an ‘alliance without exchanging people’ would have worked, Arya would have given up her name, her identity to another?”

Silence.

“Jaqen has brought down a mountain of problems on his own head--and Arya’s--with this taking of sides. The House of Black and White will not approve, and their disapproval is not something anyone walks away from.”

Jon grins. “Jaqen’s untouchable, Sansa, him and Arya both.”

“There are two Faceless Men coming to us--invited, of course, but Arya and I had thought it was because this brother of theirs, the poisoned one, that she and I could help him.” She clasps her hands together, tight, under the table. “While you were gone, Arya’s position as the official envoy was rescinded. These newcomers, they are the official ambassadors now.”

“The Faceless Men are very secretive,” says Bran softly. “They are veiled from me. But strife gathers, over the House of Death.” He turns to Jon. “I need to see, need to go to the Heart Tree.”

Jon shakes his head. “You said the Night’s King saw you, came after you.”

Bran shudders.

Danger. Magic. She needs Samwell Tarly. But the Maester sleeps.

“What do you mean, saw you?”

“In the visions,” says Bran.

So there are visions.

Bran’s eyes brim. “People died, because I went too far.”

Now Sansa does lay a hand on his head. “People died because I lied,” she says. “Didn’t know any better. Mistakes are made. We are responsible for them.”

Bran nods, regains himself.

“You will tell me everything,” she says, pinning both of her brothers with a glare. “About wargs and magic, and visions. Everything. Soon.”

Bran grins--a sudden shaft of sunlight through a Sept’s stained-glass windows. “I can teach you. How to warg. You are one of us.”

So that’s what he meant. She smiles back. “I would love to learn.”

“Arya needs to learn too,” says Bran. “She’s insane, and she’s powerful, and she doesn’t know what ‘walking quietly’ means.” He shudders again.

No, Arya walks quietly. Jaqen’s the impetuous one.

Information on the assassins is scarce, but not absent. Davos’s assessment, made after much
deliberation: The Iron Bank has allied itself with Daenerys Targaryen, which threatens the balance of power in Braavos. That is the only reason the House of Black and White has made overture to the Starks.

“I signed the agreements, while you were gone. From their side, the Stark name is known,” she says. “It means we are granted protection from assassination attempts.”

Jon dismisses the words. “The Many-Faced God would not allow such an attempt in the first place,” he says.

Sansa grits her teeth. “Religion is a comfort to those that have nothing else. Even if this god of Arya’s is real, even if he takes an active role in things, the Faceless Men follow their own principles. Immunity for the Starks is no immunity at all--protection does not mean that contracts will not be entertained, simply that the price will be set so high that it cannot be met. You have not been listening to Arya. Their god only gets a vote on what the Faceless Men do--a ceremonial thing, like a libation of wine poured for the Stranger at a funeral.”


“Do not probe too deeply into the workings of Faceless Men,” warns Bran.

Sansa nods. “I have resolved to ask no more questions of Arya and Jaqen--it puts them as much at risk as it does us.”

Jon looks even more troubled.

“The price--the gold price only, Davos says they always take something else, something of worth to the one who seeks to buy a death--the gold price will be set to a single coin for any names we may choose to give them.”

“But that’s what Arya said before,” Jon murmurs.

Sansa nods. “She is toeing her order’s line. Political support, envoys exchanged, all of that is as would be with any other guild of the Free Cities. But real support is restricted to the guild’s function. You would not ask the Artificer’s guild for a loan, you would not ask the Courtesan’s guild to build ships. Faceless Men do not act as commanders in anyone’s army, not unless it is a ruse for an assassination. No disguises here, Jon, no ruses, do you understand what Jaqen has done, taking the Last Hearth for you? He wore the Direwolf!”

Even if Jaqen does not intend it to be so, even if it is not true, his actions say he is more Stark than Faceless Man, that his marriage vows are more important than his oaths to his order.

Jon leans back, runs a hand through his hair. “Jaqen is a special case.”

Jon told Jaqen. What did Jaqen tell Jon in turn?

“It doesn’t matter if he is the guildmaster,” says Sansa. “In fact, the higher his rank the worse it will be.” She breathes, wills Jon to understand. “Guild politics--look at it from their viewpoint. A high-ranking guild-member takes a young, beautiful, noble wife. And then he abandons his position, rides to her parents’ home with her, helps her family. Doesn’t fulfil his duties while he is there--there was a contract on your head, Jon, and Jaqen didn’t fulfil it.”

“R’hllor!” says Bran. “That’s because it was a trick, the Many-Faced God--” Bran stops himself when he sees the look on her face.
“What did I say about religion, Bran?” she asks.

“I **know** what I’m talking about!” Bran protests.

“So do I,” she says, cold. “And I’m telling you, Jaqen is out of line. And Davos--he says Faceless Men wear many faces, nobody knows their true age, but that Arya is young. Too young. She may not be a full Faceless Man at all, just an apprentice.” *She said so, did she not? An apprentice poisoner, an apprentice alchemist.*

“*That* at least I know is not true,” says Jon

“We cannot know for sure,” says Sansa. “Either way, it seems to me that Jaqen has the political sense of a turnip.”

Jon chokes.

“Do **not** listen to his advice when it comes to alliances. Arya knows what she is doing. She is a Stark, she can use that blade she wears--Sandor says she’s no Brienne of Tarth, but she's better than the boys he’s training. So why is Arya not riding for you?”

Jon looks like he has seriously not given the question much thought. “I thought she was helping you,” he mutters.

“With what, planning dinner menus?” asks Sansa. “No, Jon, she knows Jaqen’s position, whatever it may be, I will not ask, she knows it protects him somewhat, perhaps it allows some leeway. But she has no latitude **at all**. All the things I thought she was telling me in confidence, about the House of Black and White, about their support for us-- *word for word* what is written in the formal understanding I just approved. She was *parroting*. All had been decided beforehand. And now Jaqen’s gone and invalidated half the clauses in that memorandum.”

“Didn’t think of that,” mutters Jon.

“Of course not,” says Sansa with disgust. “You were too busy thinking of how you can get *out* of the alliance she has risked so much to secure for you.”

Jon’s shoulders slump.

Sansa cannot afford pity. But consolation, that she can provide.

“All of this is speculation,” she says softly. “We must wait and see what these Faceless Men do when they come.”

**Drag Jaqen off in chains? Arya?** The two worst possibilities--remote, because *that* is a losing proposition for all involved, for then there will be no alliance with the Starks, no wife for the Sealord, no flow of information from Sansa and Maester Samwell’s networks, no safehouses, no legal immunity for those bearing a certain coin.

Not if Arya is harmed. Or Jaqen.

**So what is more important to Faceless Men? Principle, or practicality?**
No ship goes to Asshai. Asshai’s trade, it seems it has *ended* somehow since the Night of Ice.

Jorah Mormont sits in a rooming-house above Qarth harbour, his coins running out one by one, and despairs.

A messenger comes to the common-room of the inn where he eats his supper, comes right up to his table and speaks. “We hear you are looking for a way to reach Asshai.”

Jorah raises an eyebrow. “*We*?”

On the heels of the messenger, a woman sweeps into the inn. Frightened glances, people nonchalantly edging out of her way. She follows the messenger’s trajectory.

The rich silver-red brocade of her dress, the enamelled mask upon her face, the assurance of power...this can only be one woman.

“Lady Quaithe,” says Jorah Mormont.

The masked woman dips her head. “You are looking to go to Asshai,” she says. Some unseen signal, from her, from someone else, and the room clears rapidly.

Jorah closes his eyes, nods. He must force his hand not to stray to the bandages, not to show her, show anyone, but someone that can help him.

“If you know, then you know I must go to Asshai,” he says tiredly.

“Lo,” she says, and removes her mask. “Asshai has come to you.”

Jorah Mormont looks up into her face, half in shadow, lit only by the flames of the hearth. He does not know when he went to his knees, but he finds himself on the ground before her. His heart has not stopped its staccato thumping against his ribcage.

“My Queen,” he whispers even as he realizes his mistake.

Where Daenerys is the sun, this woman’s beauty burns like the cold, cold moon--silver-white hair, a heart-shaped face. It is too dark to see the true color of her eyes, but they enthrall, they bind him to the floor. A heavy necklace, similar to those he has seen Red Priests wear, it sits around her throat, but it is made of silver, not gold, and inset with sapphires and emeralds.

She smiles at him, and in the smile he sees the promise of everything that has been denied him by chance, by circumstance.

“I am the Champion of the Lord of Light,” she says softly.

Jorah Mormont bows his head. “Forgive me, your holiness,” he says, “I mistook you for a Targaryen Queen.”

She laughs, a chime of pure silver tinkling down around his head, his shoulders. “My mother was a shadowbinder from Lys,” she says. “Make of that what you will.”

He shakes his head. It means naught to him.
“We have a ship waiting to take you into shadow. My mistress would see you. Cure you, should you be willing to pay the price.”

“Name it!”

Silence. He dares a glance upwards—she is smiling at him, warm, serene. “Some gifts have no name,” she says. “Come, Jorah the Andal, the ship is waiting for you. Do not tarry.”

He nods, rises, moves to follow her but his legs tangle with the table, he does not know which way is up, or down, save that the ground is pressing against his cheek.

_Do not tarry._

Jorah Mormont pours all of his will into his limbs, crawls upright, bit by bit, till he can follow the vision out the door.

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Chapter End Notes

_gul's hand in this, which means spelling, grammar, everything is better by 100%.

also I'm back :)

hope this works...we're transitioning to the No One arc. Progress, on all fronts. Some unexpected things ;)

Shieldswife

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

She stands on top of the steps, almost hopping from foot to foot with impatience.

*I want to meet him, I want to know his name!*

Jaqen is amused at her antics.

The decision to receive them at the Postern Gate was a good one, she thinks. Private, nobody comes here this time of night.

*Going to pretend to ignore the archers Sandor’s stationed up in the approach.*

Ravens have been exchanged between the House of Black and White and Winterfell, and Sansa is avoiding talking about it; Arya has been replaced as formal envoy, of course. Sansa would not have known: it is not a punishment, it was the plan. Arya did not expect it quite so soon, but since their brother will be here anyways, it is an efficient move.

But Arya can guess what Sansa worries about, from the archers alone.

*He bore the Direwolf upon his breast, and took to open war in Jon’s name.*

She is the hand of the Stranger, shieldwife to the Heart Tree of the Last Dreaming. Their brothers will be managed. No archers needed, Sansa.

But Arya’s responses are still slow, she misses things. It is difficult, for one who is used to a bare handful of hours to sleep each night, to sleep the entire day away, to wake groggy and tired, to eat, then sleep again. Events are spinning away from her. Her task, to manage the Starks--and now Sansa is worried, for *them*, which helps not at all.

*Later, later, later.*

Two hooded figures have come into view, trailed by Davos Seaworth. One throws back his hood, glances up at the darkened stairwell, even as Davos says something to him.

*Zural.*

Excitement. Confusion. *What is Zural doing* here instead of the Waif? Only a very small fraction of her attention is devoted to her old teacher, though.

She waits, every sense alert, focused on the other.

He throws back his hood.

The dark-gold hair, the face... *surely not*.

He looks up.

“That’s…” she is rendered speechless. *I know him. I know him.*
“Do not give him his name,” warns Jaqen, but she is already running down the stairs.

She throws herself at her brother, and his arms come around her, squeezing her tight to his chest for a moment.

Affection. Unfeigned, reciprocal. Arya Stark warps with the force of it, her brother trembles, and even the wind is too startled at the power of it to do more than wail in the distance.

Eyes, eyes all around them. She pulls back.

“Arya Stark,” he says.

“Brother,” she replies.

The embrace was not simply a gesture of affection: he smells of clementines, and basil. No mold, no ash. His spine is twisted, pulling to one side more than the other. There is flesh on his bones, but he must exert his will to stay upright, his skin hangs loose about him. Healthier than the last time we dreamed over him, his gaze is clear for now.

“Pine and wintergreen,” he murmurs, for her ears alone. “You and Jaqen have been busy.” His eyes are suspiciously bright.

He is not a warg. How does he smell that? What did they do to our brother in Asshai? Not simply the poison, not simply the torture; something else reaves the space between his thoughts.

She swipes at her own eyes and steps back.

Jaqen coming down the stairs, his pace far more sedate than hers had been. Others come in his wake.

The darkness in her brother dances with hers, and she senses something--the slight breeze in the corridor, cold, stroking the nape of her neck--there is a bond here, between him and Jaqen, something far, far darker than the bond the wind picks out in Zural.

God-touched.

As I was, before I became the wind.

What is the difference between one who is god-touched and one who is a god? Two points do not a pattern make. She mourns, sharply, anew, for the two others, the brother and the sister she will never know.

He carries their faces beneath his breast.

The breeze laughs at her.

Zural is looking at her brother with amazement. “What happened to the Lorathi way?” he asks.

“Fuck the Lorathi way,” says Arya.

She can sense Jaqen’s amusement.

“Lorathi,” says Zural, with a short bow to Jaqen. “Valar morghulis.”

“Braavosi,” responds Jaqen, with a similar bow, with the added twist of Jaqen’s customary, mocking humor. “Valar dohaeris.”
Then Jaqen extends a hand to their brother who is no one. They clasp forearms.

“Brother.”

“Jaqen.”

It feels like an entire conversation has taken place between the two in the space of the hand-clasp, that simple greeting, though it has been devoid of both text and subtext.

Dare not give him his name, even in my own head. His introduction to Sansa and the others will take care of it–see what pseudonym he adopts.

“What, Arya Stark, no hug for your old teacher?” asks Zural.

Arya grins. “I see the knife. No hugs for you, Zural.”

“Good girl,” says her Braavosi master.

“Braavosi,” mutter both Jaqen and her brother, under their breath.

________________________________________

SANSA

She sees Arya race down the stairs, throw her arms around one of the assassins.

They frown on unseemly shows of emotion, Davos had said.

The archers have nocked their arrows, but neither Arya nor Jaqen seem to be in the least perturbed.

She cranes her neck for a better view as she goes slowly down the stairs.

Is no one in their order bad-looking?

“Fuck the Lorathi way,” Arya is saying.

And then, the curly-haired man bows to Jaqen, and calls him “Lorathi”, which makes sense given Jaqen’s city of birth, but does not fit with Arya’s statement.

And Jaqen calls the curly-haired man “Braavosi”, but the other one--the one whose hand Arya is still holding--Jaqen calls him “brother” and he calls Jaqen by name.

There is some strange interaction at work here, divisions by cities of birth? By spheres of influence? Sansa cannot tell.

And who outranks who?

She cannot, for the life of her, assess the motives of these Faceless Men in this moment–not even Jaqen. It seems safe to assume that they are not here to drag Jaqen off in chains. Not immediately, at any rate. Arya just looks happy, almost giddy with excitement.

Arya stands out.

Not a Faceless Man, thinks Sansa. She is not sure what that means, for Arya, for the Starks. An apprentice, as Davos said.
She nods to Sandor, who gives the archers the signal to back off, and Sansa steps forward with the horn of mead, and the bread and salt.

“What, Arya Stark, no hug for your old teacher?” the curly-haired man is asking.

*Her teacher. She has not mentioned him before--what else has she left out?*

“I see the knife,” Arya responds. “No hugs for you, Zural.”

*Zural. A Braavosi name, if I am not mistaken. So they do divide themselves by city of birth. What will they call Arya, then? Northerner? Winterfellow? Westerosi” seems the most likely.*

*What knife?*

“Good girl,” says the Braavosi, Zural, with obvious approval.

Something relaxes in Sansa. *Arya may not be a full Faceless Man, but she is well-liked by her teacher.*

Still.

Sansa gambles upon the form of the greeting, she *must* , she must raise the importance of Jaqen and Arya in these strange outlanders’ eyes, make them think twice and twice again before trying anything .

“Be welcome, whomever you may be,” she intones as she holds the horn out, “to Winterfell, the ancestral home of Arya Stark and Jaqen H’ghar.”

The Braavosi looks at the horn in her hand, face blank.

*He hesitates--will they refuse?*

And then the Braavosi’s gaze shifts to Arya.

Arya smiles, rueful. “Quite real.”

*Why would he ask the apprentice?*

The blonde-haired assassin steps forward.

“Forgive our hesitation,” he says. His Westerosi is smooth, without a trace of the Braavos accent that decorates Arya’s teacher’s words, or the Lorath accent that shows through in Jaqen’s from time to time. “Your customs are new to us.”

He nudges the Braavosi, who reaches for the horn, takes a drink.

“I am Daorys,” he says. “My brother here is Zural Mobhai.” He gives Sansa a bow. “Forgive my presumption,” he says, “but you can only be the Princess Sansa Stark.”

Sansa dips her head, a shallow curtsy. *He is the diplomatic one. High-born. Neither of them looks poisoned.*

Jaqen and Arya have been watching all of this without a single expression on their faces. Blank, utterly blank. Sansa cannot take her cues from them.

*What am I supposed to do?*
She retreats to the graces of hospitality, extends the bread and salt to each man, waits for them to take a piece, dip it in the small salt-dish.

The southern custom of guest-right is a thin thing to bind assassins if they bring violence to Winterfell, but it is better than nothing.

“Be welcome, Ser Daorys, Ser Zural. Bread and salt, we offer you--our home is yours for as long as you so require.”

Daorys gives her another bow as he consumes his morsel of bread. “We are not used to being welcomed in someone’s home,” he murmurs, looks to Jaqen.

And finally, finally, Jaqen smiles, and the lines at the corners of his eyes crease. “An ancestral home, no less,” he says, sardonic.

“Madness,” says Zural.

*He is right. Who gives assassins free rein of their house?*

“Starks,” says Jaqen. “Come, brothers, we must not keep Sansa and the others up so late.”

Arya turns to her. “Sansa, may I show them to their rooms?”

*Relief. Fear.*

Arya sees the fear, shakes her head gently. A quick hand-clasp: *all is well.* Sansa’s jaw clenches, but she allows Arya’s judgement.

“Of course,” she says. “Davos and Sandor will escort me back to the front of the keep--Jaqen is right; it’s very late. You are quite safe here,” she adds, “Sandor Clegane himself has trained your guards.”

Another thin thing: the reputation of the Hound. But more substantial a shield than guest-right, more coated in threat.

At Sandor’s command, the “honor guard”--wearing rich livery, looking like courtiers from some southern hold, but four of Sandor’s best--take up attentive positions.

Arya will know what to do to make the visitors comfortable. They seem very civilized. Especially the blonde one, Daorys. A strange name. They will not indulge in a bloodbath out of nowhere.

Petyr’s voice echoes in her head: *“I taught you better than that.”*

She smiles, dignified, at the Faceless Men, and retreats to the corridors upstairs.

They are nearing her rooms when Davos speaks. “Well, there goes *that* theory,” he says ruefully, running a hand over his balding head. “Seems your sister and her husband are on good terms with their order after all.”

“You are right about Arya being an apprentice though,” says Sansa. She decides to give voice to her Petyr-like worry, albeit in its mildest form. “I worry, a little, about assassins loosed upon Winterfell,” she says.

Sandor snorts. “Faceless Men just got a face full of Stark hospitality. They’ll be too confused to get up to any mischief for at least a day or two.”
That earns a chuckle out of Davos, and a smile out of Sansa.

They did seem taken aback.

“Would that all our visitors were so nonplussed by a welcome,” she says sadly.

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ARYA

The packs are unloaded from their horses, and a sleepy groom leads the mounts away. She insists on shouldering Zural’s pack, “you’re my teacher, old man, want to show you I didn’t go soft!”, and to preserve symmetry Jaqen shoulders Daorys’s, which was the entire plan in the first place.

Transparent, but the fiction is allowed to stand.

The corridors are deserted, and the four Faceless Men move swiftly towards the inner parts of the keep, trailed by their “guards”.

“Something,” says Zural, in Braavosi. “Sansa Stark was looking ready to be defending you from us any moment.”

She sighs. “Sansa, Sansa.” The Lady of Winterfell was trying to help. She’s made it worse, much worse.

“Ancstral home ;” says Zural with a snort.

Neither she nor Jaqen have missed all the significance of Zural’s words, his tone. The fact that he came at all.

Arya Stark’s neutrality is suspect.

Zural, who knows her knows best of all the others at the House, for he has been the one to teach her longest, and last, Zural has been sent to assess her.

There is another truth here, now that she knows her brother’s name. The Kindly Man never does anything for a single reason, not if it can be helped.

Still, the one who plays Arya Stark, her behavior has been above reproach. Some indulgence, some flexibility, helpfulness —this is permitted, of course, all the better for a young, inexperienced Faceless Man to play the role. And it was understood that much would have to be accommodated, given how little of the ground truth was known in Braavos at the time of her departure; magic has returned to the world, the Red God wages war against Him of the Many Faces.

The Red God justifies much. But before R’hllor’s truths came to light, there was but one reason the risk was allowed at all, of sending a girl to the family she was born to: the risk was deemed small. Even before she took Jaqen’s coin, Arya Stark never wanted to be the creature defined as Lady Arya of the House of Stark (mother, father, family, these can belong to any girl at all, can be loved by anyone, not just an “Arya Stark”). This is what makes her a Faceless Man and “Aegon Targaryen” a failed acolyte—though Izembaro’s dragon knew he but played that part, he wanted to be Aegon Targaryen with a desperation bordering on obsession.

Also, Arya Stark is inexperienced; she can be eliminated the moment she gives any indication of going renegade.
Also, the House’s need for allies is urgent. R’hllor changes nothing; R’hllor *adds* to the urgency.

*The Iron Bank allies itself with the Last Valyrian*. *The Iron Bank has secured itself, secured oaths, against another Purge. The Iron Bank has dealt in slaves before.*

But death-dealers will never have gather allies like coin-masters do. The Starks are a gift; almost irresponsible, not to claim it. And truth, love, loyalty, these are tools that can make a claim on the Starks more effectively than anything else.

Corpuses, allies...the same tools are often used in the making of both.

*Valar morghulis.*

Arya Stark’s neutrality is suspect, and rightly so: she would gladly deliver the Starks as allies. But she would not have delivered Stark corpses had the god demanded them of her.

Ironic then that it is the *god* whose neutrality has failed him here.

“Bowmen lining the walk with arrows trained upon us,” offers Daorys.

A consolation, in the face of Zural’s obvious irritation--it covers his uncertainty. Faceless Men have *never* been welcomed openly anywhere before, and certainly not by a Princess who offers food and drink to them by her own hand. *Could have been poisoned.* That it wasn’t, a Braavosi may actually be insulted by that, on some subconscious level.

“Guards behind us instructed to cut you down if you try anything untoward,” says Jaqen.

“Pah! What are four guards doing if Faceless Men raise blades?”

“They have seen me spar to be seen,” she explains.

“Good,” says Zural, grudgingly. “And Jaqen?”

“Restrained, also. Some of the fighters know--Jaqen rides against the undead with the king.”

“Hmm.” Zural will reserve judgement on this matter; “undead” are very clearly the kind of problem that the god is supposed to deal with. Every brother has their specialty, after all.

*Let’s leave the Last Hearth out of it for now.*

“Four guards, just for us,” murmurs Daorys. “When they have twelve in the entire keep?”

“Twelve,” agrees Jaqen. “Should be thirteen, there is a breach in the walls near the eastward approach, Jamrys gets stationed there, but he likes to stay out of the wind.”

Daorys grins. “So one-third of the entire guard contingent of the King in the North, right behind us. I’d call that very respectful. Appropriate. I *like* it.”

“Your *arrogance*,” murmurs Jaqen.

Zural huffs.

She can feel her brother smirking behind them.

“There is being an implicit contract, in that horn-drinking,” says Zural. “Arya Stark does not remember this thing.”
She nods. “They are reviving old customs. Same as the bread-and-salt guest-right, with kin-right extended as well—should you be killed, you will be avenged. Or your blood-price will be set to that of a minor scion of House Stark. Keeps guests of opposing factions from killing each other under the King’s roof.”

She looks over her shoulder at Daorys. Daorys, who so smoothly avoided drinking from the horn, so smoothly that it passed below even Sansa’s notice. “The reparations to be made, should Jaqen H’ghar be killed by a Faceless Man…” she smirks. “The House will be beggared.”

“So we have to pay to kill one of our own?” He grins back, his eyes giving nothing away, not even surprise at her insinuation. “The Starks really have turned the world upside down.”

Jaqen snorts. “Sansa likes me,” he says. “Don’t think she’d take the gold.”

“The horn is a formality,” says Arya. “By the laws of this land, the House of Black and White fostered Arya Stark. Her brothers in the order are kin to the king in all but blood.”

“Wondrously good,” mutters her Braavosi brother. “The mess was being too simple, so far.”

Daorys chortles.

“And here we are,” says Arya, as they mount the steps to the children’s wing. The guards take up position at the base of the staircase.

Sansa had looked askance at the choice, earlier in the day.

“You made the herald’s quarters your own,” Arya had ventured. “I’m claiming these. Unless Jon’s fathered a child or two we don’t know about?” Bran would not be returning here—he had the suite on the ground floor, right under the Maester’s.

“Ambassadors,” Sansa had murmured. “We can’t put them—”

“*My* guests,” Arya had interrupted. “There’s…reasons.”

*This is the section of the keep their memories have learned to call “theirs”.*

She had not known Zural would be coming. She’d expected the Waif as the House’s healer; the one born as Arya Stark had looked to provide what comfort she could, subconscious though it may be, to their brother while he slept.

Sansa had relented eventually.

She puts Zural’s pack down in one of the rooms, as bare as the servants would allow her to make it.

“Be careful,” murmurs Jaqen, “the hard things at the foot of the bed are heated bricks. Arya almost attacked it, our first night here.”

“Rightly so,” says Zural, but he looks quite pleased at this luxurious turn of events—Braavosi appreciate the niceties of life.

“Talk now or in the morning?” asks Arya. “Tea or wine, as you prefer.”

“Earlier the better,” says Daorys. There is a shadow hovering behind him, over him. He doesn’t smell like ash and mold, but away from the pretense of social convention, he looks haggard. A stranger wouldn’t be able to tell, but Arya has worn his face many times before.
“Should I wake Bran? Or Jon?” she asks Jaqen.

Daorys raises an eyebrow, waits for an explanation as to why the king or the king’s heir should be wakened in the middle of the night.

Jaqen shakes his head. “Briefing first, I think. Introductions can wait.”

She nods, and leads the way to the schoolroom.

The schoolroom Arya has appointed as a sitting-space, stripped it of all the things of childhood learning. She has left the walls bare stone, with the only concession to luxury a number of soft, fur-covered pillows scattered about the carpeted floor, and small foot-tables that will serve as writing and eating surfaces.

The difference in the room, from what it had been in her memories…

“All this, just for us?” asks Daorys, and he throws a devastating smirk her way.

“Only for you,” says Arya, eyes wide in mock-flirtation. “Zural can sit in the corridor.”

Their brother throws his head back and laughs, even as Zural grumbles in mock annoyance.

They seat themselves around the room, and Arya pours tea and wine as per each brother’s preference.

A briefing is best done in a specific order. They don’t need to know too much more about the environment than they do already through her memories.

Still.

“There are a number of secret passages Arya Stark did not know of,” she begins. “The one behind these rooms, and your sleeping chambers. Jaqen has the key, along with a map of the others. Severe damage to certain parts of the keep—battlements are repaired, but a lot of stonework is unsafe—marked with black paint, to keep the servant’s children from climbing. Hot springs are leaking into the library.”

She notes the flash of momentary horror in Daorys’s eyes. *He allows no one to care about scholarly things, still? Or was that just a coincidence, a nightmare peeping out through one of the holes in his mind?*

“Outside, biggest threat is wolves—a quick brush with Ghost will put enough direwolf scent on you to warn off the wild ones. Also, the undead, but they’re few and far between.”

“Re-animated, not resurrected,” reassures Jaqen.

Zural furrows his brow. “The difference being?”

“One is a meat-puppet,” says Arya. “The other needs mercy.”

“The gift must be given,” her Lorathi brother says quietly. He is an inflexible one, this brother. *Himself, Jon.* He will judge both, find both wanting, and he is allowed to kill neither. *So cruel.*

She smiles.

Jaqen straightens his spine. “Brothers,” he says quietly. Immediate, that *snap* of attention, of listening. “I play the god to the hilt.” His eyes are black, black-in-black.
Zural looks away. *First time he has seen the god.* Even through the stone the wind brings her the shuddering of the godswood with His power.

She admires the Braavosi’s composure. Her brother-- *he* looks nonchalant.

“And the god is *not* neutral, not anymore,” says Jaqen. “You need to watch everything I say--send a raven letting the House know as well.”

A deep sigh, from Zural. “How far, Jaqen?” *How far have you fallen?*

“To the limit of what I judge to be appropriate.” *Not your question to ask.*

*It is too much; too big, too fast.* Faceless Men do not labor under the innocent ignorance of men like Samwell Tarly. The transition from *brother* to *more*--she needs to draw Zural back, to focus on *her*, or the Braavosi will grow unpredictable. Uncontrollable. Her Lorathi brother, he has *seen*, he requires no handling.

She shifts--a subtle movement, an uncrossing of her legs, the baring of her throat. Merely a suggestion, of lewdity, of yearning. An invitation to the god.

Zural’s attention shifts in response, along with his disapproval.

“Arya Stark caused it,” says Zural, bitter. *The bitterness is key.* *I was his student, after all.*

Jaqen glances at her--a query. She lets Him see the winter in her eyes: *leave it to me.* Truth has always been Arya Stark’s best weapon; truth is a matter of perception.

“Arya Stark belongs to Him of the Many Faces,” she says mildly. *So do we all; it is very simple,* Zural, *though we Faceless Men do like our politics and principles and precedents.*

It *might* have been that simple, four hundred years ago. But the gradual accrual of complexity is inevitable with time; a ship in the salt-sea, its hull will gather encrustation, and barnacles will cling to it.

“Arya Stark,” says Zural. “You are bringing trouble to the heart of the order. You are sending a blank ballot, and it is leading us to this place when such should not have happened for another year.”

Perception is everything.

The perception of the House of Black and White must be brought into alignment with the god’s objectives again. And it must begin with Zural and their brother who is no one, and it must begin with establishing the fact that Arya Stark does not need to be given the gift.

“The vote over our brother,” she says, her voice cold, *“had nothing* to do with the Starks.”

“I will excuse myself from this discussion,” says Jaqen.

“That would be best,” she agrees.

And the god leaves.

She rises to her feet. She must choose, and choose right. *Zural is the arbitrator. Daorys is...what? The standard*, the wind supplies. *The standard of loyalty.*
Oh, the irony.

The executioner, the wind whispers. Zural may hesitate to kill his student; no precedent for it.

She smiles, seductive, and walks over to her brother, positions herself at his side, pressed up against him.

“Whatever gets a beautiful woman to wrap herself around me,” Daorys says, “another man’s wife at at? I support it wholeheartedly.” He smiles, rearranges himself, drapes an arm over her shoulder. The fiction of flirtation is transparent; it is allowed to stand.

The voice is not enough. The voice gives nothing away. And so they sit pulse-point along pulse-point, wrist and thigh, the muscles of the shoulders, her neck under his arm, where the slightest shift he will read. He measures her heartbeat, the breath in her lungs.

She offers him truth and takes it from him in turn; there is nowhere for them to hide a self if it exists.

“I will speak Braavosi, on the matter of the ballot,” she begins. “We could not let him go.”

“Attachment is the source of all suffering, Arya Stark,” admonishes Daorys.

“We attach ourselves to you,” she agrees, “and you suffer.”

She allows herself some pity in her expression.

He detests that.

The wind likes it, though.

“He walked into Asshai for you,” she says. “Would that I could go back in time, exchange places with you.”

Such is the depth of our attachment.

No. Her brother’s mouth forms the word. His jaw clenches. “Will go again,” he murmurs, “if it keeps Him from the chains. Will go again, and again, if it keeps you off that ship.”

Such is the depth of yours.

The wind has made a mistake.

Daorys is not the executioner.

Her Braavosi teacher is watching, eyes disturbed, intent. Emotion, attachment, these are not things Lorathi are supposed to experience. They are no one, after all; no one does not feel.

Feeling is a biological function, Zural. No one must eat, no one must drink, no one must hurt, and need, and give, and take. No one’s existence is a contradiction: in experiencing the things of the body, the limits of the body are transcended. Because no one feels, he can annihilate all feeling.

“Attachment is irrelevant,” she says.

Her brother raises an eyebrow.

“The god’s blind spot,” she says gently. “It is a Lorathi problem, is it not?”
Her brother allows it. It is hard, to confront in oneself the core of that which made one a Lorathi in
the first place.

“He will give you mercy, if you ask,” she says. “Arya Stark convinced him she could heal you—I
am not sure at all, it is an outside chance. But you must not ask. You must refuse, if he offers.”

Zural expels an explosive sigh. “This is not right!”

She is addressing Daorys now, Zural will pick up the dregs of it. “For His sake,” she says. She
gives her brother a twisted smile. “When you die, your memories should come to us.”

He nods, and there is a strange hollow in his eyes. He sees the shape of this thing.

No mercy for you, brother. You are the standard of loyalty, are you not?

But it must be made clear, to the both of them. An extrapolation, a risk. Gentle, gentle. “Who is
the woman in the mask, brother?”

Her brother’s eyes widen, he gasps; bends forward, and his pulse thrums erratically under her
touch. He strains against himself, his muscles fight against his own mind.

“You cannot remember,” the wind whispers for him. She strokes his back, long, slow strokes, and
waits for him to regain himself.

She looks to Zural. “I manipulated that ballot because we need him to remember before he dies.
Almost everything we know of R’hallor, it comes from him. How much of it he was allowed to
remember? Our brother must suffer, and live, long enough for us to extract truth from him.”

Zural is looking at her, and his eyes are wide. He had not expected this. “This is not being a kind
thing,” he says.

Contrary to the god’s will, contrary to the Faceless Men’s creed of mercy. And yet, the right
decision. Torture. Something the House has never indulged in.

“Most of our brothers,” she says, “they will be emotional in this matter.”

Zural is shaking his head. “I am being very unreasonable about it as well. You manipulated us into
rationality. Jaqen, he would not allow it for himself, so it must be meaning he does not see it—you
have manipulated him into blindness.”

She nods. “I am the cruelty the god needs; He refuses to claim any for Himself.” She brushes back
her brother’s hair as his breathing slowly, slowly returns to its calm, measured, controlled depth.
“And our brother can bear me, can he not?”

Daorys looks up, grins at her; he is no one again, returned from whatever plane his mind thrust him
into a few moments ago. “You are a small, light thing, Arya Stark,” he says.

She places a kiss upon his shoulder. She turns back to Zural, raises an eyebrow: what next?

“Are you—” Zural pauses, corrects himself. “Is Arya Stark belonging to Winterfell?” Frank,
straightforward.

He is beginning to understand. But it is not enough, being no one—it is Arya Stark that must be
exonerated here. But now she will be asked to judge her own degree of attachment, and her Lorathi
brother will watch, ready to catch her in a lie.
“Arya Stark belongs to the Many-Faced God,” she says.

Zural’s gaze is boring into her. “We have received a contract for the life of Jon Snow, which we will not take, of course--R’hllor.”

Both she and her brother allow no one to feel revulsion. For a moment, only. But there is resonance between them; dark purpose.

“We have also received a contract for Sansa Stark.”

She purses her lips. “Everyone in the order knows Sansa Stark’s name, thanks to Arya Stark’s memories.” She thinks aloud. “The one who gives the gift will have to be an acolyte. The Isles man, is he anywhere close to ready?” No, he wouldn’t be, not from what she’d seen four moons ago.

She hesitates.

“I am helping Sansa Stark heal--a fistula, from violent rape.” She bows her head--she allows no one her sorrow. “In the interest of expedience,” she says, “I will do it. Bran’s visions may be a problem, but he will not suspect me, not yet. He cannot tell one poison from another while I dose her.” Response, sorrow, these are tempered by biology; compliance is absolute.

Zural is silent.

She raises her head. “Brother?” she asks.

“You are become very different from the Arya Stark who left Braavos just a few moons ago,” says Zural.

Her mouth twists. “I have been under Lorathi tutelage.” Poor Zural.

“Taught you quite a bit, I see,” says her brother beside her, and the suggestion in his voice veils cautious approval.

“Very thorough, Jaqen H’ghar,” she says, imparting some suggestions of her own. “I had to come to Winterfell to let it go.”

The sorrow has passed, as often it does when she dwells on Him. She turns to her Braavosi teacher. “So. Sansa Stark. I would wait a day.”


“Jon--this is the god’s domain--he had incurable wounds,” she explains. “Arya Stark and Sansa Stark wept the tears of Lys. Not the poison. The tears.”

A raised eyebrow. Even amongst the Faceless that are interested in such things, the deists, this is a myth. It has never worked before.

“Jon Stark was healed,” she continues. “I would have us attempt this with this one,” she touches her brother’s head, “before I give Sansa the gift. Can’t squeeze tears from a corpse, after all.”


Incredulity. A little bit of awe, for some reason.

Her brother smiles. “She is no one,” he says. He turns to her. “Sister, leave me aside for a moment--for you, we came to clothe you in robes of black and white, should you have been exposed.”
She allows him to see her lack of understanding.

“Your breathe as if you are preparing yourself to receive the gift; you breathe to turn aside the knife.” He speaks Braavosi--this is meant for Zural.

A Lorathí’s observations, phrased as explanations .

“Arya Stark is ours .”

She must bow her head.

Arbitrator, Executioner, the wind got the roles entirely wrong.

Daorys is still speaking gently. “The gift is given to renegades, beautiful one. You are not such.”

There is a place inside herself she will not look. Wolves howl there. It is hard, to confront that which makes us Lorathí in the first place.

“It was a probability,” she says.

“An outside chance,” says Zural, dismissive, gruff now.

“We did come prepared to make accommodation for your age,” says Daorys. “Ten and five is no age to become a Faceless One.” His turn, to smooth the ragged ends of her hair back from her forehead. “We came prepared to temper your attachments to the Starks, to this place that looms so large in our memory. And now that we are here we find you as you are, ten and seven and already no one.” A smile--a true smile, no one’s unconditional approval. “Tell me you will leave Jaqen for me, Arya Stark, you are too extraordinary for a mere god.”

She grins. “Your arrogance, brother,” she says, an echo of Jaqen in her voice, “it is the thing I love best about you.”

“Lie,” he says. “No one does not love.”

“Does she not?”

She catches a flicker of something in Zural. “There is no contract for Sansa Stark, is there?” she asks. “You test me.”

“It had to be done,” says Zural, uncomfortable now.

“Arya Stark, in the stronghold of the Starks?” she asks with disdain. “Of course it did.”

“You did not tell it was a lie?” asks Zural. “We have learned the Stark name, after all.”

“I did not know that,” she says. Looks up at him. “You have been exchanging ravens with Winterfell while I was gone from here.”

A nod of confirmation.

What else has changed, apart from the ambassadorial appointment? Why is Sansa suddenly uninterested in discussing anything of import with me?

She sighs. “The Blue Pearl, for twenty-two days, to the Wall and back,” she says. It is not an excuse for the gaps in her information; she should have remedied such gaps immediately upon her return.
No, her admission is a *priming*.

“Twenty-two days,” her brother murmurs, then says no more. Something that compels a Faceless Man to abuse the Pearl for that long, it merits careful thought.

“I could not tell it was a lie,” she says to Zural, her eyes narrow. *I should have, unless …* “A contract was received,” she says, thoughtful. Scraps of information, of suggestion, they settle into place. “Cersei Lannister tried to buy some names?”

“The price was too rich for her blood,” says Zural.

She nods. “A princess, the last female Stark left. Yes, it would be. Coin is scarce.”

Zural snorts. “The Mad Queen is to be confiscating dragons from east coast to west.”

Arya raises a brow—the first she’s heard of this. *Out of touch with the world for almost a month; got Bran back. But Bran has more than balanced the ignorance; we know many things we did not before.*

“She made the gold price,” says Zural. “But the other part—we discussed it. Sansa Stark is sister-by-marriage to *Him of the Many Faces*. What has Cersei Lannister got that balances such a thing?”

“You asked for…?”

“The Iron Throne.”

She giggles. “Good one.”

“It was amusing,” agrees Zural.

“So let us speak of the Starks,” says Daorys. “How much do they actually know? And why is the king the god’s domain?”

“Sansa Stark, Sandor Clegane, Davos Seaworth,” she says, “they know what we discussed in Braavos for such as them to know. Faceless Men, an alliance. Sansa was shown a death mask, once.”

“So it became necessary,” Zural says. “Such was expected, you recall.”

“I was hoping not,” she replies. “But Jaqen had an intuition.”

Nods, all around.

“Apart from Sansa, nobody knows about the masks. None at all know of the faces, anything at all about Faceless Men. A lot of speculation, rumors. For the exceptions,” she says with a sigh, “the god has been dancing a merry jig—expose everything about Himself, keep secret everything about the order.”


“Jon and Bran and the Maester, Samwell Tarly— they are special cases in many ways, and your input would be required in their handling.”

Nods, for her to continue. She briefly explains Samwell Tarly, that he knows Jaqen is the god, and he is curious about *everything else* and has been told nothing. Then she moves to her brother by blood.
“Brandon Stark is a greenseer. With powers we cannot counter—he can go anywhere there had once been a weirwood, he can see the past and the present, *interact* with the past in certain limited ways. He as assumed the position of the god’s Champion, as dictated by R’hllor’s prophecies.”

“I can see why he merits exception,” murmurs her brother.

His tone tells her Daorys has explained the entirety of R’hllor’s machinations (as much as he remembers, of course) to the other Faceless Men.

Zural has this pained look on his face, constipated, almost. But then, Zural is an atheist. Zural interprets “service to the Many-Faced God” as a metaphor of principle. Zural tolerates Him of the Many Faces only insofar as the god is a necessary role that Zural’s brother plays, from time to time.

She’s been handling Jaqen’s worldview for moons; she knows how to wrest understanding out of an atheist.

“So on the one hand,” she says, “we would normally kill anyone that can scry into the House of Black and White. On the other hand, Bran Stark has decided he belongs to the god.”

“Priest rules, I suppose,” says Zural, reluctantly.

“It fits cleanly,” agrees Arya. There is more to the House than Faceless Men, and priests make free of all the god’s secrets except those that belong within the Faceless Men’s memories.

“This Maester,” says her brother, “I do not like this curiosity you mention.”

“It will be useful,” she counters. “He has a vast network of informants.”

“A novice priest then,” says Zural.

Her eyes narrow. The wind was hoping the others would vote for elimination.

Her brother is still undecided. “I see no urgent need for a decision,” says Daorys. “Let us observe.”

Nods.

“Now to Jon Snow,” says Zural.

“Stark,” she corrects. “Though rightfully, it should be Jaehaerys Targaryen.” She explains, briefly.

Zural whistles. “Did not expect *that* either. And we cannot be killing him if he goes dragon-mad.”

“With a dragon egg *we* gave him.” Their brother appreciates the irony. He is thoughtful as he extrapolates. “The god compromises himself to steer Jon Stark away from the Valyrian madness.”

“*One* reason, perhaps,” she says. “The god’s domain is complex enough that His reasons are not always apparent, even to Himself. Future bleeds into the past, and some of that may be His Champion’s doing. In this case I think the god chose a side mostly because Jon…” she sighs.

Then she explains the rest. Jon’s death, resurrection, that her brother of the heart is denied the darkness.

Another name she must speak: Catelyn Stark.

That the god must be present to take the dead into the darkness, or the dead will keep coming back.
Zural is appalled. “Jon Stark needs mercy,” says her brother, flat.

“The torment of it,” she agrees. “The god offered it to him, regardless of what it would do to Jaqen, to our war with R’hllor.”

Zural looks confused.

“Jon Stark refused it,” she says gently.

The brother beside her, he sighs. “Valar dohaeris,” he whispers.

Zural looks back and forth between their brother and her. “Valar dohaeris,” he says finally.

“Valar dohaeris,” she echoes.

Her brother is contemplating the floor. “Jon Stark is stronger than me, it seems,” he murmurs. “The darkness is in me, and yet…” He looks up. “I need your help. You must stop me, from begging Jaqen for this thing.”

Zural bows his head. “You cannot be asking me for this thing. I have watched you sleep.”

“I stand,” she murmurs. You will not be allowed to fall. “And we will play out a game for the god.”

He grins at her. “Now this will be amusing.”

She grins back; the tears will come soon, she thinks, whether they are bidden or not. The wind is a cruel thing, but even the wind knows its limit.

She raises her voice. “There is more.” And she speaks of the Wall, the necromancy that must have raised it. The dead, in the thousands, chained within the ice.

Jon’s choice, “...to give mercy, at the cost of the lives of every man, woman and child in his kingdom.”

Silence, for a while after that.

“I was skeptical about this part of the alliance,” says her brother. “Braavos, the Sealord, that is well done, and high time.”

If she had been Arya Stark, she would have preened.

“But I was skeptical of the Starks,” says her brother. “But they are far more aligned to the goals of the order than even Braavos. It is more than acceptable.”

So you see why the god’s compromise is necessary.

“But,” he says, “the god is still compromised. He has taken a side.”

Unrelenting, this Lorathi. Un compromising.

“He has,” she says.

“To counter, I would offer an observation,” he says. “So far, I do not see that the god had compromised the Faceless Men in any way. He has compromised Himself alone.”

Unfair, he is not.
“Such has been known to happen,” she says.

He nods.

When Arya Stark died, the secret heart of her purpose--vengeance, a desperate longing to go home--it was an open thing, and to her Braavosi brothers like Zural, like the Waif, it was a thing that she would “grow out of” in time. It was the Lorathi, the ones who tolerate no ambiguity in their service to the god, it was her Lorathi brothers that reached out, and told her the stories.

There is precedent. Slaves, most often, freed and sworn to Death, who go seeking their half-remembered childhoods.

Another story: long before Arya came to the House, a woman walked through the black doors, stooped and bowed before her time. She came in the middle of the scaly-plague, a disease that decimated more than half the population of edible fish on the western coast of Essos. She had nothing to eat, no one to eat it with, she could have sought death anywhere, but she said the Drowned God, the fisher god, he told her to come to a pool. And she knelt beside it, and the hand offering her a cup full of poison made her tremble and shake so badly that the black liquid spilled on the floor.

The Lorathi are harsh with the acolytes they train, harsher still with themselves. But compassion is not unheard of.

He followed the Lorathi way, but when the woman (who once had a son whose face looked uncannily like the faceless one’s; her son died), when she left he followed her out the door and did not return for years, not till she lay cold in the ground in the natural course of things.

How can one brother be allowed compassion, and the other chastised for it?

“Even in the matter of Arya Stark,” their brother continues, “He has led her to understanding. The god has served.”

A suspicion grows in her. Not just a deist like the other Lorathi (true selflessness, the annihilation of identity, it requires submission to something greater than the self).

Not simply attachment to a brother, to the one that recruited him.

_Priest’s blood_.

This brother is as Arya Stark is: a fundamentalist in his deism.

Her grip on his arm tightens, a fraction. He shifts, draws her closer.

He has seen through all her games with the truth, the reframing of their perspectives. And he plays alongside her. _God first, order second_. It is a dangerous thing, discouraged--Faceless Men cannot allow themselves to slip into the comfort of religion.

_Since when does he play along with me?_ She thinks back, and pinpoints the moment. _When I told him to refuse mercy, for the god’s sake_. He understood her nature then, as she understands his only now.

“Jaqen should return to the conversation,” says her brother.

Religion does not offer either of them comfort, only the conviction to withstand. To endure.
Zural sighs. “I am in agreement. Jaqen should return.”

She nods.

“Better go sit far away from me, cruel one,” her brother grins. “Or He will know how much you love me.”

Zural has opened the door, Jaqen comes in, grins at the both of them.

“What does the Many Faced God not know?” she asks.

Zural sits again, pours himself more tea.

“We have decided upon priest rules for Brandon Stark. Priest-novice for Samwell Tarly with the option to eliminate the Maester should his curiosity grow beyond the bounds of the god’s domain, and magic in general.”

Nods.

“We do not know what to do about Jon Stark,” says Zural. “Have you any thoughts?”

“He knows we are dead,” says Jaqen.

“It is to be expected,” says Zural. “He is a dead man himself. It does not feel right in me that Jon Stark must be doing this thing for one of ours, that he must be refusing mercy.” Zural shakes his head. “But the order will not survive if R’hllor wins, if you, Jaqen, become this Great Other. It is difficult.”

She can see Zural’s struggle. It will play out, she knows, within every Faceless Man that is not Lorathi. She is curious to see what Zural’s justification will be to himself; it can be used as a model, later.

Her old teacher sighs. “No Faceless Man should be responsible for denying Jon Stark what comfort he may take in the presence of the god. Mercy--what little mercy we may give--it should override all other concerns.”

Interesting. “Necessity”, “pragmatism”, “usefulness”, these are the ugly words here. *I will always be an ugly creature, no matter what face I wear.*

The wind is *delighted*.

Her brother’s turn, to stroke along her arm, lean down, whisper in her ear as lovers do. “So beautiful,” he murmurs. “You draw all our gazes to you.”

Much, that can be extrapolated from that: she has read it right--there is tension within the order. She draws their ire, becomes the focus of their suspicion. *Good*. Arya Stark is a curiosity, an anomaly, everyone watches with bated breath to see her break.

Arya Stark is not breakable.

*Guilt, grave guilt, in that moment of realization.*

Perception is everything. Perception shifts.

A reflexive calculation: “If I feel this much guilt for thinking ill of Arya Stark, for whom it was *justified* to think ill of, how much guilt will I feel for thinking ill of Him of the Many Faces?” And
the god’s indiscretions, they are dismissed, labeled “mercy”.

Avoidance of wrongdoing, avoidance of guilt, these are things only no one is free of.

And all that are no one, all but one of those are Lorathi, and Lorathi see reason without having to be led to it.

Calculation is everything: one hundred and thirteen Faceless Men. Of those, the two Lorathi in this room comprise an entire tenth of that faction. The rest are mostly Braavosi, a handful are unaffiliated, one is Him of the Many Faces, who plays at being Lorathi when it suits Him.

“I would suggest a new classification for Jon Stark,” says Jaqen, “but I know not what form it can take.”

“A lie,” she says. She plays Arya Stark, she plays the god’s bride, she knows him. “You know.”

Jaqen sighs. “I do not see the definition of it.”

Truth.

“Should it come to pass,” He says, “that Euron Greyjoy dies and Aeron Greyjoy does not, there may be as a second king I am sworn to.”

Is a god sworn to a king, or a king sworn to a god?

“A new classification,” murmurs her brother. “Dead kings, both of them.”

“This wanders into the realm of religion,” says Zural with distaste.

“Imagine how I feel,” says Jaqen.

Zural nods, sympathetic, and she must stop herself from rolling her eyes. Atheists, always commiserating with each other, bemoaning the mindlessness of the faithful, and all the while they outnumber the deists four to one, and they have the god on their side.

The irony of it is almost enough to make up for the constant complaining.

“We have defined that there exist ‘us’, and ‘enemy’, says her brother. “The enemy is a god. So our brother who plays a god must be empowered in a manner that can meet the enemy on its plane.”

Her brother knows how to handle atheists as well: there are nods all around, again, though Jaqen looks uncomfortable.

“Coin is power,” she says. “In this manner we ‘empower’ any brother that goes forth on a mission. Coin will not suffice here. ‘Empowerment’ is not entitlement, Jaqen, it is a tool.”

Jaqen sighs. “That is not all that irritates me.”

“It is the directionality of it,” says their brother, “is it not?”

Jaqen grimaces.

“I would understand,” offers Arya.

“Water, sold to a man thirsting in a desert,” says her brother, “in exchange for a handful of sand.”
“The sand turned to diamond-dust,” she murmurs, understanding. Such accidental accrual of riches was not the intended direction of the original sale.

“Jaqen is a fucking altruist,” says Zural. “So what else is new?”

“Arya Stark is new,” says her brother, smirking at Jaqen. “Not as altruistic as all that, is he?”

One worshipper, he will abide, though he was compelled to it in the haze of sexual need. Sex is a tool; it will be used where it is most effective.

“The horse is led to water,” she says, hugs her knees to herself.

“I’m right here, brothers,” says Jaqen, even as he narrows his eyes at Arya. “And my wife is over there for some reason.”

But you knew that, even on the road, did you not? The god comes before everything, and that was true for Arya Stark long before she was a Lorathi.

“Why don’t you come over here as well,” says their brother, his eyes wide with sexual invitation. “It’s a much nicer part of the room.”

Yes, Jaqen, give up the fiction. It will be hard to fight R’lllor, and the order, and you all at the same time. Not impossible, but harder than it needs to be.

“Too close to the hearth,” says Jaqen, “I’m likely to burn myself.”

Arya giggles.

“Lorathi,” says Zural with disgust. “How do any of you get any work done, I am not to be understanding.”

Lorathi have a reputation. There is some basis in truth, as she has learned. But this is the thing about sex--humans are biologically compelled to notice it. Even Faceless Men are men still. A man’s response to sex, positive or negative, yearning or disgusted, the response is not the point, the noticing is.

Other things may pass, then, beneath notice.

Zural glares at Jaqen. “Always thought you, at least, were sane.”

“Sanity is relative,” Jaqen allows, then smiles, a little bit mischievous. “I mean, look at them, Zural, is it truly the act of a sane man to say ‘no’?”

He is undecided; he allows us to make the decision for Him. He can counter it should he choose, we need no formal vetoes to obey.

She untangles herself from her brother, crawls over to Jaqen, lays her head in his lap.

“So,” says their brother. “Dead Kings. A new classification in the god’s domain. If it is acceptable, I will pen a short definition for our brothers back in Braavos.”

“A vote?” she suggests. Zural must assist, in the making of this decision.

“No,” says Zural, as if on cue.

So accommodating, the Braavosi.
“A vote would make these, these dead kings, the House’s concern,” continues Zural. “Which they are not being. All your problem, Jaqen, they are the type of problem for what you are there to be handling.”

Jaqen sighs, nods.

She breathes. Done, and done. And not a moment too soon; she frays, she frays with His thigh under her cheek, His hand upon her arm.


“Let’s hope he doesn’t collect too many,” mutters Zural.

But it is her brother’s turn to shake his head. “It sounds like we are playing right into the Red God’s hands,” says Daorys. “R’hllor styles himself Lord of Light, styles the kings he converts as Light Bearers. Now we have Lich Kings, Lord of Darkness.” Her brother sighs. “Too much defining by our enemy’s standard, brothers.”

“Names, definitions, these have power,” says Arya. An obvious truth. “It is the means of gathering complexity to a concept. The Red God has been gathering such complexities for eight thousand years—we must catch up.”

Their brother looks to be about to argue further. Arya meets his eyes, and a little bit of the wind still plays within her, because she says, “the effectiveness of the naming of people—it is undeniable, is it not?”

Her brother looks away. “Our enemy drinks water,” he mutters. “We drink water. This is undeniable.”

Huh, she thinks. Even no one flinches away from the wind. They have become too used to serving a merciful god.

She shelves the thought for later.

“I may have been a poor choice for this assignment,” Zural says thoughtfully.

“You’re exactly what is needed,” says Jaqen, “keep the rest of us grounded in reality, brother.”

“I’m grounded,” Arya protests.

Jaqen snorts. “Arya Stark made the Night of Ice—should something like Asshai happen to me again, she will take over the functions of the Many-Faced God. There will be a long transition period, but we have discussed her not going entirely mad with power in the process.”

“Ambraysis Alayain has explained,” says Zural. Unconcerned, the Braavosi—it seems her existence, the Wind, it confirms their worldview, that Jaqen is not a god in the religious sense of the word.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you,” says Arya sullenly.

“I felt the wind pass over me as I left Asshai,” says Daorys. “Would really prefer not to serve it.”

“Wind’s fucking cruel,” agrees Arya.

“Poor choice for this assignment,” mutters Zural again.
All the others ignore him.

Jaqen continues the briefing where it had been abandoned during the fight for identity, for defining principle. “To everyone beyond those named, I am Arya’s bodyguard and clandestine lover, she’s back from Braavos as an emissary, and she’s going to be married to the Sealord after Jon marries Daenerys.”

“Servants?” asks Daorys. “They see much.”

“Twenty-two, for the whole keep,” says Jaqen. “Easy to avoid, and Sansa and Samwell—functioning as left-hand and spymaster, respectively, keep very close watch. Nothing is exposed.”

Zural’s lips are pressed together, considering. “Tight ship,” he says. “You’ve been here two and a half moons?”

“Almost a moon spent riding to the Wall and back,” offers Arya.

“A lot of people know, a lot of time passes. Nobody makes talk?” asks Zural.

“Stark people,” says Jaqen. “Loyal to the bone. We are all ‘in’, by the way, once Sansa is fully reassured that you are not about to kill me or Arya. Get to know everyone, and even Sandor will take an arrow for you.”

“And it’s real,” says Zural, bemused.

“No masks, no faces,” says Jaqen.

“Naked,” says their brother, and he leers at Zural this time.

It’s nice to see Braavosi squirm.

“A Faceless Man is in because he is a Faceless Man.” Her brother grins. “It is a strange world we have come to.”

“Strange also,” says Arya, “that our sister didn’t come with you— I thought she would be dogging your steps the entire way, dosing you with concoction after concoction.”

Her brother’s eyes are hooded. “Your ‘Waif’ does not fight losing battles, Arya Stark.”

Arya allows her fury to pass through her without showing in her face. “Didn’t take her for a coward,” says Arya softly, coldly; she cannot quite isolate the fury from her voice.

Her brother flinches at “coward”.

So, she thinks, he did not ask for help simply to appease me. She has a suspicion it is him who sent the Waif away.

“I will consult with her by raven,” Arya says, “and continue where she left off. Since it seems I do not understand the meaning of ‘losing battle’.”

“It means I am dying,” says Daorys simply. “It happens. Whatever face I wear, it ages too quickly—a year in a week. I have to change faces twice, thrice a week now.” He reaches up, pulls a clump of hair off his head, tosses it into the center of the floor. “Also to keep the hair, of course— vanity I will indulge in till the end.” He looks at her, finally, and realizes the weak jest has affected her not at all. He sighs. “‘Losing’ means to be defeated, Arya Stark.”
“Others have tried to explain the concept to me before, brother,” she says with a twisted smile. “R’hllor. Him of the Many Faces. Even the wind. Who are you to teach it to me now?”

He looks down at the ground. “No one. Truly.”

“Just so,” says Arya. “Complete the briefing,” she instructs Jaqen. “I think we could all do with some sustenance from the kitchens.”

And the walk down the stairs and the long corridors will give her a chance to work off her fury. And her terror.

Their brother truly does not want to live. He has asked for my help. But how can I fight against both his will and Jaqen’s? The body is half of it, the mind is seated in the body, in the brain. How can Jaqen and I persuade his body to heal if his will fights us on that as well at every turn?

An argument suggests itself: if his mind is not his, how can he be considered competent enough to make a life-and-death decision? The argument will hold, with any Lorathi.

And then her brother may beg for mercy, but it will be ignored.

Up to a point.

Cruel. To both the one that begs, and the one that denies.

But the framework will hold long enough, she hopes, to restore no one to himself. Somehow.

So he can be allowed to die.

When she returns to the room with her excuse held in her hands--a platter of bread and cheese and cold meat--it seems Jaqen has completed the briefing; their brother is on the floor with his shirt off as Jaqen’s hands hover over their brother’s heart.

“Zural left?” she asks.

“Says he doesn’t want to see my ‘scrawny, naked’ body until I put on some muscle,” says Daorys. The sadness seems to have passed; he’s all jest now.

“All the constituents of your body are dying,” says Jaqen. “They are renewed, each time you put on a face.” He runs his hands over their brother’s throat, his head. “But the acceleration of death continues unabated, now upon the new body.” Arya scoots closer. “Death is concentrated in your bones,” says Jaqen. “In the bones, and from there in the blood.”

“What else?” asks their brother.

“Infections, a few deep-seated ones,” says Jaqen. “Overshadowed by the bones of you.”

A wrenching gasp from their brother, as Jaqen runs His hands over their brother’s back, fanning out over the lungs.
“Oh,” breathes Daorys. “That is much better.”

Jaqen looks to Arya, meets her eyes. Pain, pain, pain.

“The Waif did not catch this?” Arya asks.

Their brother shrugs. “She didn’t look--secondary infections are really not a concern if the primary is, well, primary .”

Arya’s mouth curls with disdain. “What a very good Faceless Man she is,” she says. “Stopping a search when the obvious has been identified.”

You couldn’t breathe properly, brother.

“Tumors, in your liver and kidneys, mostly,” Jaqen continues. “That, at least...” Jaqen narrows his eyes, touches the small of their brother’s back. The god’s eyes are closed.

Death flows, the wind tells her. Death flows like a stream, like a river under His hand.

And, bit by bit, by the miniscule shift of his muscles, almost unnoticeable, their brother relaxes.

He exhales. A long, slow breath. “ Well ,” he says, and he allows them to see a trace of wonder on his face: gratitude, from no one.

It infuriates Arya Stark. He catches that--hard to miss, Sandor would have caught it.

“She did offer me the milk of the poppy,” he says, apologetic, on their sister’s behalf, “but I had to refuse.”

“Of course you did,” says Arya. Mind’s clouded enough as it is. Her fury grows, and it becomes colder still. “The Rakhene’s Bite, the Blade-Blood Alloy--there are poisons, and even I, novice to the poisoner’s art that I am, even I know them, that pain may be blocked, localized, without disturbing the mind.”

“She is objective; she did not ask about the subjective . To allow me to save face, at least in part.” He shrugs. “Why waste rare poisons on one who insists it is not necessary?”

Arya growls. “She knows the signs.”

“She tried, she did, Arya Stark. Braavosi more than anyone do not simply abandon. But it was clear she could do little good.”

“She did not try hard enough,” says Arya. It is easy to forgive, when you are the one that suffers. The suffering of a brother--not so easy for Arya Stark to let go.

Their brother smiles, rueful. “She also did not know, Arya Stark, that Jaqen H’ghar was wedded to you.”

Arya’s jaws clench. She understands then, oh she understands, Jaqen is a heady poison. You have the liking of women, the Waif had presumed. Presumed Arya Stark safe, she guesses. Presumptions, overturned, are a breeding-ground of chaos.

“Allowed to hate me , if that was her leaning,” she says, bitter. “Why take it out on you ?”

Their brother’s mouth twists. “Your hand, at the end, not even Jaqen’s. Your hand that kept me alive. She was justified .”
"It was not well done," says Jaqen. Damning, such a thing, coming from His mouth. "Brother," the god hesitates. "Take off the rest."

Their brother raises an eyebrow. "I think you need to get me drunk first."

"Do I really?" Sardonic Jaqen is back.

"Your wife is watching," murmurs Daorys.

"She’ll rage at me if I leave it undone," says Jaqen.

Their brother shakes his head, rises, takes off his britches, the rest. He staggers, on one foot--awkwardness from the weakness of his muscles, not the nakedness--they have all worn each other’s faces, worn each others’ memories.

Jaqen briefly rests his hands on their brother’s testicles, then the small of his back again.

"Death gathers," Jaqen says. "The tumors will come back."

Their brother shrugs, shivering, as he puts his clothes back on.

"Is it too cold?" asks Arya.

Daorys snorts. "If my bollocks retracted any further from the chill I’d have to go through puberty again."

Arya giggles, fetches a blanket from the chest in the corner, drapes it over him.

Truth becomes lie becomes truth. The game, of pretending to survive, pretending to hope, it is a thin one. He will beg again soon--the pain of the body is not nothing, but it is not a deciding factor to a Lorathi.

She exchanges places with Jaqen, pulls out a knife, the sharpest she has left. Her brother tenses.

"Pine," he murmurs. "Wintergreen."

Deliberately, deliberately he relaxes against her, and just as carefully she runs the edge of the blade over his scalp.

"Keep you from shedding like Ghost does," she says, "at least until you need to change faces again." She shaves off swathes of his hair, leaving stubble in the wake of her blade.

"Easier if you let me leave," he says to her with a smile.

It begins.

He will slit his own wrists, now that he’s handed the faces he carried to Jaqen.

She has not missed the slight bulge, beneath Jaqen’s shirt. A discharging of duty, a sacred compact, between the god and his servant--that is why Zural left, why it was done while Arya Stark was out of the room.

But he was strong; he did not ask for mercy while I was not there to stop him.

She longs to ask whether their brothers’ names have come back to the god, and knows before she does the asking that the names still lie forgotten.
“Let me leave, Arya Stark,” he whispers.

“You cannot, not yet,” she says. “Not until you know you are making a competent decision—until we are sure there are no tendrils of R’hllor coiled in your mind somewhere, making Jaqen complete the Red God’s work against your true will.”

He looks at her, and he has been no one for far longer than she has been; Arya Stark is an open book to him, to Jaqen. The truths that belong to no one are very well obscured beneath Arya Stark’s need to keep people, to not let people go.

The god can be manipulated only with truth.

If Jaqen learns that all of this is a matter of necessity, to learn the face of their true enemy...

Power of will, restraint, these are a finite quantity, even for the god. He has restrained His nature with Jon, He has restrained Himself upon the Wall. He will not restrain Himself with their brother, not when He is the ultimate beneficiary of her cruelty.

The gift will be given.

“I would argue with your motivations,” says her brother.

“My motivations are suspect even to me.” Arya’s voice is quiet. “Counter my reason, Lorathi.”

“From the mouth of babes,” he mutters, looks to Jaqen. “Does she always get her way?”

Jaqen is watching them. He suspects something. “When she makes a valid point,” He says.

Their brother sighs. He has seen the suspicion as well. “All right, Arya Stark. I will not leave tonight.”

“Changing faces helps, yes?” asks Arya.

“The body,” says their brother, dismissive.

“Then we can keep dealing with the infections, the tumors, until we find a way to deal with the mind,” she says. “Treat the symptoms, until the disease is rooted out.”

Their brother grimaces, closes his eyes as he leans into the touch of her blade. “What are you going to do, have Jaqen follow me around for the rest of eternity, groping me?” he asks tiredly.

She throws a pleading glance Jaqen’s way.

“Arya has discussed forming a three-man squad,” says the god.

Their brother’s eyes snap open. “I work alone.”

“Not until I consume R’hllor,” says Jaqen. Flat. An almost-command.

Interesting.

Daorys makes a gagging noise: a half-hearted joke. “Is this what happens when Jaqen H’ghar accepts that he is a god?” he complains, and it is Arya’s turn to get a look. “He gets his way all the time now?”

“Only with those He has touched in an intimate way,” she replies, grinning at him.
Their brother grins back, despite himself. “Knew there was a catch to the healing.” He closes his eyes again as she finishes with the last of his hair. “Not the fucking Leng twins, Jaqen, going around in a team.”

“Exigencies of war,” says the god calmly.

“All this effort for me,” their brother says, sadly. “I pleaded a lot, on the way here.” He sighs. “Will you not listen to my pleas either?”

“Of course He will,” says Arya, giving Jaqen a warning look. “And if he doesn’t, the wind will.”

She shifts, and draws their brother into her arms till he is lying down, his head in her lap. Jaqen comes and sits by her side, leaning back against the wall. The wind slackens, somewhat, as it always does when He is close to her. She leans her head against His shoulder.

The god strokes their brother’s now-shaved head. “But not today?” He asks.

Their brother breathes out. “Not today.”

Eventually, their brother sleeps.

It is easier, standing guard over his dreams with him right there; the nightmares, the shadows in him, they have not lessened.

“Zural left to avoid making a commitment,” she says to Jaqen as they stand, shoulder-to-shoulder in the dreaming.

The god’s gaze is fixed on the horizon. “Force it.”

She bows her head.

Chapter End Notes

I've been setting up this meeting for a very long time, the meeting the characters, the conflicts spoken and unspoken.

Your comments are appreciated as more is revealed :)

Keeps the words flowing.

Any guesses, btw? **grin**
JORAH

It is as if he dreams, and he would rather not awaken. Asshai looks like a wasteland of shadow and dust; the river gurgles green, choked with ash, and every building around it seems to have been reduced to rubble.

Their own doing--he sees slaves attack yet another structure with sledgehammers.

*What will they build atop the ruins when they are done?*

The streets crawl with shadowbinders; shadows from torches, from fires, they twist around people with masked faces. The clouds overhead, glowing on the underside with sorcery and snow-glare, they add to the shadows.

He trails behind the Lady of Light, the Champion.

Every person he sees other than a slave wears a mask. It is said that fashion hasn't changed for five hundred years in Asshai. He doesn't like it. Beautiful women should show their faces more often. He glances at her, sidelong.

They have stopped at the mouth of a dark edifice; stairs lead down, and another woman in a mask, black and red this time, she climbs to them.

"Jorah Mormont," she says, and her voice is honey-sweet. "We are pleased." She turns to the Champion. "He will do."

"Do for what?" He finds he knows how to speak after all.

"The Lord of Light sees great potential in you," she says.

There is a shift in the woman beside him. "Has he awakened?" asks the Champion.

"Not yet," says the woman before them, curt. "But our work continues."

"The Lord of Light *must* awaken soon," murmurs the Champion. "Daenerys Targaryen is the rightful bearer of the Light; she must strike back against the darkness, against the Heart of Winter, once and forevermore. No more long night, no more irregular seasons. The world will have peace."

"The world will have to burn before that happens," says the woman in the black-and-red mask.

"Not if this works," gestures the Champion, and for the first time Jorah notices that there are chains, of iron, with little mounds of ash, each of a different size and shape, beside each link. The chains extend down the street, vanish around a corner, more chains, from other streets.

*They demolish buildings to lay chains? Over the entire city?*

"Not if Death is constrained, not if that whore of his cannot meddle," says the Champion. "The moment our little escapee finds a way to die, the two can be removed from all calculation." She dips her head. "Nothing needs to burn, Holy Consort, the Lord has shown it to me."
"You see visions I do not?" asks the woman, the "Holy Consort". "That you can puppet-master a two-hundred-year-old assassin when a mere soldier of two-and-twenty slipped out of my grasp? Is this arrogance, Champion?"

Jorah has known enough women to know that the lightly-delivered admonishment veils threat, a vicious warning. And that is what is revealed on the surface.

"The wargs smelled you coming," says the Champion. She smiles. "I could have told you that if you had consulted me before."

The woman in the mask seems to be smiling. "Consult you?"

"I am his Champion. I fight for his vision of the truth."

"We fight for the same thing, then," says the honeyed voice. Shadows gather behind her, they rise out of the ground; almost invisible, against the darkness.

He can feel the Champion beside him wavering, she bows. Low. "Holy Consort of R'hllor," she says, "You have made your place beside Him, and you have made Daenerys the bearer of his sword. You have honored my kinswoman above all others. Valar dohaeris, I serve to bring your vision to pass, for it the same as the Lord's is it not?"

It seems the Lady of Light still cannot suppress her sarcasm.

The Holy Consort chooses to ignore her servant's tone. For that is what the Champion is, Jorah realizes. A servant. He focuses on the Lady in the black-and-red mask she has come forward.

"Show me your hand, Jorah Mormont," she says. Her words are honey but her flesh smells like rotting meat. He unwraps his bandages, extends his hand nonetheless, realizes he has to extend it upwards; he is on his knees.

"Ah, yes. Stoneskin. It is good that it is an extremity."

Shadows strike from all sides--they bind around him, bind to him, tighten around his arm. Pain, then a blessed loss of sensation. He tries to look at his arm-- what are they doing to it? But the woman has seized him by the chin, forced his face up to meet the eyes behind the mask.

"Your blood also needs to be cleansed," she says. "Open your mouth."

He obeys, grateful beyond reason.

She reaches for something, from whence he does not know. She brings to his mouth a quivering morsel of flesh; it glows green.

His lips close around it, it slithers in his mouth and he almost vomits, but then it stills.

Jorah Mormont realizes it is the most delicious thing he has ever tasted. He chews slowly, swallows. Regrets, that there is not any more.

"What is the price for your aid, your Holiness?" he asks.

"The price?"

This time both the Champion and the Holy Consort laugh, together.

"Why, Jorah the Andal," says the Champion, "you must seduce Daenerys Targaryen, you must
make her fall in love with you."

The Holy Consort caresses his head. "The price," she says, "is that you must wed her, and rule at her side."

#

**NO ONE**

He wakes up on a soft surface, and his breath is shallow, too fast, he is... *not drowning*. He knows the shape of the timbers that support this roof, he knows this smell, the casement before the window.

*Theon's room, when he was still young enough to tolerate the littles, allowed them to sit at his window and watch the comings and goings in the courtyard.*

His breath does not rattle in his lungs for the first time in a moon, though he can feel the fluid gathering again.

He looks down at himself; he has an erection.

"Guess Jaqen's groping worked," he mutters. And then he realizes what he's said. He groans, buries his head in a pillow.

*Why so many pillows? How many does one person need?*

He overheats, throws it aside, and lies staring up at the vaulted stone ceiling.

"This is ridiculous." Convalescence should happen in a stone bed, with a faceless one checking in on him once every few days. That is the pattern to things.

Not in a featherbed, with Arya tormenting him with potions twice through the night, followed by Princess bloody Sansa Stark and Princess fucking Arya Stark kneeling over him and weeping a watch later.

Didn't work though, if the look on Jaqen's face was any indication. Which, of course, earned him another groping from the god while Arya watched.

The pillow goes over his face again.

*Can I smother myself?* He knows it will not work--he will fall into unconsciousness, his hold will slacken; the body will start breathing again.

But what's the use of willpower if it cannot make a man keep a pillow over his face for as long as is required?

*Let us experiment.*

Two (maybe three, hard to tell sleep from unconsciousness these days) failed attempts later, he gives up. Hunger has returned, along with increased bloodflow to his...extremities.

He can hear the keep stirring below.

He hauls himself out of bed, lights a candle.

Then he wonders why he shouldn't just sleep here for a while. Starvation can kill a man, if he has a
good run-up to the condition, which no one does.

*It is not allowed--Arya will weep again.*

He pauses, examines the thought.

*Since when is it "Arya" and not "Arya Stark"?*


So armored, no one goes to find breakfast.

#

**JON**

"Arya's coming down the stairs," says Jon.

"I am aware," replies Jaqen.

"We have to tell her." *And Sansa.*

"Wait till the introductions are complete," suggests Jaqen. "Sansa will be too busy trying to protect Arya, and Arya will be too busy trying to protect people from Sansa."

"Alright," says Jon, relieved, and turns his gaze to his food until he senses his sister nearing the table. He looks up. "Good morning Arya. Did you sleep well?"

Jaqen winces.

"No," says Arya, curt. Her eyes are bloodshot.

"What happened?" he asks. *The envoys--Jaqen said all was well.*

"It didn't work."

Jon's turn to wince. "Sorry." He tries to find something to cheer her. "I'm looking forward to meeting your comrades, he says.

Arya does brighten a bit at that.

A servant carries Bran down in a litter.

"Good morrow, Champion," says Jaqen.

"I felt them come in yesterday," Bran says, a smile for each of them at the table. "I like them."

Arya ruffles his hair. "They'll like you too."

Bran flinches away. "Don't do that, please."

"Not dignified enough for the Champion of the Great Other?" she teases.

"No, not dignified enough for the Consort of the Great Other," Bran says, "I'm protecting you, sister."
"Oh-oh."

"I know more than you," says Arya. Narrow-eyed challenge.

Bran gives her a look.

"How many ways can you kill a man with a teacup?" she asks, holding aloft the implement intended for mass-murder.

"How many men have died by teacup since the last Long Night?" retorts Bran.

"I don't need to hug a tree to answer my question," she says.

"You're worse than shit with a sword," snaps Bran, "I saw you when you started coming North. Jaqen beat you every single time."

"Good morning, everyone." Sansa's dignified tones cut through the juvenile insults. "Arya, don't say whatever it is you're going to say next. Bran, she's your elder, have some respect."

Jon finds his mouth twitching. He controls it with some effort.

"My god's better than your god," mutters Arya.

"They're the same god!" Bran is exasperated.

"Mine's got a hundred assassins at his beck and call," Arya says. "Yours throws acorns every autumn."

Jon chokes; he wants to laugh, his eyes are tearing with the effort to contain it.

Jaqen rests his chin in his palm as he contemplates his wife with a very neutral expression.

"Enough!" says Sansa. "Enough." Her jaw is tight. "We have visitors," she hisses.

"Right," breathes Jon, gets himself under control. He very, very carefully does not look at Jaqen.

Two men have entered the hall. The elder of the two has olive-toned skin, tightly curled black hair. He wears trousers in the Braavosi style, with a loose-sleeved shirt on top. A sword-belt sits around his hip, though he shows no weapon. Jon knows better to assume that he has no weapons. The other...taller, younger, shoulder-length blonde hair. He carries no open weapons either, though his clothes are better-suited to Winterfell's climate, layered over with fur. There is a very cold look about him, and his eyes...

The one that couldn't be healed.

"Welcome," says Jon. "Please, join us." Not supposed to apologize for not meeting them last night.

Both give him a bow, then one to Sansa, and another for Bran. A short nod in Arya and Jaqen's direction. Nothing more than a nod for Jaqen. Jon would have said they are playing a part, but he knows Jaqen now, knows without having being told that the god has deliberately fostered an environment of irreverence over centuries.

"Forgive me for not meeting you yesterday," says Jon as he indicates seats.

Sansa gives him a look, subtle but pointed.
The blonde one is the first to react, he extends his arm. "Daorys," he says.

Jon clasps his forearm. A strong grip, but Jon knows fighters; iron will keeps this man upright, given the state of his musculature underneath.

"Jon," he replies.

The procedure is repeated with Bran, and this time both Sansa and the Braavosi man give pointed looks, the Braavosi to his younger comrade, Sansa to her younger brother.

The Braavosi bows again. "I am called Zural Mobhai, your Majesty," he says, another, more shallow bow towards Bran. "Your Highness."

A dip towards Sansa; she extends her hand, no expression on her face, and Zural Mobhai's hand hovers under hers, kisses the air above it. "Princess," he says, "this man finds he does not miss the Sun any longer, for dawn follows Sansa Stark wherever she goes."

"You flatter me, Ser Zural," she replies, and her tone says: you may flatter me some more.

Incongruous, the cultivated, courtly niceties. They jarr against the cold reality outside this hall; Jon wonders which will give way, the fiction or the truth.

The Faceless Men seat themselves.

"What, Zural, no kissy-hands for your old student?"

At least we know which side Arya fights for.

"I see the vial, Princess Arya," says Zural. "No kisses for you."

"Good man," she replies. 

Jon doesn't miss the eye-roll exchanged between Jaqen the other faceless man, Daorys. 

What vial?

"We follow Northern customs," says Jon into the silence as the two men take plates, serve themselves, as if they've been eating like this for years.

Alert eyes, a pause.

"King's table is like any other man's," he continues. "Wear your swords as you see fit."

Zural clears his throat, glances at Sansa. "Thank you for your trust, your Grace," he says to Jon.

"We did not expect your arrival so early," says Sansa quickly, "I expect you will wish to select your servants, staff the embassy in the coming days as per your requirements. But envoys of Braavos, of the House of Black and White, they will not be quartered in the children's wing, of course." She smiles, thin. "Suites in the Southern wing are being prepared for you as we speak."

"And where am I supposed to sleep?" asks Arya, indignant.

Some conflict here; Sansa's ambushed our sister.

"You will have to choose," says Sansa, looking into her plate. "Whether you and Jaqen stay with the family, or whether you wish to move to the Southern wing."
What is she doing?

"In that case, I think Cerwyn would be best," says Arya, acid. "They have a very nice inn."

The Faceless Men have started eating, nonchalant, as if this is still a breakfast table and not suddenly a battlefield.

"If I may make a suggestion," says Jaqen.

"No," say Sansa and Arya in unison.

Sansa seems immediately contrite, she turns to Jaqen, but her words are interrupted by Arya.

"My brothers are not Red Keep courtiers," she says. "Let's have this out in the open. Jaqen and I are in an awkward position regarding boundaries between family and guild."

Jon shivers. It feels as though some draft seeps through whatever gaps in the stone there may be.

Sansa’s jaw is tight.

"The direwolf's share of my objectives in coming to Winterfell have been met," says Arya. "My further presence here is to ensure a smooth transition--whatever blandishments may be required--for the forging of Valyrian Steel, both for the House of Stark and the House of Black and White. Most importantly, I am here to support Jaqen," and she makes a point of looking at the Braavosi, "in his objectives, as well as care for my brothers in their convalescence." Her gaze takes in both Bran and Daorys.

Both "brothers" look similarly discomfited by this statement.

"Not very assassin-like; not the work you trained me for, Zural," she says ruefully, "but all men must serve, no?"

Sansa is furious, by the slight furrowing of her brows. "We're talking openly?" she asks bitterly. "Are you sure you want that?"

"Say it, Sansa," says Arya. "Say it and be done with it."

"Fine," says Sansa, and she puts down her teacup very, very carefully. "This morning's primary objective for me is to make sure that House Null, House Norrey and House Flint do not back out of the commitments they made during the kingsmoot. The task involves a light bit of blackmail and the memory of my father shoved down their throat. My next objective is to make sure we have accurately replicated the Lorathi ice-breakers, which means Maester Samwell and I will be spending two watches poring over badly scribbled field-drawings covered in raven excrement. Then, since it seems Cersei Lannister and Euron Greyjoy are copulating their way to a military alliance, I must find a way to use the rumor of Asha Greyjoy's nonexistent betrothal to my first husband, the Lannister Lord of Casterly Rock, to maneuver the ships under Victarion Greyjoy's command such that they do not add to Euron’s strength. And since there are four shipments of grain scheduled that I have no means of paying for, the rest of the day will be spent going through the North-Wing cellars to find things that we can sell, since mother's wedding-gown is almost gone."

"You sold mother's wedding gown?" asks Bran in a small voice.

Sorrow. Jon's shoulders slump under the weight of it.
"In pieces," says Sansa. "I cut it up and sold it in pieces. Because we need winter-hard seeds for the glasshouses and everything we got from the south blackens with frost instead of germinating."

He cannot find it in himself to feel guilty—he knows enough of Catelyn Stark to know that she would have sold whatever she had to feed her people, even if those people included Jon Snow.

"Finally," hisses Sansa, her eyes bright with unshed tears, "before I sleep tonight, I have to make sure the assassins you invited into my house do not haul my brother-by-marriage off in chains for stepping outside the bounds of his role in their guild; that Jaqen doesn't fucking die for the Last Hearth."

Sansa swipes angrily at her eyes.

“Last Hearth?” murmurs Zural.

"Sansa," murmurs Jaqen, reaching out to her across the table, an aborted motion—Sansa is glaring at him. "Sansa, nothing is going to happen to me."

"How many did you kill, Jaqen?” demands Sansa. “We paid nothing for it."

"You're the envoy, Zural," says Arya, her eyes expressionless, trained on Sansa.

"I think," Zural looks between Arya and Sansa, then at Jon. "I think some information has gone astray. Princess Sansa, Jaqen H'ghar is supporting King Jon; this has been explained to us."

"Perhaps you would like to clarify our position," says Arya. "Formally."

Jon’s breath mists in the air in front of him; he realizes the draft has dragged in the sudden cold from outside—spiderweb-like tracings of frost grow on the windows of the Hall.

"The House of Black and White supports Jaqen H'ghar's objectives," says Zural, and it feels as if the words have been dragged out of him.

She forced him to say it, thinks Jon. All of this, to make him say that in front of us. Why? Jaqen is in no danger, he's the god. Jaqen H'ghar's objectives. Strife, in the House of Death, Bran had said, just yesterday. Do some not support their god? Or just not the Starks?

The Wall has taught Jon many things. Patience. Waiting. Watching.

Daorys, he too watches, a cold, hard smile on his face.

"Now that that is clear," Arya says, "obviously it is Zural's place to decide what is most appropriate when it comes to sleeping arrangements."

Wrest all power from him in Jaqen's name, then give it back? In the first few moons of his reign, Jon had done much the same. That his sworn lords remember from whose hand they hold their authority.

"Why did you pick the children's rooms?" asks Zural.

"Sometimes I wake up, disoriented, I do not know where I am and it panics me," she says, her voice suddenly gentle. "The panic passes, if it is a place that my memory has learned to call 'home', and 'safe'. I almost never went into the Southern wing when I was a child."

That sounds decidedly like a weakness for an assassin. Why would she admit so openly to weakness?
Zural's lips are pressed tightly together.

"I am the official envoy," says Zural. "I think it will be most appropriate for me to be quartered in the customary place for such. Jaqen and Arya have been where they are for moons, any damage to be done is done already."

"And Ser Daorys?" asks Sansa.

Daorys reacts not at all, that cold, considering, half-smile still on his face.

"If Arya and Jaqen stay where they are," says Zural, "it would be more convenient for Arya to treat him if he is nearby."

No one speaks further.

So Arya's work is done, it seems.
But Sansa's has not even started.

"My bannermen answer to me," Jon says to her. "Sandor's boys are riding circuits. I will have a conversation with House Flint and the others."

"Maester Luwin taught me how to run Winterfell," says Bran, "I am quite capable of interpreting drawings."

"Victarion," says Arya softly.

Jaqen leans back in his chair, stares at the ceiling. "A falling out between Victarion and Euron does not threaten Euron's Kingship," he murmurs, then says nothing further.

"There is no contract," says Zural, flat. "We do not interfere."


"You are too sharp," says Zural. "You will cut yourself."

"Undoubtedly," she replies.

Jon almost shivers. Her voice, so very cold, a match to the smile playing about Daorys's mouth.

Since, and nobody looks at the envoy, but everyone it seems is focused on him. Jon exchanges a glance with Bran. Bran eyes are worried, panicked almost.

“Arya Stark is Braavosi,” sighs Zural. “In the matter of brothers, vengeance is expected.”

Sansa turns to look around, at Jaqen, at Jon, questions in her eyes.

Jaqen shakes his head slightly, and she subsides.

“Braavosi do not interfere,” says Daorys, flat.

"No," says Arya and her voice is a different kind of soft this time. "But we repay debts." She speaks in a manner similar to Jaqen’s, without direction, her eyes focused on the hearth. “We sent a brother to the Iron Isles. One thing led to another, and our brother now watches Victarion, ostensibly for Euron. Euron muted him," she says, suddenly vicious, and her viciousness concentrates itself into a smile. "So it is fitting, that our brother speak the things they never thought
he would. That the side effect of such speaking benefits an ally of the House, such is simply...coincidence. That this ally of the House is an enemy of Euron Greyjoy’s, such is Euron’s doing.”

"So all I have left to do is root through the cellars," says Sansa. Her face is blank, and Jon cannot even guess what she thinks in the moment.

Arya considers her, tilts her head to a side.

"Pride is a front we put up to distract our enemies. It is often confused with self-respect, with honor." Arya smiles around the word, even as Jon rises to add more logs to the fire. "But what is honor, except for a twisted, self-deluding word for 'duty'?”

No response.

Arya sighs. "This I have been taught," she says, "and Zural is the one who has taught it to me--if a brother falters under a load, it is his duty to ask for such help as may be given. Words like 'weakness', 'pride', these are distractions."

She continues. “And I am not sharp, Zural; I am about as subtle as a warhammer. Nothing but the truth from me," and she spreads her hands before her, extended far beyond her own space, her palms almost hovering over Daorys’s plate to her left, Jaqen's to the right. "I am but come newly to the order; it is for my elders to correct me if I misinterpret the core of it. For what I thought I was taught was that if a brother asks for help, it is duty to empty oneself to the limits of what a man may contain, and then empty further, that such help may be given. 'Restraint', 'appropriate', these words too are distractions; they must be cut out of the self, that the penultimate duty to the god may be carried out."

"I do not remember teaching that to you," says Zural.

"I remember," she says, and she looks at him until his eyes drop. "Counter my truth, Braavosi," she says.

Zural maintains his silence. Sansa, too, says nothing.

Arya is overstepping her bounds. She seems to realize it too, she shakes her head. "Work within what framework you will, Zural, Sansa, diplomacy is not my domain. I will work under the assumption that Arya Stark is married to Jaqen H'ghar, until my elders in the order feel they must tell me otherwise."

Daorys speaks again. "And yet, none but the eldest in the order may presume to tell you such a thing, Arya Stark." His tone is wry.

She shrugs.

And that, it seems, is that.

Enough.

Bit by bit in the silence left after her speech, conversation resumes, and this time it has nothing at all to do with duties and alliances.

"Subtle as a warhammer?" murmurs Jon to Jaqen, for the god's ears alone.

"Must be," says Jaqen, "I have a concussion."
"You didn't sit in on the moot," says Jon. "Third day, Lyanna and Sansa decided it was time to browbeat some perspective into my bannermen." He shakes his head.

"Surprised you're not still seeing stars, then."

Jon sighs, contemplates the last smears of porridge in his bowl. "The god is a nonbeliever," he says. Half a question.

Jaqen's snorts, softly. "The king is a republican."

"Irrelevant," says Jon, imitating Arya's tone from earlier. "Neither kings nor gods get any say. World's ruled by women now."

"South too," says Jaqen. "Cersei, Daenerys, Asha, if her uncles turn on each other."

"Someone should find the Night's King a woman to manage his affairs," murmurs Jon. "Just to even the odds for the poor sod."

"Isn't working too well for R'hllor, last I saw him," says Jaqen. "World's not always fair." His lips twitch. "And it seems to be very unfair to Samwell Tarly, who just wants to know things." Jaqen's looking towards the door to the inner keep; Maester Samwell trundles in through it, little Sam at his side.

"So," Samwell says, smiling all around, though his smile grows a bit thin when he looks at the newcomers, "what did I miss?"

Jon is saved from finding an answer by the arrival of Sandor Clegane. Sansa invites Zural to a tour around Winterfell. The envoy accepts, graciously.

_The morning rounds._ A Stark must be seen, after all, and so must the Commander of the Guard. _How the Hound_ ended up in that position at Winterfell still surprises Jon.

The Maester eats hurriedly, and little Sam emulates the behavior, though most of the bread ends up on the boy's tunic rather than in his stomach. Bran brings up the subject of Lorathi ice-breakers, and Sam starts to explain, which means it's Arya's turn to leave the table--she hauls Daorys off somewhere.

Jaqen rises. "Better go after them," he says.

"You're going to rescue him from her?"

"No, I just want to watch him critique her. Some mockery, perhaps, if he doesn't go far enough."

"Petty vengeance?" asks Jon.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Thought you'd be above such things."

"Acorns," says Jaqen, sardonic. "Not much dignity left after that, is there?"

And it is only when the god has left, and Bran and Sam and little-Sam are preparing to rise, and so Jon must follow suit, does he realize that they didn't get to tell Sansa and Arya about his letter to Daenerys after all.
"Are you Braavosi," he asks her as they find themselves walking alone across a snow-drenched courtyard.

"You cannot tell?"

"Your voice," he says.

She winds an arm around his waist, so of course he must reciprocate. Truth, and lies, no Lorathi does something for one reason alone, not of it can be helped: he does not have his footing entirely, the softness of the snow makes him misjudge his stride; vision's no use, it doubles and redoubles with every wave of pain behind his head.

It comes and goes. There is no constancy to him.

She steadies him before he falters.

"I told them a story," she says. "Braavosi lap that shit up. So do Starks."

_Something is not right._ He wants to find fault with her methods, and there are many--it should not have worked, not on Zural.

The vague sense of dissonance in the one who is no one, _when did it start?_

"I did not enter the House," he says thoughtfully. "The ship docked; our sister and the others disembarked. The ship set sail." He pauses. "He did not come to see me."

Arya turns, and there is a blankness to her face. "Did he not?" she murmurs.

"Zural knew you were ours last night. And yet he allowed you the fiction of 'Braavosi' this morning."

She snorts. "Zural’s trying to balance himself, smooth out his dissonance. He contemplated making me give Sansa the gift to prove myself, right up until she exploded."

"I did not see it," says no one thoughtfully. "But there is nothing in me attuned to danger on behalf of the Starks, other than Jon Stark."

She nods. "But Braavosi," she says, "hold on to what relationships they think are allowed--teacher, student, brother." A small smile. "She has wept for his brothers."

Arya uses a free hand to wrench open a door to the eastern section of the inner keep.

"A butterfly," she says, smiling, "a pretty little butterfly trying to hold back a storm, fluttering in distress over Zural's relations."

"Sansa Stark is not a 'pretty little butterfly' anymore," says no one, "regardless of what Zural has in his memories, he does have ears, and eyes."

Arya's mouth twists, she looks at him then bows her head in something that feels like sorrow, but it has not the poignancy, the shuttered breath of last night's truth. "A violent rape," she murmurs.

_A priming._

Daorys follows Arya’s line of reasoning, identifies a flaw. "You need both sides to cooperate. For
all her weeping over me, Sansa Stark would have responded if you'd pointed out Bran Stark’s weakness instead of mine."

"Did want to engage Jon by ‘accident’," she says. "Him or Jaqen, did you hear that conversation?"

Daorys grins. "They’re but a good battle short of getting drunk and singing bawdy songs. There may be some maudlin weeping over lost loves--small mercy, that Jaqen hasn’t any of those, at least." He thinks on it. "Bran would still have been a better choice. You already had Zural at the open declaration. You still don't have Sansa Stark."

"Hmm."

Jaqen approaches.

No one can feel the tread of his god in the world; it is new, this thing. He has come into Himself. Before, when Jaqen walked, it was but a sense of an oncoming storm, somewhere far overhead.

Now the ground trembles with His passage.

"You have a sense of propriety?" Daorys asks her. "Won't use a cripple?"

"I tried to work up to it, before you came," she replies. "Dissonance. Had to balance it, attack the Weirwood to close it off." She sounds disgusted with herself.

They told each other a story.

He listens to his own words: "Won't use a cripple." Even no one is unable to suppress the satisfaction: she used me well against Zural; she doesn't think I'm a cripple.

Used him against himself, against the bell that rings in his head: useless, useless.

"I have been no one for but a moon and a half, brother." She turns wide, innocent eyes on him. "I can't even speak in the Lorathi way unless Jaqen guides me to it."

"And here, I thought," he says, "it was Lorathi you spoke all this time."

"Petty vengeance," says Jaqen, as he walks up to the two of them, leans casually against a wall next to Arya. "I seek petty vengeance, and what do I get? Lovers congratulating each other on a well-made bed."

"Not our bed," says Daorys, "you get to lie in it."

She steps closer to Jaqen, so close that surely, surely Jaqen must smell her skin, the green, cold scent of her. "Was my technique not to your liking?" she asks.

Jaqen is considering her.

“What did you see, Jaqen?” asks Daorys quietly.

Jaqen gives them a twisted smile. Bitter. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jaqen look this bitter. “It--whatever it is, it plays out in Zural’s heart.”

“He has one?” asks Arya, visibly distressed.

Lorathi like their classifications. They provide a framework for communication, a common understanding of the world. The body. The heart. The mind. And since they are Lorathi, the soul.
The soul of a Faceless Man belongs to Him of the Many Faces. This is the seat of loyalty, and mercy. Compassion, though no one has never found his own; it must be around somewhere, but he’s never bothered to go looking for it.

The mind of a Faceless Man is his greatest enemy, and all Faceless Men have a choice in what to do with it. The Lorathi use the mind against itself (who watches the watchmen?) and they call it reason. The Braavosi drown it out in names: vengeance, duty, attachment. For both, the mind is also known by the name “motivation”.

The body of a Faceless Man is his greatest tool. The body takes hunger, and thirst, and infatuation, and joy and pain and sorrow, and it feeds them to the mind, and the mind reasons (or in the case of the Braavosi, limps around in circles until it finds something appropriate by accident) and commands a response to the body: parry, thrust, riposte, voice, expression. A well-trained body is one that produces the fastest, most accurate response to command.

The soul makes them faceless. The body makes them men that play the game of faces.

The heart of a Faceless Man stops beating the day he dies. When it starts again, it is merely an organ like the stomach, or the pancreas.

The heart of a living man is a filter of perception, a bridge between the body and the mind. The heart breeds confusion, veils truth from itself; it conflates. Infatuation with love, avarice with survival. Fear with threat.

“Error belongs to the body,” says no one. Guilt, however, is a thing of the heart. No one knows many other things that belong alongside guilt: terror; resentment. Procrastination.

Can a Faceless Man have a heart?

“All Braavosi play at it,” says Arya, on the defensive for Zural now. “My ‘heart’ this, my ‘heart’ that, even Jaqen uses it as an endearment sometimes.”

“I’d heard Jaqen reads poetry,” says no one. Poets use the word a lot; some admixture in the vocabulary, in the throes of infatuation, it is to be accommodated.

Jaqen’s face is blank, and no one cannot read it.

“Zural plays ‘Zural Mobhai’, Braavosi Envoy,” says Arya. “He has to internalize some things; I just played with him till I could reach his attachments to you, to Jaqen.”

“It was too easy,” says Daorys. “It seems you have a rare talent, Arya, to bludgeon with truth and nothing else such that your reaching passes beneath notice. But to shift Zural that quickly?”

She lowers her gaze, stares at the floor.

Jaqen still contemplates her, the same thoughtful expression on his face he's worn for most of the morning. "Regardless,” he says, “It worked well.”

No one catches the moment she breaks, the moment she falls into being Arya Stark.

A moon and a half. No, she is nowhere near consistency herself. Still a Lorathi, still theirs, but the body is not well-trained yet.
She falls, but Jaqen waits in the abyss below her; he catches her.

"Excuse us, brother," Jaqen says, without preamble or explanation, and picks her up, no protests allowed, carries her up the stairs to the upper floor.

The intent there is quite clear.

Jaqen is very restrained.

In the god's place no one would have taken her against the wall the moment they cleared the Great Hall, taken her and left his mark on her, in her, that she felt the dampness between her legs for the rest of the day as a reminder of her allegiance.

He walks, slowly, aimless, finds himself in a long, narrow room empty of everything except a lit hearth, freshly laid. He wonders who it is lit for--doesn't matter, he sinks to the ground beside it, ignoring the carved chair placed so conveniently nearby. The stones are warm under him.

He corrects his thought. If I had taken her it would begin with me pushing her down onto the table. Jaqen would have been watching. Her nothingness would have shattered, she would have said "no" in some form.

A hesitation. A moment's hesitation in compliance from me.

Jaqen's knife would have slid into no one's heart.

His blood would have bubbled out of his mouth.

He plays it over in his head, again and again and again, the feel of the knife parting skin, flesh, sinew. A burning, Jaqen moves too fast for pain, it would be a sudden theft of breath that would first alert no one to the gift.

He finds flaws in the setting. What to do about the others? Jon Stark, Zural, all watching. Have to get them out of the room somehow, can't leave Jaqen trying to explain me to them, can't leave Sansa Stark unintentionally traumatized, more work for Arya in my wake.

His mind shifts to the corridor they first entered when they left the Great Hall. A stumble, which doesn't need too much feigning, just long enough for Jaqen to arrive. A knife. Surprise is everything--a thousand ways no one can be restrained, but that moment of surprise, where he surprises himself with his hesitation... that earns him a knife, the burning in his heart.

She would understand. Jaqen would too, but a moment too late.

Another way, to wait for others to finish their meals, to leave, and then it is simple again. It ends with the knife of course, as he wants it to. The taste of blood in his mouth. Jaqen's eyes, dark upon his own.

A smile has distorted his mouth, and no one does not care.

Jaqen's steel in his heart. Arya's scent seeping into the holes in me.

He realizes the hearth has burnt down to embers; footsteps alert him to it, as a servant enters, builds up the fire again, gives him a very strange look but does not question, simply ducks her head and leaves.

He understands whom the fire is for when another servant carries a basket in, and it is Jaqen's
Champion's turn to stare at Daorys.

Apparently he has wandered into Bran Stark's sitting room.

"How crippled are you?" he asks as the servant arranges Bran on the armchair, covers the boy's wasted legs with a blanket.

"Can't walk," says Bran.

Daorys snorts. "I see that. How far does it go?" he gestures down the length of Bran's body.

"Somewhere here," says Bran, reaches, touches his lower back.

Daorys notes the twist in Bran's torso as he gestures. *Legs, hips. He won't be siring any children.*

"What?" asks Bran.

"You're a disgrace to your god," says no one.

Both of Bran's eyebrows rise, but that serene expression does not shift from his face. Perhaps there is a little bit of resentment there, though.

"Not an accusation," no one clarifies. "A statement of fact. Not your fault, nobody's told you better." His voice is flat, matter-of-fact. "Your arms work. You have control over your upper body, some limited control over the muscles of your torso."

Bran nods, cautious. "Tyrion Lannister made me a saddle with a brace," he says. "I rode a horse."

"You rode a horse," says Daorys. "And yet you allow Jaqen's Champion to be carted about like a sack of moldering tubers."

The boy's jaws clench.

"You see things. Surely you've seen into our House in Braavos?"

"Once," Bran says. "On the Night of Ice."

*So he is not that much of a liability after all.*

"Didn't dare go east again," Bran murmurs. "Had to hide from the Woman in the Mask."

No one comes to himself with his face pressed to the floor, his hair in danger from errant sparks off the fire.

"You're a disgrace too," comments Bran.

No one levers himself upright. "Much worse than you; I've been taught better," he agrees, grinning. "But it's amazing, the number of people a crippled beggar can kill." He sketches out a shape in the air before him. "Build up your arms. Braced crutches, up to the elbow, something to keep the legs from flopping around."

The boy's head moves forward, eager. "Can you show me how?"

"Need a lot of work, the arms; they have to carry your entire body. Most cripples can't manage to strengthen the muscles that much."
"I'll do it," says Bran.

Daorys notes the obstinate tilt of the boy's chin. It is familiar to him, he saw the same but a watch...maybe two watches...ago on another face. He snorts, then heads over to the logs stacked beside the fire, picks one.

He tosses it into the boy's lap.

"Start with lifting that over your head."

"How many times?" asks Bran.

Daorys smirks. "Fifty," he says. "Fifty, after you think you cannot lift anymore."

#

MISSANDEI

She watches. She learns. She is helpful. And she clutches at the darkness coiling in her breast.

Selfish--so very selfish, to want this marriage of Daenerys Targaryen's to succeed; the face of the sister she wears, it is a lonely, sad one.

A slave-girl that commanded high price for her pubescent looks, well into her early twenties.

She plays the role very well. She sorrows when she needs to, she learns how to make pathetic jokes. No one does not emerge, ever, no one has not emerged since she came to Daenerys Targaryen's service.

There is a newcomer, a woman that is younger still than the face she wears. Arya Stark. She knows the name; she sends missives, secretive; the name has fluttered back to her upon raven's wings.

Another scrap of news, in the wake of the Night of Ice, news of another marriage, a marriage that had never been anticipated.

The face Missandei wears has aged with her, in Daenerys's service, and she cannot put on another, cannot receive her newest sister's memories.

Curiosity is permitted, up to a point. The House of Black and White is changing. She has not the detachment of a Lorathi in the moment (it will be hers when she lets Missandei go); she longs for her home; she longs to participate in the change alongside her brothers.

She sits upon a hard-backed chair in Daenerys' cabin, and reads aloud from a piece of parchment.

Her hand trembles, though she hides it within the sway of the ship.

She has glanced over the letter before reading from it. It is not penned by any hand she knows--if she had to guess, she would guess it is penned by the King in the North himself.

But Jaqen H'ghar's imprint upon the words is unmistakable.

The one who recruits is never the one who trains.

He never tried to force her obedience, never turned his sharp, sardonic mockery upon her quiet ways, the melancholy of her movements.

She has not seen him for decades. And he's married now. Is she a Lorathi? Far too young, far too early for that. But Missandei hopes Arya Stark may come to it in time.
Time is nothing for one of the god's servants. Years pass, before one meets another again, but those meetings are precious because of their scarcity, their brevity. Missandei hopes this marriage succeeds--she wishes to meet Arya Stark. Even if Jaqen does not come, the king's sister surely will.

In the meantime she reads the Queen's letters to her, and watches, watches for any stray glimpses of her brothers peeking out of the parchment.

"... my sister was wedded twice, each time against her will. Queen of Meereen, take the alliance, take the Dreadfort to garrison your troops, take what you will, you need speak no sacred vows to me."

Missandei looks up. "More terms, everything you asked for," she says, "the first time."

"Does he know we are blood?" Daenerys is irritable, sitting in the lone chair, bolted to the floor. Tyrion Lannister sits cross-legged upon the bed, and eyes the carafe of wine on the side-table with longing. He allows himself two glasses a watch now, no more.

Tyrion snorts. "Jon Snow is not the type to know anything beyond his own sense of honor," he says. "I'd feel sorry for him, if I didn't want to strangle him right now."

They are but two sevendays away from dropping anchor in White Harbor. The raven bearing this letter could be no more an ill omen than if Jon Stark had tried to send one.

"Has he fathered any bastards?" the Queen asks.

"No idea," says Tyrion, "but if I had to guess I'd say not. Not with that chip he carries on his shoulder."

A grinding of teeth, from Daenerys as she contemplates the lantern on the table in front of her; the light flickers, though its wrought-iron cage is immobile.

"It would solve two problems, though," says Tyrion. "You get the alliance, he's free to have the child you want."

Stark means fidelity, she thinks. Jaqen never took lovers outside the duty. His marriage will draw ire. Not interference, of course, perhaps not even judgment. Disapproval, however, there is always room for Faceless Men to disapprove of something they think they understand.

"Is it bad," murmurs Daenerys, "that I care so much about something so inconsequential?"

Tyrion sighs. "I'm still a Lannister." His mouth twists. "Just don't like the people that share the blood."

"What else?" asks Daenerys, "apart from the terms?"

Missandei bends her head to the letter, scans all the way down to the bottom of the page, turns it over.

"A cold wind blows over the escarpment; it scatters the snow. If the wind is strong enough you can almost see the bones of the land underneath. The wind drives the clouds before it as well, and when the moon shines, dips and valleys in the land cast blue shadows, ephemeral, until the wind scatters them again. The North is a desert now."

She looks up, sees Daenerys's eyes focused on the past. "Water," murmurs Daenerys. "They have a desert made of nothing but water. The deserts I have known make you thirst till you think there is
nothing more important in the world than a mouthful of water."

Missandei’s eyes drop to the parchment again. "He writes, ‘a man I hold in high esteem, he calls
the wind the Ice Maiden, who waits upon a cold bed for men that lose themselves in the world; I
am not sure I agree with him--I have heard it said that a man is never more warm his whole life
than in the moments before he freezes to death.’"

Thank you Jaqen, now I want to visit this "North" of yours. She almost smiles. Daenerys will take
Missandei ashore with her when the fleet reaches White Harbor.

"What more?" asks Daenerys in the silence.

"A poem," says Missandei.

"What? Give it here." Daenerys reaches forward, snatches the parchment from Missandei’s
unresisting hand.

Queens are commanding. Daenerys does not mean to be unkind.

"Some say the world will end in fire..."," Daenerys reads the first line aloud, the rest in silence.
Eventually, she puts down the parchment in consternation.

"He withdraws his suit with one hand, courts me with the other?" the Queen snarls.

Tyrion looks as confused as Daenerys. "Winterfell's got more parchment and books than a man can
go through in ten lifetimes. Perhaps they found the Pact of Ice and Fire, he's offering to..." Tyrion
pauses. "You know, I have no fucking clue what he's doing."

Isn't it obvious? No, only to her, who can see this Jon Stark's soul laid bare in the paper.

"A choice," she says. "He creates a space for a choice. Not for alliances or power. For Dany, for
Jon."

This King in the North, who holds Jaqen H'ghar in high esteem. Whose sister--by heart if not
blood--whose sister is married to Him of the Many Faces.

Such depth of entanglement, between the House of Stark and the House of Black and White? It
should trouble her. It really should. It must be troubling many of her brothers, back in Braavos and
beyond.

But then, our brothers often forget that Faceless Men are but a part of the god's domain. We are
tools in His hand.

Missandei’s religiosity has always been a comfort to her.

Daenerys does not look amused. "He really is quite naive, this Jon Stark." She spits out the last
name.

What, you want a scorpion in your bed, my Queen?

But Daenerys still holds some residual hatred for the Starks, fed to her by her brother of the melted
crown.

Tyrion holds his hand out for, Daenerys passes the parchment to her Hand. Tyrion glances over it.
"He would not have penned this without someone looking at it before it was sent. His advisors
must have agreed with it."
He almost succumbs, reaches for the carafe. Catches Missandei watching him.

Tyrion Lannister withdraws his hand.

"And who are his advisors?" asks Daenerys.

"His sisters, I suppose."

"And this man he seems to hold in high esteem," offers Missandei. "That is not Westerosi poetry."

Tyrion makes noise in his throat. "Your Master of Whispers caught a rumor. That Lady Arya has taken some lowborn Lorathi to her bed."

*That* had amused her, when Varys brought the rumor. *Wylla Manderly told her chambermaid who told her sister who told...Lady Arya Stark, no better than a lightskirt at the docks.* The role her sister plays sounds like a feisty one. *Wonder how Jaqen's dealing with that.* He's always been the untouchable, remote sort, always watching, mocking, never participating.

"Sister's lover is *not* going to be held in high esteem," says Daenerys.

*Look to your own council, my Queen, you give slaves equal rank to lords and ladies, listen to us with as much care as you listen to the ruler of Dorne. Is it so hard to assume someone else might be capable of such egalitarianism?*

"No," says Tyrion, "But where there is one from Essos, there could be others."

"It doesn't have to be so," says Missandei softly. "This one was a slave, my Queen, and just yesterday you allowed this one's... *my*...advice to overrule the Lady Sand's. The King in the North may also listen to ones that others malign."

Tyrion shakes his head. "It's not that he's a commoner, or a foreigner, it's that he's warming the king's sister's bed. Doesn't matter how good his advice is, Lady Sansa of all people is not going to have him under the same roof as her."

Missandei bows her head, signifying acceptance of Lord Tyrion's words.

"His sisters," Daenerys says, taps a finger on the table, deep in thought. "*They* are the ones offering me a choice." She looks at Tyrion. "Sansa Stark *really* didn't want to marry you, did she?"

The lines on Tyrion's face deepen in bitterness. "Would you?" he asks.

Daenerys smiles, a quirk of one side of her lips. "I considered it," she says, "but there is no advantage to either of us; you already bring me Casterly Rock as my Hand."

*Do you not see the shards of his soul, Daenerys?*

But of course she does.

Missandei has watched how Daenerys commands loyalty bordering on obsession from the men that serve her: harsh truths, toughness of mind, of spirit, until one, single soft word triggers a cascade of emotion, a cascade that is almost religious in its intensity.

It helps, that she is beautiful. A contrast to the steel at her core. Men and women oscillate between the halves of Daenerys Targaryen; oscillation does not require sex, it simply requires a tearing in two of the soul, and the one that sits at the point of balance becomes sanctuary from the demons of the self. Becomes salvation.
Water, in a desert.

And she does it all unconsciously, instinctively. Not for the first time, Missandei wonders if there is something in the dragon's blood apart from an immunity to fire.

Tyrion Lannister says nothing.

"But Sansa will not be so careful of Jon Stark's heart should it become known he is a Targaryen," says the Queen. She sounds very sure of that--surely, surely the Starks hate the Targaryens, surely the hate, fed with lessons and mother's milk, surely it must be reciprocal. "I will marry Jon Snow, Stark, whatever he calls himself," the Queen says.

"This one thinks you do not need to anymore if you do not want," says Missandei. "King Jon is offering all the terms you demanded."

"I cannot deal with this," and Daenerys's anger is swift, she sweeps a dozen scraps of parchment on the table to the floor, proposals, proposals all of them, "I cannot do this, find new ways to say no without alienating a house that should be sworn to me. It will stop once I am married."

The Queen should not be this angry. She sees a choice as a rejection, however subtle.

And what beautiful woman has ever learned to meet rejection with grace?

Perhaps his tastes run to the spear, not the distaff? Or there is another he loves.

No.

The choice of words, the placement of them--it speaks to uncertainty of place in the world, sorrow for what the world is, but more than anything it speaks of honesty. An honest choice--this king would be open to Daenerys choosing him, open to choosing her.

"It is not a rejection," Missandei says. "Nor does he love another. This one sees in this king's words a longing, my Queen."

Daenerys shakes her head. "All men long, often for things they cannot have. Choices, in this case."

It would not have mattered if this Jon Stark had been a street-sweeper from Volantis, Daenerys would have married him, put a crown on his head, made him sire bastards in secret and then taken his children as her own.

Targaryen, Targaryen, it comes back down to that, over and over again.

Daenerys Targaryen is barren.

Blood is an obsession.

But of course it is far more than that. She plans for her children, her true children. Who will ride her dragons after she is gone from the world, who will control them? Should they lay eggs, who will hatch them if not the Blood of the Dragon?

This king wants a choice, wants reciprocal affection, wants the kind of fidelity it seems Starks are, indeed, capable of.

Daenerys would much prefer a man with Robert Baratheon's appetites and ability to sire children every time he spills his seed.
The proofs of the marriage of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen, they are not simply there to threaten Jon Stark with the destruction of his claim to the North. They are there as insurance, should it not be possible to claim a bastard as Daenerys's child by subterfuge, should a natural-born child of Jon Stark's need to be raised to the throne on some future date.

"I will marry him," says Daenerys.

Jaqen's king, Missendei's queen--their goals are contrary to one another. But my queen has a will forged in fire. Snow will melt, will turn to vapor. Or else it will turn to ice, and shatter, this Jon Snow's heart.

"I cannot afford him to be soft," Daenerys is saying, "for Arya and Sansa Stark to coddle him and feed him sweetmeats and give him poetry to send to me."

Tyrion rubs a hand over his eyes. "No," he mutters.

"Tell them," Daenerys commands. "Tell them who he is. Address the letter directly to his sisters." She is envious of Jon Stark. Not an emotion Missandei has seen in often in the Mother of Dragons.

Viserys looms over her still.

"Let him see how thin the bonds of siblings really are when it comes to power," says the Queen. "Then he will be open to a trade--my children to hold his kingdom, in exchange for his children to hold mine."

Chapter End Notes

So, action finally starts up again. It'll ramp up as we continue :) What did you think? Feedback makes my day, makes me happy, happy me writes more
Old Friends

Chapter Notes

Warning: Non-Con in the "Jaime" section, please skip if you don't want to read, I will provide enough data where the incident becomes relevant for you to pick up the threads without reading it through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA

They walk, arm-in-arm, around the outer periphery of the keep. A test.

She glances at Sandor over her shoulder, widens her eyes: Zural Mobhai is safe.

Sandor shakes his head, as nonplussed as Sansa is.

Zural has no interest in Sansa Stark. Braavosi-- like Loras? Sam, and Gilly-- Sam has no interest in me either, and yet I cannot touch him.

Her and Sandor...in all the month that he carried her everywhere, slept outside her door with his sword drawn...some things do not need to be spoken of between them. Sandor Clegane holds a certain kind of affection for Sansa Stark.

She cannot figure a pattern in those that are "safe" or "unsafe".

A path has been shoveled clean, between the Inner Keep and the approach to the rest of Winterfell.

"I must apologize for my sister," murmurs Sansa, as they walk out into the courtyard; Arya was exceptionally rude at the table.

"And I must be apologizing for mine," observes Zural, rueful.

They exchange a look; Sansa sighs. "At least she knows herself--subtle as a warhammer."

Zural raises an eyebrow. "How would you have been arguing for honesty between us, had you been her?"

Is he...is he asking to be convinced? She sees Sandor shake his head in her peripheral vision. A warning: Zural Mobhai is not safe.

"I would simply have left it after pointing out that Faceless Men are not Red Keep courtiers," she says.

They tour the glass-houses. He is interested in the ways of growing food in the absence of sunlight.

"Braavos could benefit," he observes.

"How would you have argued, Ser Zural?" she asks him.

He sighs. "I would be saying that the oldest definition of the word 'alliance' that I have found," he
glances at her, "it is in the language of the First Men, who called it 'al'lain', they are defining it as a pact of marriage. I would be asking: are Stark interests married to those of the House of Black and White?"

Sansa blinks. So not Arya's fault, her lack of subtlety. "You were Arya's teacher," says Sansa. "You must have taught her more than just the sword?"

*Warhammers, for example.*

He snorts.

Sansa checks Sandor--he has a finely attuned sense for how much a man can be pushed and how much he must be sweetened before he is pushed. Sandor shrugs: *no idea.*

And so Sansa swallows pride, she confines her distrust to the small part of her mind that watches her, from very far away.

"The Starks are weak," she says. "They have no coin, no soldiers, and enemies at the gates."

"The House of Black and White is blind," murmurs Zural. "Our brothers are ending up in cages, and with their tongues cut out, and lured into shadow, and nobody is knowing about it till it is too late."

She pauses to let a cart pass--broken weapons scavenged from the battlefield outside the gate. They have no smelter. Yet.

"I am not sure I understand," she says. "Jaqen knew...so much, before he brought Arya to us."

Zural sighs. "You must be seeing that there is a specific goal. A contract. The aim for information-gathering, for infiltration, it is always very focused. Temporary. The brother gives the gift, he leaves, and whatever network of eyes-and-ears he has built up...dissolves."

This teaches her something: *there are very, very few Faceless Men in the world.* How many, she cannot guess. But not enough to have one stationed in any one place for too long.

"Maester Samwell and I have been building a network of informants across Westeros," she says. It has been one of the points on the memorandum, this sharing of information. *Specific, and sporadic, but very thorough from their side, versus long-term constant dribbles of knowledge from us. But who will put the two together?* "One of the reasons we have so few servants in Winterfell itself."

Zural nods; he's looking at the ground deep in thought as he walks. "How extensive is this network?" he asks.

She smiles, a little. "Women and Maesters," she says. "Women and Maesters, Ser Zural. Both live upon the sufferance of their lords." A woman may or may not receive an allowance from her husband, her father. Even a small handful of silver is appreciated, is power that is hers, and hers alone.

He looks above him, at the heads mounted over the bailey, black with frost. Unrecognizable. "Women and Maesters," he says. "Most excellent."

*Sarcasm?* She's not sure.

They cross the western arch into the market square. Empty, now, though she's attracted a handful, with her buying and selling of garments--a draper, two furriers. A seamstress. Coin has begun to
flow, between Winterfell and White Harbor.

Zural pauses at a furrier's, the bigger of the two. "How cold is it liable to get?" he asks. She has noticed his furs are of the light, southern style, with more thought given to looks than warmth. But Arya and Jaqen had arrived in wool, so Zural and Daorys's attire is some improvement at least.

"The longest winter Maester Samwell has records for," she says, "it was written that unprotected skin--the nose, fingers, a man would lose them to frostbite in something like a tenth-watch."

Zural whistles.

"Wind matters, of course," she says. "Up to a point."

They step inside the shop, and Sansa watches as Zural haggles.

Like the proverbial fishmonger, she thinks. And she learns. A lady is not supposed to know how to haggle with common-folk. The language, the structure of it is entirely different than the barbed insinuations and suggestions that cover up such a "crudity" of something as simple as a sale amongst her class.

She realizes he is purchasing six sets of furs, under and overlayers, all in grey. Six. The number merits further attention, though the garments themselves will be delivered to the keep within a sevenday.

Zural is rubbing his hands as he steps out. "It is being an excellent start to the day," he says. "A man of Braavos loves a good bargain," he tells her by way explanation, a twinkle in his eye.

She cannot help but laugh. "Thank you, Ser Zural," she says.

"Ah," he says, "taxes."

"I learned a lot," she disagrees, though of course the taxes are important. "More than I have taught myself by watching others in the past six months, truth be told."

His brows furrow.

"The highborn," she says, "sell their daughters easily enough, but bargaining for shoes is somehow 'dirty'."

His eyes are considering her now, but he says nothing as they continue their promenade.

"Properly," she says, a bit of wry humor on display now, "the Starks should have allied with the Iron Bank, and the House of Black and White with Daenerys and her Master of Whispers."

"But it is Arya Stark the House chose for itself," says Zural. "And there must be some reminder of that," he murmurs, "not just for her."

Six sets of fur.

"You are expecting two others?" Sansa asks.

He shakes his head. "Two will be sent back to the House, for replication, some accommodations to our work. Very well made, your garments, I am thinking, it is being of no use to reinvent something that is already designed for unprecedented harsh cold--the layers, the cutting of it."

Winter will bear down on Braavos as well. Soon, if it has not already.
Grey fur. "So this is for your House. Not meant for Braavos, or the other guilds." An observation, a warning: if Winterfell has any knowledge worth trading, it will be traded and not given away. But the House of Black and White merits betrothal gifts. "Grey is your House's co--" I've asked something of the working of Faceless Men. "Forgive me, I should not have spoken."

Zural snorts. "About what is in front of your eyes?"

"Polite fictions," she says. That is her territory, after all, to see and not see what is before one's face.

They cross back into the rear section on the keep, near the inner bailey, and she points out the practice fields; a handful of Sandor's men have set up archery butts.

"Arya has appropriated a hall inside for her and Jaqen to train," says Sansa. "Jon and Sandor join them from time to time."

Zural snorts. "Train?" he says. "She is not training. The girl has gone as soft as a pudding."

Sansa giggles, she cannot help it. "A pudding," she says. She feels a little better about the bludgeoning earlier (intent and outcome, she is gratified by them, but Arya's tone). Your teacher thinks you are a pudding, dearest Arya.

They re-enter the Lord's Keep through the westwall doors.

"The House of Black and White is using fiction as currency, Princess Sansa," says Zural. "But we are not polite. Ask about what is in front of your face. I will tell you if it may be answered."

She stops in shock, stares at him. Is it a trick?

He shakes his head in negation.

She takes a deep breath, nods, and they walk in silence for a while, punctuated by Sansa pointing out things of interest to Zural: the armory, the library-tower, the relocated herald's quarters; the tower of ravens.

"Davos Seaworth says marriage does not seem to be a common custom for your guild," she says as they ascend the wide, straight stairwell to the receiving rooms on the second floor of the Lord's Keep.

Sandor is behind her, two steps away--right up until a week ago, she could not manage the last flight by herself.

"Marriage is not common, no," Zural says.

"And yet you seem to be comfortable, with Arya and Jaqen."

"Any Faceless Man can enter into a contract," says Zural. "He is a free man, not a slave--entering legal contracts is one of the marks of a free man. If they contract with each other, a gamble, an exchange of goods and services." He smiles, as if baffled by it all, "and marriage seems to be a contract that includes all these things. It's none of the guild's affair."

"What a strange world you live in," she says.

Zural snorts. "I could be saying the same to you." He doesn't look at her as they walk. "Divorce would be messy though. Very messy. He'll get the chattels, she'll get the house."

"There is divorce in Braavos?"
"The god is merciful," says Zural.

I think he means "yes".

He looks carefully out a window as she shows him the stone garden--one of her mother's projects, it used to have riverlands plants (all gone now) in carved stone pots.

"Dowry details must be discussed," Sansa murmurs.

Zural nods, slowly. "For Tormo Fregar."

"Is that Jaqen H'ghar's name in Braavos?" she asks innocently.

Zural's eyes twinkle. "Forgive me Princess, I am being under the impression that the Princess Arya Stark had taken Jaqen H'ghar as a paid companion, not a prospective suitor!"

Her eyes widen. "Paid companion?" she says in horror. "Ser, do you insinuate my sister is no longer a maiden?"

Zural raises his hands. "No, no, I am to be repeat scurrilous rumor, of course, you must be forgiving this poor envoy, he misspoke."

*The Braavos accent thickens. Is any of it real?*

She bows her head gracefully. "You were not to know such an insult would be avenged by her Champion."

"This Champion's name is Jaqen H'ghar?" asks Zural.

"But of course," says Sansa.

"I pray, Princess, you forget Zural Mobhai ever spoke anything untoward," he says.

Sansa pretends to think about it before she nods. "Let us return to the matter of the dowry. A middle ground. *Let us find a middle ground.* By our laws, our sister has fostered in the House of Black and White. Would you be willing to act in the stead of our father, and dispense her properties in the appropriate manner?"

He raises both eyebrows.

*It is nothing but the principle of it we argue over. Arya's dowry should go to Jaqen, held in her name; but Arya Stark must marry another. Principle is important, Faceless Men keep their word; if they swear to act in Arya's interest, then they will take only that which is needed to pacify the Sealord of Braavos."

"This eldest of the order she mentioned," says Sansa, "who has the power to nullify her marriage, should said occur--surely he can make such decisions."

"A most interesting proposition, Princess," he says. "Genius by accident, I am to be thinking." He nods. "Such will be done. What is the provision made for Princess Arya Stark, if one may ask?"

*This answer you may not like. "Lands," she says. "Dower lands."*

He looks out over the window, into the vast snow-covered fields beyond. "Out there?" he asks.

She nods. *Nothing, Zural, it's all worthless, drowned in snow for a hundred years or more. The*
farms, the forests, the fields.

She does not expect him to throw his head back and laugh, uproariously, laugh until tears run down his eyes. "Nothing!" he says. "Nothing but fiction." He shakes his head. "Accepted, more than accepted!"

"The House of Black and White uses fiction as currency..." she murmurs. Have I given them more power than I should have? Let us pretend it is intentional, then. "There is another thing," she says, and this must not go to the Sealdor. "A stone bed in the crypts of Winterfell for my sister," she says quietly, "and for the man she shares her life with."

Married daughters are not often buried in this manner, in their father's house. But Sansa will not have to lie with any man ever again if Jon's marriage succeeds. Jon is no oathbreaker; Daenerys is barren. Bran cannot have children.

Arya and Jaqen are the last hope of this family.

A quiet discussion, between Jon and Sansa and Jaqen--Arya was not involved, one of the reasons Sansa knows Arya toes her guild's line.

Her children will hold Winterfell, and they will need their parents' graves, side by side, in the crypts below.

Sansa has needed her parents often, since their bones came home to rest. She speaks to them sometimes. The apologies have passed; increasingly, she speaks to them of her hopes for the Kingdom of Winter.

For the first time since he has arrived, she sees something in Zural that makes Sandor step closer to her, his cloak pushed back from his sword-arm.

"Winterfell claims Jaqen H'ghar," Zural says, flat, all pretense gone from him.

Would that we could, but he will accept neither name nor title, and Jon flat-out refuses to press them onto him. She holds her ground. "His children," she says.

"There will be no children," snaps Zural.

Oh really? Sansa's mouth quirks at one side. "As you wish, Ser Zural." Death-dealers do not bring life into the world, Jaqen has said, he's cautioned her on the prevailing sentiment within the House of Black and White.

Eddard, or Niobe; I know their names, I know I may have to be their mother in all but name, that I may have to claim them as my bastards, or Jon's, and have him legitimize them.

Whatever it takes.

There will always be a Stark in Winterfell.

Sansa has no wish to fight the Faceless Man on this. "For the sake of polite fiction," she says, "provision has been made."

He takes a deep breath. "The graves mean as much nothing as the lands, Princess Sansa," he says. "The eldest of our order will be asked if they can be accepted."

She bows her head. Whether they are accepted or not, they cannot prevent us from making the
provision.

He smiles, assuming his "Zural Mobhai, Braavosi Envoy" mien again. "The Sealord is wanting trade concessions--a dock in the White Harbor, no tariffs for Braavosi merchandise."

*The goods will flow from them to us for a while yet.*

"We cannot buy anything in turn if there are no tariffs," she points out reasonably. "Let us say..."

By the end of the watch, some settlement is reached. It is equitable, Sansa thinks, and Zural seems satisfied. *Good.*

*At least for the Sealord of Braavos. So where do Starks stand with the House of Black and White?* A suspicion in her, that Davos is wrong--no apprentice could have gotten away with speaking to her masters the say Arya spoke this morning.

"Pudding," she says, "but not an apprentice?"

"I am to be liking you, Princess Sansa," says Zural. "And it would make much trouble for the diplomacy business if she stabs you for insinuating such for reason of her age."

A warning. Delivered with humor. For Arya.

Sansa cannot stop the wide smile. "You don't know how happy that makes me," she says. "I worried, that her coming here...Braavos seems like a place where she could do anything, rise as high as she wanted."

They have paused, looking out one of the long windows into the courtyard below. New arrivals, from Cerwyn way; none that require her attention. *Arya's smith. When will he come?*

"You worry for Jaqen's position in the guild as well," Zural says, and he is *amused.*

"I should not, he is of very high rank," she ventures.

He does not contradict her.

*Knew it!*

She leans against the wall. "I fear for him," she whispers, and almost she cannot believe she is voicing the thought. "He is an assassin, a killer, he does not comment on politics, but he sees, he sees me, he sees everyone." Her mouth twists. "But there is such fear in me for him." She places a hand on her breast, "and I know not whence it comes." She gives Zural a weak smile. "And that was not a diplomatic thing to say."

Zural also mirrors her position. "An observation for an observation," he says, "and that is not diplomatic either. But I would offer you a pattern, Princess."

She looks to him.

"First, Brandon Stark. Then Eddard Stark. Then Robb Stark. Then Theon Greyjoy. Then Jon Snow."

*The broken and the dead.*

"Arya told you," she says.
"Stark secrets are currency, to buy indulgence for her interference in our affairs?"

"There is significance attached to dead men in the House," murmurs Zural. "Jon Stark will be protected--not just from Faceless Men."

Secrets for protection above and beyond the guild's function.

"So," says Zural. "Jon Snow. Then Rickon Stark. And now you have Jaqen H'ghar."

Every single man in my family.

"Is that all there is?" she says bitterly. "My fear, based on a pattern?"

He does not answer for some time.

"I accepted a local contract about a year and a half ago," he says, looking out the window. "Arya Stark did not eat, did not sleep for the entire four days I was gone. She trained, and she served, somehow always, always hovering near the doors to the House, and her little sword, Needle, it stayed at her side." He smiles, grim. "There was a man named Syrio Forel, once. We are trained to notice such things, Princess Sansa."

Sansa straightens. "I would pray, Ser Zural, that you are correct. But I do not know who to pray to."

Zural snorts. "That is always the way of it, for us who do not believe."

"Arya believes," Sansa says.

"Yes," says Zural. "And now there are many more men in her family." His mouth twists. "She will not let go of our brother. She will offer many reasons, and each is a service, so how can it be refuted? But a service is still an excuse."

She dragged me out of my rooms the moment the moon set, and she'd been weeping for some time already.

Daorys had lain so still on the bed, barely breathing. Slipping away, somehow, somewhere. A statue, still, no sign of wound or illness to mar his sharp features, his hair haloing his head in gold.

Sansa has seen her share of beautiful men at court: Loras Tyrell, Aurane Waters, Daemon Sand.

None of them lay dying before her, none of them offered her a story: The Princess wept over the Knight's bier and lo, his eyes opened and the Stranger stayed his hand. But it seems Sansa and Arya have already received their stories in Jon.

It must have done something, he woke, he was walking and talking this morning.

"Surely that is a good sign, for your order?" she says. "That Arya cares so much."

Zural sighs. "She goes to war with death, Princess Sansa, she deceives him, and yet somehow she makes of even the deception a service."

You are not a believing man, Ser Zural, so it does not bother you overmuch that she transgresses against her god.

Well and good.
"Shall we continue?" she asks, stepping away from the casement.

"Pray, let us be doing so," he says as he offers her his arm again, and it seems to her that some of Jaqen's sardonic humor has rubbed off on Zural Mobhai.

#

JAIME

"Cersei!" Jaime bursts into throneroom, Qyburn huffing and puffing a few paces behind.

Euron Greyjoy, the fucking whoreson, stands on the dais at the foot of the Iron Throne, casually leaning against it.

"Is this where you killed the mad king?" asks Euron.

Jaime's mouth stretches in a smile. "Kings die."

Cersei, her mourning garb far more revealing that it should be, emerges from the shadows at the corner of the hall. A sneer curls at Jaime's lips as he takes in her decolletage; bruises, fading, mark the upper curves of the snow-white flesh on display. His gaze turns to hurt disapproval as he looks into her eyes, searching for something, anything.

"It's very cold, my queen," says Euron gently.

Cersei gives the Iron Islands king a sickly sweet smile, then turns to Jaime and her voice grows warmer.

"My brother is very protective of my prerogatives," she says. "He is the one thing I have left in the world."

Jaime breathes out, he cannot help but soften at her.

*Everything will be all right. Somehow.*

"Your men are beaching our ships!" says Qyburn, throwing the words into Euron Greyjoy's face. The Hand turns to the Queen. "Your Grace, the docks, they’re hacking our ships apart, all--"

"Your ships are old," interrupts Euron, even as he reaches forward, lifts Cersei's hand to his lips. When he speaks to her, his voice is low. "The wood has better uses. A man needs warmth," he says, looking into her eyes, and his touch upon her crawls up Jaime's spine, crawls and some violent anger in him surfaces again.

"What need have you of ships that are falling apart when *I* am here?" Euron smiles. "A man needs warmth more than gold when the sun has set," he says, and turns to Qyburn. "Confiscate their gold with one hand, give them wood to burn with the other. Your people will *accept* their place in the order of things."

*Don't touch her.*

"Your brother looks unconvinced," says Euron, and then he shakes his head, sighs, as Cersei withdraws her hand. His eyes lose their dangerous edge; he wears once again the guise of the warlike-but-reasonable King that had sailed into Blackwater Bay, in the guise of an honest warrior. "Come, Ser Jaime," says Euron, gesturing towards the doors. "Walk with me. Let me show you some things, that I may convince you."
Euron Greyjoy steps down from the dais.

"Very well," says Jaime, his jaw hurting with the effort to keep his tongue in check. "Convince me."

*Anything to get him away from her.*

They walk through the echoing corridors of the keep, and servants bow and scurry. A cold wind blows, the keep is tall, and the wind howls through its spires. They cross the courtyard, to the suits of rooms Cersei has given Euron to enjoy.

Jaime is not prepared for it.

They slam into him, slam him against a wall and these are men used to taking slaves, taking strong warriors of many lands and tribes, subduing them.

*Useless, useless hand!*

He is bound face-down on something, the room is dark he cannot see and the smell is overpowering, a charnel-house.

A candle, then another. The room comes alive with light.

Jaime's horrified eyes take in the scene.

Men, in a various stages of dying, chained to the walls all around. Incongruous, amidst the red-and-gold splendor of the chamber's appointments, the gleaming chandeliers, the rich fabrics upon the walls, the draperies.

The bed.

He is bound, face-down, to the four posts of a bed.

"Unhand me!" He twists; not much play. *This man is mad! "You assault the Queen's brother?"

"Not yet," says Euron, as he calmly unbuttons his surcoat. He smiles at Jaime.

Breath tangles with voice in Jaime's lungs, he chokes on air.

*Like the Stark cage, like the Stark cage but Catelyn Stark was vengeful, not mad.*

Jaime swallows, finds his courage again. "What is it to be?" he asks. "A whipping? You think that will make me compliant? That it will break me?" He snorts; his own voice has given him courage, he sounds confident. "I spent months in a cage once," he says. "Interesting experience."

Euron circles the bed, passes out of Jaime's field of view.

"Your sister is very beautiful," says Euron.

*Too close. He comes too close.*

"What are you doing?" snarls Jaime.

"Satisfying a curiosity," replies Euron.

Jaime's heartbeat is loud, so loud in his ears, every sense straining to its limit, and he hears the
sound of buttons being undone, one by one.

And then he feels rough hands on him, and his britches are being pulled down, the cold touch of steel on his flesh, the wielder does not care overmuch if he cuts Jaime; warm blood, running into the cleft of his buttocks.

**Jaime fights.**

His muscles are pulling themselves apart; a harsh screaming pain, a snap, he has pulled his right shoulder out of its socket and the ties holding him stretch, and give. A splintering sound; one of the bedposts cracks. More warm blood trickling from his wrists as he pulls and pulls and screams obscenities.

Cold chains, over him, and he cannot breathe anymore, hands on his flesh, choking the voice from his throat. He vomits and drowns in the rancid smell of it; his head swims.

And then the burning pain starts. He is being split apart and there is no sound left to him but gasps as his lungs refuse to suck in air of their own accord, and that voice, Euron Greyjoy’s voice, it whispers sweet endearments in his ear and Jaime can only flinch, fitful, and try to pull away from the blood-soaked thrusts until the pain and the darkness take him.

#

**SANSA**

Sansa and Sandor watch the grey-cloaked figure leave the Inner Keep, head to the Southern Wing. The division of time, arbitrary though it is now, marks the time as mid-afternoon.

"Cold son-of-a-bitch," says Sandor.

She cannot disagree. Like Ser Zural, Ser Daorys has a fighter’s grace, he walks as if the cart-churned slush under his boots is a level, tiled floor.

His face gives nothing away.

"The she-wolf called you out in the middle of the night two days ago," says Sandor.

"Arya thought we could weep over Ser Daorys, heal him as we healed Jon."

Sandor considers the assassins as they turn a corner. "So it worked again--he looks a fair sight better than he did when they came in."

"Arya says it didn't, that the poison still thrums in his veins. We are not blood to him, I suppose. She's dosing him with something for the pain--it lets him sleep." She pauses. "I think I am starting to like handsome killers--he seems the sort that keeps to his oaths."

Sandor sighs and turns to her.

*Here it comes.*

"What can I do," he asks quietly, "little bird, what can I do that you will forgive me for riding to the Last Hearth without your permission?"

She has considered the problem. She knows his question will come.
"I have no answer for either of us," she says. "Permission is a distant, abstract thing. I just wanted to be told."

He closes his eyes, lays his head against the pillar he had been leaning against. "Won't happen again," he says, and the firmness of his voice belies the sorrow on his face. "Will tell you everything. My word. Got no honor to give you, but word's still good."

A test, then.

"You will tell me everything?"

He nods.

"Do you love me?"

His jaw clenches. His eyes remain closed. "Yes."

"Do you desire me? As a man desires a woman?"

He swallows. "Yes."

She raises a hand, touches his shoulder, and he must open his eyes, look down at her hand, follow the line of her arm to her shoulder, her face.

"Still safe," she murmurs.

Relief, in the both of us.

"I cannot figure what lies behind this safety," she says.

He snorts. "Ask the handsome fucking assassins, they're the ones trained to identify patterns."

He didn't like Zural's observations. For the presumption of them? Or their accuracy? She must admit that she, too, does not like the observations--she does not like Sansa Stark becoming a predictable pattern. This much of the Mockingbird she keeps: never do what they will expect you to do, unless it serves you to pretend to be a predictable creature.

"Kiss me," she says.

Sandor blinks, backs away from her.

"I've never been kissed by a man that loved me," she says to him. "I would like to know what that feels like."

He shakes his head.

"Sandor," she says. Not a warning...an expectation.

"Won't be pure any more, little bird," he says. "Let it be. Someone more suited to you will come, and he will love you too."

Sansa Stark finds that the fury that has dogged her steps this past half-moon--being kept in ignorance, being overruled in her own keep, being wrapped in cotton-wool for her own good--the fury has not dissipated, it has simply disguised itself as apathy.

Not apathetic any more.
She steps up to him, close, far too close for propriety, she lays her palm over his heart, looks up into his face. "You know I do not believe in second chances. I will never ask this again."

His eyes are far too soft. "Nothing good would come of it, Princess, for either of us."

She steps back, one, two paces. Turns on her heel without a word, walks towards her sitting room. She steps through the threshold, then looks over her shoulder.

"Pity," she says, "I never kissed anyone I loved before, either."

She closes the door behind her, and only then does she allow a savagely satisfied smile to bloom on her face.

Love comes in many forms. She loves her brothers, she loves the memory of her parents, she loves Arya.

She loves Sandor Clegane.

The love does not resemble anything she would have called "love" between a man and a woman when she was a child. No butterflies, no giddiness, no desire to see him or hear his voice. Only a knowing, that he is there. A remote cousin of "love", she thinks, and she sees in her mind's eye the gaze Ser Daorys had turned upon Arya at the table yesterday.

Sansa's love is not the sort of love that could have made lovers out of her and Sandor Clegane, but Sandor doesn't know that.

A petty vengeance. Let him imagine what it could have been.

#

NO ONE

It is mid-afternoon, by the clock the Maester has hung in the Great Hall. There is no moonlight to reflect off the snow, the hearth-flames and candlelight spill out of windows but the light does not reach far from the stone walls, as if afraid to lose the protection of the keep.

The priests of the Red God have a saying: "The night is dark and full of terrors."

Daorys snorts.

The night's dark all right.

The darkness hides his weaknesses, to an extent even from himself: it is dark, so he must step carefully. Yes, his footing is not stable, even on level ground he can slip, if he does it at the right time, well, there are blocks of stone lying around, one of them can be found with a suitably sharp edge to fall upon--the skull is a fragile thing, from the right perspective, blood and brain and --

No.

He clenches his teeth against the cold, against himself, against the tremors that wrack his frame as he climbs the interminable steps to the second floor of the Braavosi embassy.

No one still has responsibilities.

He finds the Braavosi at a table, a cup of tea and a flagon of wine at the ready.
Daorys seats himself across from Zural without a word, and then reaches for the wine.

Zural raises an eyebrow.

"Too early for tea," says Daorys shortly. He drinks directly from the flagon, without spilling anything on himself--the weight of the vessel serves to steady his hand. He sets it on the table, considers the other man. "Was it a question of tides and timing, that I was not allowed into the House of Black and White?"

Zural drops his gaze.

Daorys sighs, and raises his hand, places it upon the tightly-wound curls atop the Braavosi's head.

"Zural," he says quietly, "I know she shifted you because you wanted to be shifted."

The Braavosi's shoulders slump; he drops his head into his hands. "Everything shifts," he whispers, "and nothing is as it should be." No trace of Braavos in his voice, Zural's words regain the infection of the Pentoshi sailor he had been, before coming to the House.

No one withdraws his hand. "Why is loyalty to the god a liability? They did not know He compromised Himself."

"The Night of Ice," says the Braavosi, finally looking up. "Endless arguments. Chaos. It will settle. Until then...it must be shown that Jaqen is under control."

No one's eyes narrow. "Under whose control?"

Zural purses his lips, says, reluctantly: "A Braavosi's."

Daorys's jaws clench: his patience wears thin.

"Every statue," says Zural. "Every statue, every symbol--save the heart of fire, R'hllor's, that went out and it cannot be relit, no matter how much the priests try--every statue in the House of Black and White wears a face now. Under the Weeping Woman's hood there is Jaqen H'ghar--feminine, but still him. The goat's body is a pan with a man's face, and it is Jaqen H'ghar. The Heart Tree, the child..." Zural finally meets no one's gaze. "Him of the Many Faces is supposed to be a concept," he says, and he wavers between bitterness and awe.

The Lorathi know better; Zural should have known better, he has been told Jaqen's true nature long ago. Daorys can extrapolate the rest easily enough. A pang, that he will not live to see this change in the House. He lets the wish dissolve into the pit--acidic, today.

The Braavosi think the Many-Faced God is a concept.

Faction can be defined as "herd."

And with Zural's student involved in the Night of Ice, with Zural's own beliefs the first to be called into question, safer to go with the herd than against it, and be trampled.

Daorys pours from the teapot; errant black specks, tea-leaves, they escape the wire mesh at the mouth of the pot, they swirl in the teacup and settle to the bottom.

"Do you serve the Many-Faced God?" asks Daorys.

"What will you do if you do not like the answer?" asks Zural.
No one shrugs. "Ask for another flagon of wine." He allows some portion of no one's sorrow to show in his face: even Zural fears no one, and Zural names this fear **logic**.

The Braavosi sighs. "Fear, it is a useful thing; no Braavosi is immune to fear. You have a reputation."

Daorys snorts. "Half-dead and half-mad, I have a **reputation**?"

Zural looks away. "Forgive me," he says, his voice low.

*Not logic. Guilt.*

"There is nothing to forgive," says no one. "Fear is a thing of the body. The one who hunts renegades...it seems most bodies respond to him with fear."

Zural grins a little, then. "Arya thought you were just a story told to new Faceless Men to keep them in line, like the monster under the bed."

No one raises an eyebrow.

"She *said* it," says Zural, and a bigger smile blooms on his face. "Loudly. While wearing your face." He shakes his head. "Endless amusement, Arya Stark, she wore Jaqen's while she went around trying to figure out who the very first Faceless Man was."

"You *let* her?" asks Daorys, mildly appalled.

Zural snorts. "Not all of us lack a sense of humor when it comes to our students."

Daorys does not respond.

Zural pours himself some tea now. "I serve the **concept** of the Many-Faced God," he says. "As I swore to Arya in the morning, the House of Black and White **officially** supports Jaqen H'ghar, officially serves the Many-Faced God."

"Just not **unofficially**?" Daorys asks. "How many stray, Zural? How many have a **heart** now, that they think they can pick and choose the manner of their service as they perceive fit?"

Zural's jaw is clenched. "There's a reason you have a reputation," he says. "If you could but see your face in a mirror."

"I know very well what my face shows," says Daorys. He considers Zural. "Is your head screwed on straight?"

Zural starts chuckling. "She has grown subtle; she shifts even **you**."

No one smiles then, rueful. Daorys is here, isn't he, **discharging responsibilities**, as if there is still a point to no one's participation in the world.

*For what I thought I was taught was that if a brother asks for help, it is duty to empty oneself to the limits of what a man may contain, and then empty further, that such help may be given.*

Zural has not asked; in this one case, **asking** is not required.

And then he wonders what subtle impulse she has engendered in *Jaqen* from this morning's tirade. What parts of it speak to the god?
"I serve," says Zural and there is no lie to him at all. "I have always served; it is not the service but the whom that was called into question."

Daorys knows the way of this convolution. "Let it not be said that a Lorathi cannot handle a Braavosi," he mutters, he leans upon his elbows and gives Zural a sunny smile. A Braavosi needs a name. "The structure," he says. "The memories. The House. The purpose. The mercy." Equality. Vengeance. Brotherhood. "Do you serve the construct that Jaqen H'ghar has created in the Faceless Men?"

Construct means "world".

Zural nods.

"Without Him," says Daorys, all pretense at affability wiped from him, "the world ends."

"I know," says Zural as he breathes in the fragrance of the tea.

Peace.

Between one name and the next, the world has re-framed itself for Zural. Daorys exhales; his shoulders relax--it is allowed for Zural to see this.

Zural smiles at him, and it is a dry, questioning sort of smile. "And you," he asks, "how goes the ending of your world?"

Daorys leans back in his chair. "It comes and goes," he says, shakes his head. "Arya..." he trails off.


No one pushes back his chair, rises. "She is taking on burdens she should not have to," he says. "The Consort of the Many-Faced God should not have had to 'warhammer' you, of all the Braavosi. She should not have to worry about the loyalties of the House on top of the loyalties of the god." He rakes his fingers through his hair, frustrated. "She should not have to care about the Starks any longer. She should not be burdening herself with me, either."

"Her choice," Zural points out.

"Gods are stupid," says no one, and is surprised at how little bitterness there is in his voice; there is a gratitude in him, almost, and that more than anything surprises him. "The House," he says. He pauses. "I sense the old man's hand in the sending of you."

Zural says nothing.

"Make it right, my brother," and he holds Zural's gaze, unwavering, and wills what will he has in himself to the other man.

Zural knows what is being asked of him. It should not be asked of a Braavosi; but who else is there? Not Arya Stark, ten-and-seven and decades away from being a properly trained Lorathi. Not Jaqen--the god no longer pretends to be purely Lorathi, and there is far too much sorrow in the doing of this thing.

"I come to the end of me," Daorys whispers.

"My word," says Zural. "Should the chaos not settle in a few moons. Politics has no place within
the construct."

* * 

A heart has no place within a Faceless Man.

Should this discord continue, the House of Black and White will have to be purged.

"She is no one," says Daorys. "She can judge them for you, Zural, if you but cut them down."

"Valar dohaeris," says Zural, and bows his head.

"Thank you," says no one, with sincerity. Then he considers the man sitting in front of him. **Two ways, this responsibility business, has he anything left undone?** "This may be the last time we speak, at least privately," says Daorys, his tone devoid of anything at all. "If there is something you want to say."

Zural looks up at no one, and his eyes are haunted. The silence stretches between them, taut. No one lets it stretch, until it is almost painful, and then he gives Zural a short bow, and leaves.

#

**GENDRY**

He banks the embers in the forge. The bellows are old, the basin is old, all the tools are old--within the first week of his coming to the Crossroads, he had come to realize how privileged his position under the Mastersmith of King's Landing had been. Reprimanded, for using too much stock, but he could play with the scrap as much as he liked.

Fuel was scarcely measured, save for when the coal-boy had to be told to fetch more.

He picks up his saddlebags, draws the second wool cloak around his shoulders, and shuts the door behind him. He doesn't lock it--he's trained up two boys, one's better than he had been when he fled King's Landing. They'll take over here: shoeing horses and shearing barrel-staves and punch-cutting straight knives and swords does not need a Mastersmith-trained man.

* * 

*Maybe I'll earn a mastery one day.*

Lady Arya has painted him a pretty picture in her letter--Smith to the King of Winter. *Our resources are not abundant,* she has written, *but my retainers remarked upon how much you did, with what limitations you had at the Crossroads. We need you.*

A horse nickers. Then another.

"Are you ready now?" snaps Lady Brienne. Her squire, Podrick, looks a bit hangdog; he's spent the night going at the ale in the common room, it seems.

"Just making sure the smithy doesn't burn down, M'lady," says Gendry, as he fastens his saddlebags upon the horse.

Lady Arya's letter came with a letter-of-credit as well. Useless, at the Crossroads, but the thought counts. Gendry has enough gold of his own that he can buy a horse, buy the supplies they will need to make it to Winterfell; Lady Brienne supplies her own.

Well, Lady Brienne could supply an entire kingdom's march North, given the blade she carries at her side. Gendry recognizes it, of course.

_Widowmaker._
He has a strange suspicion Lady Arya will not like seeing that sword, not with Lannister jewels on it, not worn by someone who is not of Stark blood.

*What is she going to do, find that assassin that killed all those men at Harrenhal, set him on Lady Brienne?*

A childhood memory, the terror and anxiety of those days has faded with time. The memory almost feels like an *adventure.*

He grins.

It will be good to see ‘Arry’ again.

Chapter End Notes

So, since I’ve gone so long without an update (Part 1 of this arc is now almost complete, and at 50k words, so yeah...) I figured I'd start posting chapter-parts as gul edits them.

Please let me know what you think!

And thank you for staying with me through all the twists and turns and run-ons :)}
ARYA

She hauls the chest across the courtyard; could have asked a servant to help, but that is not the Braavosi way. She finds her teacher surveying the "embassy's" receiving-room, a large chamber on two levels. The lower has scribe-tables, three of them, for clerks--an optimism, but an optimal future requires pre-planning; a dismal future requires no action from anyone at all.

Zural's hands are clasped behind his back; he watches the courtyard through which she has just dragged the large trunk.

"The ice has reached Ib Nor," he says.

She closes her eyes, imagines it; the falling level of the sea, more and more water being locked up in ice-sheets.

The power of the Free City of Braavos is exercised through trade, through gold. Through the sea. The ice, the ice, it always comes down to the ice--every sea route will undergo drastic change in the coming year.

Braavos is the most northern of the Free Cities.

Ice cannot be bought-off. Ice cannot be assassinated. Ice cannot be prayed away. Ice can neither be persuaded nor threatened.

Ice must be befriended.

For the befriending of Ice, the Sealord created a joint committee of all the guilds of Braavos, every temple (even R'hllor's, and Arya has no idea how that fits into anything after the Night of Ice), every political office. A secret committee, the steering of it given into the hands of the House of Black and White as the only guild that has never voted upon a partisan issue, the only temple that assumes the interests of every other temple's god, at least in principle. How much his impending marriage to Arya Stark influences Tormo Fregar's decisions...well, that is not a quantifiable matter.

Winter comes earliest to Westeros; it snowed in Highgarden six months before Ibben saw its first flurry. That makes the North an ideal venue to test this befriending of Winter. And there are so many eyes on Braavos at all times, eyes on the Artificer's guild, the ironmongers. Pentos especially, Pentos circles, its beady little vulture-eyes always on the lookout for Braavosi innovation to steal.

But nobody expects innovation in Westeros.

Samwell Tarly had been so very excited at finding the plans for "ancient Lorathi" ice-breakers in the Library, two days after Arya received her first raven from the House.

"Who made the corrections to the design?" Zural asks.

"The Maester," says Arya. "But Sansa was the one that substituted the iron for wood. Cost-cutting. It will have to be undone."
"Didn't expect them to actually try to build them," Zural mutters. Hence the errors in the plans. A whetting of the appetite, at least six moons, docking concessions, treaties, before the first prototypes would be brought to White Harbor for testing.

"When has a Stark done anything that is expected of them?" asks Arya, dry. "It fed Sansa's need," she adds.

Zural raises an eyebrow at her; he knows Arya, after all.

She grins. Sansa needed to find some unorthodox means to take down Karhold--through the one venue the Karstarks do not defend because they believe the ice defends it for them (the river that flows past Karhold, the seamouth it flows into, ice-bound now, all of it).

Arya never stooped to suggesting anything the House would not want suggested.

She did ask some questions about ice, questions whose answers the Artificer's guild will be very interested in.

Not a compromise--she was still an envoy of Braavos at the time and ordered to share the plans by the Sealord. He could not have anticipated the...acceleration of it, now could he? The envoy obeys.

"Have I not been helpful?" she asks.

Zural snorts. "Artificers--and the Admiralty--will be dancing for joy. A field test four moons before they're ready to put their first prototype in the water."

"The price for shellfish dropped," she says. "You were right, we mucked up the timing." But it was only a small wager--the House bet against the Iron Bank's assessment. Purely on principle; despite cooperation there is a bias that comes from the memory of certain brothers they carry.

"Better too early than too late," Zural says philosophically.

The price for "shellfish" is not the price for shellfish, of course, but ships. A ship has a hard outer shell, wood and rivets. Inside, the soft nourishment of commodities and coin.

The price should have risen with Daenerys Targaryen's war.

Every ship-builder and coastal city saw the outcome of Slaver's Bay, of ships turned to kindling by dragons, and they rubbed their hands in glee: many more ships will be needed for these wars to come. Fear should rule the water, and a buyer's fear should make it a seller's market. But moons have dragged on, and there has been no major naval engagement since the sea-siege of Slaver's Bay. Ship-builders try to recoup their investment, sell ships almost at a loss--Warships and tradeships differ in design, but not by much, retrofitting one into the other and selling it off is preferable to having half-constructed flotillas sitting in dry-dock, accumulating fees.

Gold is a fiction; it doesn't matter how much gold there actually is in the world, as long as someone holds a piece of paper saying they have a lot of it, safe and sound in the Iron Bank's vaults.

The bank lends money to Braavosi merchants, to the Office of the Sealord. It lends money to itself, then leverages the certainty of the repayment of all of those loans to loan even more money to the city. As long as the numbers balance upon a balance-sheet (for long enough time-intervals), the game can continue, and Braavosi interests can keep buying ships.

Not politics (though nobody ever stops playing). Not profit (though the Iron Bank would never stoop to not making a profit).
Survival.

The Great Northern Circle Route will be cut in half by the ice, and for all the gold in its coffers, Braavos will still lie on the part of the Circle that is cut, not kept. *Braavos, Lorath, Sarnor, Ibben, Nefer...* they will all starve, for commodity, for coin, for food.

The advance of the ice will accelerate; one by one other cities' ship-owners, shipping-conglomerates, they will start dropping out.

The point of the ship-buying exercise is for Braavosi merchants, guilds, the Admiralty, to own enough ice-ready vessels (warships, tradeships, all outfitted with ice-breakers, ice-skimmers) to replace every single ship that plies its trade in waters north of Tyrosh.

A side-effect, that within two years, the Shivering Sea will belong to Braavos.

"All of this is old, Zural," says Arya. "How can I be helpful now?"

Zural sighs, walks over to her, and then he places a hand over her head. "Child," he says quietly, "that you are being married to him--far too early, and it was done before anyone else had a say-so--is not to be meaning you can take up every burden his city prays for the god to bear."

Arya closes her eyes, and she finds that her teacher's gentleness has absolved her of the need for control; her eyes burn.

There is a thing to this--when they play the roles of student and teacher, she may confide anything in him, and he will teach her; compromise, disloyalty, doubt, these are permissible between a teacher and a student.

"Master," she whispers, "what am I to do?"

"Focus," says Zural.

Her eyes snap open.

"The world is moving beyond the ordinary," says Zural. "Not dragons--those have been gone for but an eyeblink. But gods, and the Long Night, war on every front. Such times as these require the extraordinary in us. You have aptitude for many things--stratagems, weapons-work, poisons. But in each of these you are untrained, blunt. So you must focus in that which you are extraordinary."

Her smiles, bitter. "Everything that I can do, another brother can do better."

"Every brother has a specialty," says Zural. "And even Jaqen H'ghar remembers this, he compromises himself for it."

She wears no masks at all, alone with her teacher; the surprise shows.

He smiles ruefully. "Every man must be reminded of his penultimate duty to the god, from time to time. You are doing the reminding for me, when such was my teacher's task. You take burdens that are not your own, again."

She bows her head. "Forgive."

"Nothing to be forgiving, Arya." Zural sighs, and she senses much in it. "But the god, his specialty is in the fighting of R'hllor now."

*Truth, truth if I cannot speak it now.*
"Before we ever knew of R'hllor," she admits in a small voice, "he came north for me, for Arya Stark."

"Did he?" asks Zural, and he sounds skeptical.

Again, she shows her surprise.

"The god had to let go of Jaqen H'ghar as much as you had to let go of Arya Stark. Brother helps brother in this letting go amongst the Lorathi, is that not so?"

She nods.

Zural shakes his head. "Don't know what I did wrong, that you turned Lorathi." He sighs. "But I am not being a god either, or a warg. By my mind of thinking, you are coming for training, first to the Many-Faced God, then to the north to find Brandon Stark."

That... "That's why you supported me leaving," she says.

"A teacher knows when he has reached his limit," says Zural. "It should not be hampering the student's progress."

"How could you know?" she asks. "About the wind, about--"

Zural shrugs. "Pattern," he says. "Jaqen H'ghar never stays in one place for more than a moon, he moves, from city to city, from continent to continent. Always searching for something. He stopped, when he found you. I was thinking that maybe he has found this mythical Lorathi 'mirror' of his."

She narrows her eyes at him. "What did your teacher do wrong," she asks, "that you turned Braavosi?"

Zural grins. "Asking instead, what did he do right, hmm?"

She cannot help but giggle.

"So," says Zural, "Focus. What is Arya Stark's focus?"

She shakes her head; she does not know.

"Where has Arya Stark been extraordinary?" he asks.

She studies the floor, and thinks.

"Where," says Zural softly, "did Arya Stark set her wits and her weapons against impossible odds, and win?"

"Against Him of the Many Faces," she says slowly, and there is no dissonance in her at the words. Strange. "Against Him--his preconceptions, upon the road. His power as death, in the barrow. His rules and customs within the House of Black and White in the vote for our brother's life. His imperative, the reason he exists in the first place, his mercy. Upon the Wall."

She takes a deep breath, lets it go. She looks up into Zural's face, and her teacher is studying her, impassive. "Nobody in their right mind would say that my speciality is countering the god, Zural, we are indivisible in purpose. The Weirwood cannot differentiate between our names."

Zural grins. "I am to be saying, a man's worst enemy is always his wife."
It earns him a wry smile. "Your history makes you biased," she says. Because of course, every Faceless Man comes to the House of Black and White for vengeance.

Zural shrugs. "The god is merciful."

Indeed.

She tries to turn her thoughts to obedience. Focus? "I do not dare focus, Zural," she says, "our brother, who has no name, he needs--"

"Wants the gift," interrupts Zural, "and the god wants to give it to him."

The world rotates about the an axis perpendicular to its face--west becomes south, east becomes north.

She tilts her head to a side. "What an interesting perspective," she purrs. "The enemy of the Many-Faced God, am I?"

"Perspectives, reframing, definition," Zural rolls his eyes, "let it not be said a Braavosi cannot be handling a Lorathi. Yes, Arya Stark, the enemy. Of death." He makes a shooing motion with his hand. "Go."

"And the House?" she asks.

"The House," says Zural, and his eyes are hard, dark agate. Zural has found his focus as well, it seems. "The House also needs reminding of its specialty." Zural points a finger at her. "Stay out of it. Warhammers will not work."

"Do you take on a burden that is not yours, master?" she asks softly. For whom? For your student, who is wedded to the Many-Faced God?

Zural looks tired. "It falls to me, before it falls to you," he says.

Zural of all people does not consider marriage a sufficient justification for shared responsibility.

"The question to be asking..." she murmurs, is what justification does Zural consider to be sufficient, that he must hold himself responsible to bring the House of Black and White back into line?

What line?

Ah.

The lineage.

She understands, then. The incessant, nagging worry under her breastbone eases. Another thought, and she must ask it.

"You are my teacher," she says. "The wind was right--you were not to be my executioner."

"Execution is a thing for renegades," says Zural.

A certain sadness in her eases as well. Far easier to bear her brother's blade than her teacher's, though she would have knelt the same for either.

Zural looks at her, shakes his head. "You wear your thoughts on your face--are you thinking that
one that thinks like you is being a renegade?"

"There was a chance," she says, places a hand on her breast. "A Lorathi is a coward, Zural. Why can we be no one? Because the one we were born as, that one runs, he runs from something. He hides from himself in nothingness, and then hides his cowardice in frameworks and philosophies and strange definitions for things, in word games." She drops her gaze. "Arya Stark was born in Winterfell. She had to die here." Her mouth twists. "He has many reasons for what He does, some of them veiled even from Himself, as I said--there is a balancing to it. A god must be sacrificed to this place, in exchange for the god that is taken from it. He can disengage, when it is all done; he has experience in it."

"The god is merciful," Zural says softly.

She wipes at her eyes. "Don't turn deist on me now, master," she says. "You'll leave poor Jaqen without company in his delusions."

*Delusions. Deist. Lineage.*

The Braavosi name Jaqen a thing called “god”—a man with extraordinary magical powers that the Lorathi foolishly define as “divinity” and the Braavosi name Him of the Many Faces. That Ambraysis can dream, that the Leng Twins read each others’ thoughts, that Arya can enter the minds of animals, these do not put any of them above any other. Same with the god. He is a brother, an equal, and he stresses this more than any other. It is a simple thing to the Braavosi, or it should be.

The problem is that after the Night of Ice, there is no difference between the thing the Braavosi name “god” and the Lorathi define as “god”. The Lorathi call Jaqen “brother” not because they perceive him to be their equal, but because it is an edict from Him of the Many Faces. A subtlety. To outward appearance it all looks the same.

But the foundations of the House of Black and White are shaking.

*When is an equal not an equal?*

"Thyme," she says. "Have you been with our brother the entire way?"

Zural wanders over to the chest. "And what is this being?"

_Not going to get an answer, then._ "A gift, regifted," she says. "First given to Cregan Stark by an envoy of Braavos. Hand for a day--got honors and lands and gifts like this for the rest of his life."

Zural throws back the lid. Inside, nestled in some yellowing cloths, lies a large iron statue of the Titan of Braavos.

"Well, well," says Zural.

"Sansa sent it over, she found it in the eastern cellars," says Arya. "Told me tell you, 'more reminders'."

Zural nods. "She is very clever, this Princess of the Starks."

"Trained by Baelish," says Arya. "What is the cleverness in the statue?"

"Lord Cregan Stark," says Zural. "This was the man that orchestrated the Pact of Ice and Fire, between Targaryen and Stark, was it not?"
Arya nods.

"She reminds us, in a manner that we cannot take offence, for a thing that will genuinely touch a man of Braavos, but she reminds us nonetheless--Braavos can be rendered a mere courtesy to this alliance between King Jon and Queen Daenerys. Princess Sansa Stark seems to have located the Pact of Ice and Fire."

"Braavos will not be sidelined," says Arya, her voice hard.

"No," says Zural, "The House of Black and White will not be sidelined. Braavos itself has no alliance with the Starks at the moment."

Arya blinks at Zural. "Wait, what?"

Zural chuckles. "She plays Zural Mobhai, envoy of Braavos, against Zural Mobhai, Faceless Man."

"Why?" Arya is genuinely baffled.

Zural waves his hand. "Return to the keep, feed our brother some nasty-smelling thing. When you see her, tell the Princess the reminder is well-timed."

"Not a mushroom," says Arya from gritted teeth. To be kept in the dark and fed on horse shit.

"Focus," says Zural. "Go!"

Alright, alright, I get it.

She goes.

**AEGON**

His eyes burn as he looks at himself in the mirror. Dark eyes, dusky skin, close-cropped hair. A scar on his cheek from the repeated bloodings. His mouth twists.

*Not a Targaryen.*

The Princess Arianne Martell suspects something.

Volantis turns its eyes to Daenerys Targaryen's fleets, her dragons, and the invitations stop coming.

Jon Connington rides back and forth to the Golden Company, and there are no ships to be had; somehow they're always bought by someone else before Connington's agents can get to them.

The House of Black and White...his handler has not replied to his last two missives.

*Faceless Men always keep their word.* Aegon--and he thinks of himself as "Aegon" no matter what name he bore long ago upon the streets of this city--Aegon has the word of a Faceless Man: if we cut you loose, we will tell you. They have told him nothing.

Something is wrong.

Everything is wrong.

He takes a deep breath, and runs his blade over his cheek. A thin line of blood. He lifts the mask sitting on the table before him--it is an old one, it smells of dust and blood, a Targaryen taken
during the Dance of Dragons, he doesn't know which one and he doesn't really care. Looks enough like Rhaegar Targaryen to fool the right people.

But Arianne Martell suspects something.

*Shouldn't have fucked her.*

He raises the death-mask over his head, and assumes the hair, the blue-violet eyes, and *becomes* Aegon Targaryen. He tries a smile on for size: hard, but charming.

Nowhere to go--no invitations. But appearances must be maintained--in the outer portion of the suite of rooms he has in Volantis, Aegon Targaryen sits down to a seven-course meal, alone.

The servants scurry around him, silent.

The wine tastes like piss, the sauce for the fish has a bitter aftertaste he recognizes. He hates the antidote to this particular poison, he has to get up ten times over the night to piss it out.

He laughs softly at himself.

*This is what you wanted, isn't it?*


*So why do you miss the tasteless gruel and the cups of watered-down wine and the bed made of stone, Aegon?*

He sighs, and ladles more sauce on the fishbones.

**ARYA**

A compromise has been reached: the assassins will break bread with the Starks in the mornings, and everyone will pretend Arya Stark's foster-kin have come to visit. Arya and Jaqen and Ser Daorys will take their nightmeal at their "embassy", and everyone will pretend the three don't sleep in a place reserved for Stark kin.

The servants will be allowed their confusion.

It is Braavosi, this room--almost to Sansa's taste, with comfortable armchairs and cushions all around, soft carpet underfoot. The scaled-down Titan of Braavos looks over them from the mantle above the hearth.

Dinner is Umma's gruel; the small kitchen for this suite is not entirely operative yet, but a cauldron of gruel can very easily be suspended over any fire. A bit uncanny, she thinks, the way Daorys contemplates his empty bowl once the last of the tasteless mush is gone.

*Years. He has not been back to the House of Black and White for years.*

Faceless Men are not supposed to have a *home*, only a House. But *gruel* is insignificant, inoffensive, not even the Lorathi could disapprove of simple gruel.

Zural comes armed with the most subtle of enticements, should such enticements have been needed. They find the wrong target--meant for Arya, most probably, now suited to Jaqen H’ghar, who too has not returned to Braavos for almost a decade.

Jaqen H’ghar is not here--Jon rides to the seat of House Flint, and Jaqen rides at the King’s side,
protector and advisor both. It is ostensibly a courtesy visit, to discuss the tracts of forested land adjacent to both Stark and Flint villages.

She wonders how others do it; in his arms each and every night for moons, and then suddenly, he’s gone. For two nights, but the abruptness of it leaves her feeling very strange. And yet the darkness of Him, it is in her skin, her mind, it sleeps in heavy coils underneath her breast. She pities them, then, ones that are not lovers to gods—*how do they bear this?*

She sinks into her armchair; she is no one--no one does not need, does not fight that which it is not necessary to fight. Comfort, in this case. And appearance--an embassy must have servants, staff.

"More farmers," she says. "Bewildered. Too afraid to be loyal to anyone, won't take much to make them yours."

Zural nods. "One or two. I have been watching the courtyard. A clerk was recruited before we left White Harbor--ex Bank man, he lost some fingers to the cold."

Daorys leans back in his chair, eyes half-closed.

Zural is contemplative as he stares into his cup of tea, swirling the cup so the flecks of black leaves at the bottom of it spin, round and round. Sansa and Sandor will be joining Jon and Bran in her mother's bower soon.

Idly, she wonders what they will talk about.

*Us, probably.*

She meets Daorys's eyes. A little smile on his mouth, come, then gone. His gaze is warm when it rests on her: *peace; time passes.*

*That’s what no one fears, brother--the passing of time.*

Zural is right: she is overextended. She is weary, she longs to give over the *balancing*, to surrender it into capable hands and just...sleep. Sleep for a moon, with it being someone else's watch.

Wearness is dangerous.

In her mind's eye, no one fans out the array of things she feels responsible for, in front of her like a hand of cards she's been dealt (or drawn). And one by one, she discards each card: R'hllor--irrelevant, not in reach. The Starks--irrelevant, Jaqen's got them in hand. The House of Black and White--irrelevant, her elders have it in hand. The god--irrelevant, He's got two of His brothers, a king, His Champion, His wife *all* at hand. Tormo Fregar, Gendry, Daenerys Targaryen--irrelevant, irrelevant, irrelevant.

One by one she pares down the excuses for her weariness, and is left holding three cards.

Arya Stark.

Aeron Greyjoy.

Her brother who has no name.

The hand is a losing one: The High Priestess, the Hanged Man, the Tower of Ruin. *But if I were to cheat, as a good Faceless Man should, and turn the cards upside down?* Then the High Priestess becomes the acolyte, the Hanged Man goes free, and the Tower becomes the key to it all: the Ace
of Swords.

*How does one reverse the Tower?*

She still does not know the *why* of it, why her brother became nameless, why he asked to be stripped of himself. Not Jaqen's doing, Jaqen sees no faction, neither judges nor disapproves of anyone, and why would he? *Valar morghulis*. But Jaqen should have asked, should have looked into it. He didn't. He let it happen.

*My brother is going to die.*

She watches the bitterness pass through her, watches it mingle with the sorrow, a bittersweet poison that wraps around the inside of her throat. There is a *resonance* to it: Jaqen mourns.

Jaqen has been mourning in some shadowed recess of His mind for two hundred years.

It requires no extrapolation; they have spoken. A third of the poetry he feeds to her is of that age, of that same bittersweet taste that rises from within *her* now. Details she leaves alone, but there are no secrets of body or mind or soul between them, nothing that may not be asked, and answered, or what else is a marriage *for*?

Her awareness extends outward, her senses reach for her brothers, and she can feel their heartbeat against her own. Her mind drifts; her perceptions are blurred at the edges. She closes her eyes entirely.

*Not my watch.*

Zural harrumphs. "I think I owe him an apology," he says.

The wind can speak for the Many-Faced God. "He believes *he* owe the *House* an apology," she murmurs. "Should have stopped running a while ago."

"Running is good for one's health," observes Daorys, dry.

Chuckles, from all of them, then silence wraps around the Faceless Men, the kind of silence that is peculiar to the House of Black and White, though there is no incense, no smell of blood and magic to accompany it.

*Peace*.

Their heartbeats measures the passing of time, slow and steady; the crackle of the flame punctuates it.

She hears her brother rise, add more logs to the fire.

The wind is very far away, the core of it is draped around Jaqen’s shoulders, a mantle.

And yet, yet it whistles a warning to her: *in this one moment, you have more than anyone has any right to have. The family of your blood and the family of your choice, safe? The one place in the whole world where impossibilities intersect and the ground belongs to both Titan and Direwolf? Faceless Men of unwavering discipline, brother and teacher, and yet you are allowed to be Arya Stark and she who is no one?*

*The moment is coming, when all of this will be taken from you.*

Because she *is* the wind, she heeds its warning, and wraps the present into a tight ball, a thing that
glows with firelight and the smell of thyme and citrus, and she locks it away deep inside her.

**ZURAL**

Jaqen’s out running errands with the King. Logical--Jon Stark must be protected, and Zural himself must make for White Harbor on the morrow.

A flicker of torchlight, out of the corner of his eye. Outside the window, down, across the courtyard.

“Your sister’s pet drill-sergeant’s on his way here,” says Daorys. “When that man walks, he _thumps_.”

Arya looks out the window. “And if Sandor’s coming to the ‘den of murderers’ uninvited,” she says, “it means Sansa’s dragging him along behind her.”

“We have no poison that can change a man’s disposition as absolutely as love can,” says Daorys thoughtfully.

Arya snorts. “Sandor’s the man he’s always been,” she says. “Love’s just...exfoliated the crud off of him.”

Daorys leans his head back, observes Arya. “Did you take notes on the progression of this exfoliatory mind-rot in Jaqen?”

She leans forward. “Why, brother,” she asks, “are you trying to determine whether what ails you is _passionate_, unrequited love for R’hillor?”

Daorys tosses something at her--a knife.

Now where did he get that?

She snatches the blade out of the air, sheathes it in the holder under her sleeve.

Daorys raises a hand to his heart. “There’s no room for the Lord of Light, _sweet-pea_,” he says, “where Arya Stark has already made a home.”

She pulls out another blade, a longer one, from under her shirt--strapped to the front, handle-down. _So she hasn’t forgotten everything._ _Good_. And then she draws her hand back and throws it at Daorys’s head.

Who catches the knife, blade-first, between his fingers.

Zural gives no outward sign, but he knows both Lorathi will have heard the change in his heartbeat. _Damn Lorathi. Always hear too much. Don’t know what is in that self-delusion they practice that makes them as they are._

The Lorathi have great reputations as fighters, as infiltrators, as lovers. It is said that a Lorathi intends for something to happen, and it does. There is a very good reason for this: they delude themselves with such force of certainty that it is the world that gets confused as to the nature of reality, and goes along with the Lorathi’s way of thinking because there’s just going to be less arguing about it that way.

The Braavosi, on the other hand, see reality as it is. Braavosi like names. In this the god is a Braavosi: the god demands a name for the gift to be given. Not for the Braavosi the artificial...
distinctions between “mind” and “body” and “soul”; these are simply names given to the functions of different organs of a body.

When the body engages bone and muscle and blood and lungs, this is named *fight* and *survival* and *training*; there are many names, and each can be broken down into other names—the mouth and stomach and ass *eat* and *digest* and *shit*. The brain, along with the humors of the body produce thought and *feeling* and *sensation* and *perception*. And *magic* and *power*. Magic may look strange, but it is a thing of the body—blood, and dreams.

A god is a man with the luck—or ill-luck, given the way Jaqen thinks about it—to be born with a body capable of very many extraordinary things, if the opportunity is given to the body to *learn*.

And when all organs of a man’s body work together, there arises a state that the Lorathi may define as “*consciousness*”; a false name. The true name for this thing is *pattern*.

*But to be sure there is some strangeness to the patterns of Lorathi.*

The functions of the body the Lorathi call “will” seems to be able to transcend the limitations of flesh. When any man (even a Braavosi) flexes his arm, only a proportion of the fibers of his muscle contract, release. Only a hysterical overload of the body’s emotional centers—life-threatening danger, certain poisons—can ever overcome this limitation.

A Lorathi can do it at will. A Lorathi can command all his fibers to contract, to release all at once, moving faster than any man should be able to, being stronger than any man has any right to be. A Lorathi body pays the price without hesitation, it tears itself apart on command; it repairs itself faster than it should, in some cases, almost as if the Lorathi can command which of the body’s functions must be fed and which starved.

Such a thing should not be possible, not without magic, and Lorathi use no magic that Zural’s ever been able to see.

Daorys can kill Zural; Arya he will eliminate between one heartbeat and the next.

*In a good moment, when he’s not drooling and staring into the hearth.*

Zural is not quite sure what Jaqen can do. He’s seen the aftermath of Harrenhal in Arya Stark’s memories. He sees a way clear to killing each of the Lannister soldiers, but they way they lie upon the ground... *unaware. Completely unaware.*

Zural’s idle ruminations are interrupted by rapid footsteps—someone is coming up the stairs.

“*Arya!* Arya!”

“*Here!*” Arya Stark calls out, rises.

Sansa Stark enters the room, her velvet-and-fur slippers kicking the hem of her gown before her, sheaves of parchment held before her as if they were portraits of Cersei Lannister.

She pauses at the door, takes in the scene, the three Faceless Men sitting in more-or-less identical posture. The hesitation costs her the momentum of her fury.

“Forgive the intrusion, Ser Zural, Ser Daorys,” she says.

*Ah, a new tangle for you, Princess Sansa—you bear tidings that are Stark in nature.* He wonders how she will handle it, then decides to forgo any testing; it has been a long day.
Zural rises, bows. “Our house is your house,” he says. “In fact, I am to be believing it is your house.”

“You are too kind, Ser Zural,” says Sansa, and steps inside the room. Sandor Clegane’s hand is on the hilt of his sword, but he follows the correct half-pace behind her.

_She didn’t look over her shoulder, didn’t check with him before coming in. Some tension there._

Daorys contents himself with a nod in Sansa Stark’s direction, and not for the first time Zural wishes their brother would pay at least some lip-service to the niceties of diplomacy.

But Daorys seems to almost enjoy reveling in his open facelessness, as if he’s gone to some place in his head where even *Faceless Man* has become a role he plays now.

_The ancestral home of Jaqen H’ghar and Arya Stark._ Zural harbours a suspicion that Daorys actually takes that fiction somewhat seriously. A priest makes free of his god’s house.

Religion—_is that_ what is behind this strange overlap of pattern Zural senses between Arya and Daorys? Because the memories account for some of it, but such depth of entanglement between them in a mere day is not possible, not in Zural’s experience, not even for Lorathi. *They’re tossing knives at each other in play* . She teases Daorys about his captivity and torture in Asshai, he turns around and flirts with her, intensely enough that Zural’s made uncomfortable by it, but Jaqen seems entirely too amused.

**So Jaqen’s in the middle of it, whatever it is.**

Zural hates not having a name for something. Especially when it is some delusion of the Lorathi.

Sansa Stark’s eyes are a bit too bright. _Wine. Wine and anger._ An interesting test of a person, with both these things remove constraint.

“Is there anything in the keep that will be remain secret from you by the time the week is done?” she asks Zural.

“Many things, Princess,” he says with another half-bow. His mouth quirks up at a side. “Not, perhaps, a thing that has made yourself and Ser Sandor march across the courtyard, however, bearing raised voices.”

Sansa sighs. And then she rounds on the sister of her blood. “*Your* husband.”

Arya groans, raises her hand to cover her eyes; a bit too theatrical, but it matches Sansa Stark’s outrage, diffuses a bit. “Tell me,” says Arya.

“Queen Daenerys Targaryen has sent us a letter,” snarls Sansa. “Three ravens, to carry all of it.”

Arya uncovers her face, takes the parchments from Sansa’s hands. She reads, quickly.

“Aarrgh!” Sansa Stark’s eyes are a bit too bright. _Wine. Wine and anger._ An interesting test of a person, with both these things remove constraint.

“Jon wrote her,” says Sansa, now a little calmer that she has found another to share her outrage. “She’s included his original. _Poetry_, Arya!”

Arya paces before the hearth. “Irrelevant,” she says. “Though that is Jaqen’s fault. But the fucking terms, we already settled, why the _fuck_ would he? _Aarrgh!_ ” She comes to a halt, the flames licking at the air behind her. “I’ll deal with Jon,” says Arya Stark. “You get to flay Jaqen.”

“I was married to a Bolton,” says Sansa, her temper dissolving into thoughtfulness. *Appeased by*
the sacrificial offering of Jaqen's hide, Zural thinks with some amusement. “But we must reply to Daenerys first, that…” The Princess takes a deep breath. “That bitch,” she says, and a little bit of feral she-wolf escapes out of the snarl at the corner of her mouth. “Jon was being kind to her. And she tried to make us turn on him.”

The roles are flipping, without control. Wine and emotion.

Arya Stark smiles, cold, calculated now--she mirrors the reversal in Sansa. “The Queen has great expectations of us two, it seems.” She turns to Zural, to Daorys. “Brothers,” she says, “will you excuse us? It seems Sansa and I have a letter to write.”

Zural nods, mouths some pleasantries; something passes, between Arya and Daorys, he cannot tell what. Then arm in arm, the two sisters leave the suite, Sandor wordlessly following behind them.

“Jon,” says Arya. “We need to send a raven to him, he needs to know. What she said, what we’re going to say.”

“Then he’ll know we want his blood,” says Sansa. “He’ll delay coming home.”

“Jon’s no coward!”


The main doors to the quarters creak open, then closed.

Zural raises an eyebrow. “The girl’s body is falling apart, but her face has improved.”

No response.

He glances over--his brother is slumped against a wall, and his face is utterly slack as he stares into the fire.

MISSANDEI

Wordlessly, Missandei passes the parchment on to Daenerys.

Two words, penned in a flowing hand Lord Tyrion has confirmed to be Lady Sansa's: "We know."

Daenerys’ eyebrows have risen. The queen draws a deep breath, then another, reads aloud the next line. "Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn Stark left word, posthumus, for the King."

"They've known all along?" Tyrion is shocked. Missandei knew it was possible to surprise Lord Tyrion, startle him, even. Not shock him.

"It was kind of you to send the proofs and Lady Ashara Dayne's testimony. I believe the King's heart will be lighter for it--his mother was not raped, his father's senior wife was not betrayed. These are subtleties, of course, lost in the wake of the great tragedies that followed for your House, and eventually, ours. But when there is no sun, even a candle is received with the utmost gratitude."

Tyrion pours himself another cup of wine, drains half of it in one swallow.

"The King has ridden out on a hunt, the proofs must wait upon his return. We expect he will agree with us, that they must be destroyed."

"Good that we have the originals," murmurs Tyrion.
"Would it be an imposition to beg you to convey our words to another? We know not where to send a raven in her name. But a landgift is customary for the midwife upon the birth of a prince, is it not? It would please me very much if Lady Ashara Dayne would accept lordship of Marag's Keep, upon the western shores of the North, in perpetuity for her and her heirs.

In gratitude for her presence at our brother's birth, for protecting our brother then, and for all the years since, for the words she sends him now, Lady Arya also sends by ship a starfall dagger from the barrow of a king of the First Men, a woman's dagger of an age equal to her brother's Dawn..."

Daenerys puts down the letter.

"What is wrong with these people?" she asks. "You said Lady Sansa was trained in the game of thrones by Petyr Baelish! A thousand ways she could have used this information, with the King out of Winterfell. And she sends this?" Daenerys shakes the parchment at him.

Tyrion thinks. "There is machination here, my Queen, buried under all the sentiment. The North is bare of lords, many have perished. This Marag's Keep, what do you want to bet it's just as empty as the Dreadfort? On their western shore, which suffers the worst of Euron Greyjoy's raids. They need someone loyal to hold it. Lady Ashara Dayne has proven herself, in their minds, colluding with Eddard Stark to keep Jon Stark's parentage secret all these years. A gift of land to bind her to the North—they do not know she was Howland Reed's wife. The gift of a priceless dagger, heavy with so much symbolism, to bind her to the Starks."

"If she was not a novice of the Red God's temple," murmurs Daenerys, now thinking. "The fate of her children is unknown, she thinks them dead, but she does not know. She would have gone, had the Red God not held her."

"We would have lost Ashara Dayne to the North," says Tyrion.

Daenerys shakes her head. "I cannot tell. Can you? Is this machination, or just luck, on their parts, that gestures of sentiment could have loosened our hold over Jon Stark?"

Missandei holds her face impassive.

Tyrion drains the other half of his wine. "I think that is the point," he says.

"My queen," says Missandei. "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Daenerys looks at her, raises an eyebrow.

"These Starks are strange people--capable of impossible affection, loyalty."

Daenerys's mouth is a thin line.

Tyrion looks bitter. *That* is Missandei’s entry.

"Lady Sansa did not give you anything, Lord Tyrion," she says, "not her affection, not her loyalty." Tyrion's eyes narrow. "Because you were not her choice. She did not give you her hatred either, she writes warmly to you. Because you gave her what choice you could, under the circumstances."

"What are you suggesting, Missandei?" asks Tyrion.

Missandei addresses the Queen instead. "Make Jon Stark choose you, Mother of Dragons."

"Make him fall in love with me, you mean?"
Missendi smiles. "You did it before," she reminds gently, "with another king."

Her eyes are shadowed. "The price for Drogo's heart was my own." She straightens. "I don't have a heart anymore. And all of the Stark people are soft, it seems. So no choices. No poetry. I will be wed to Jon Stark within the moon. If there is argument, we will wait until we reach White Harbor, then force the issue. The North can be invaded as easily as the South. Do I care what part of the Seven Kingdoms I start in?"

**JORAH**

He lies wrapped around her form. Perfect, in every way, no blemish, no scar to mark her skin. He breathes in the scent of her, sex and musk, and he knows he should be sated.

He hungered.

He sighs and sits up, reaches across her breasts to grab a piece of the light-ridden meat that is made available to him at all hours of the day. The High Consort says the hungering will pass, sooner or later.

"You take to it well," says the Champion, and her voice still has the power to make him stop at _one_ morsel, draw himself back into her arms. She runs a fingernail, lightly, over his back. "Do not fall in love with me, Jorah Mormont," she says. "I sate your hunger, but your heart must belong to Daenerys."

"It does," he says, and sighs. "It does."

*Liar*.

"Good," she says, but her eyes are far too knowing.

He considers the Champion, the cascade of silver hair flowing over her shoulders. "Where do you go, when your eyes turn white?"

She smiles. "Far away," she says. "I am threaded through the dreams of a man who escaped from Asshai some time ago."

"Are you really?" A new voice.

Jorah knows this one too.

He turns, and the High Consort, masked and half-naked in her red robes walks out of the shadows that have cloaked her.

*How long was she here?*

The Champion stretches, displaying herself, languorous. "The Valyrian and his whore bar my passage. I can no longer reach him while he sleeps. But the waking dreams..." she smiles, sweetly. "His god cannot follow him everywhere at all hours of the day, can he? And the greenseer is a mere _child_, my brother's apprentice." She spits out the words, and it is the very first thing Jorah has ever heard in her mouth that sounds ugly.

"We should have kept him," says the High Consort. "He was far stronger than your new toy here."

"Should have kept him," says the Champion. "But let us not pretend the letting-go of him was intentional, shall we? Unless the defacing of our Lord was also _intended_?"
The High Consort says nothing.

The Champion strokes Jorah's hair, then grips it, hard. "Jorah is meant for Daenerys. That you want to add to his burden," and she kisses his forehead, "that you want to add to his burden is not Jorah's fault."

"Fault has many names," says the High Consort. "Powerlessness, for one. Your power is not sufficient to counter a lone man’s will."

The Champion sits up, her hair falls to cover her breasts. "What is a man but another animal?" she asks, and looks at Jorah, his cock at half-mast, despite the interruption. "Shadows, wended with light," she says, as if she is explaining something to Jorah. "Something a thousand times greater than what my half-brother pretended to be. The spells of Asshai, mated to the power of blood, the power of the Children of the Forest. Older than death himself, Jorah the Andal, these powers."

"Grandiose," says the High Consort. "And yet the Lord of Light remains unsatisfied."

The Champion flicks her hair behind her, rises to her knees, and pushes Jorah onto his back. She straddles him, works his cock with her slender fingers, and he hungers and his body and his mind pulls itself in a thousand different directions, and still, he rises.

"Hard to turn aside purpose in one such as that one, Lady of the Mask," says the Champion. "Even in his dreams he would not let go of his duty, would not let go of the two faces he carried away from here."

Half-aware, almost the entirety of his attention split between the platter of meat beside the bed and the hands stroking him, a strange suspicion still grows in Jorah.

Two faces. Masks.

Arya Stark?

He holds his peace.

"He will have handed them over now."

"He has," says the Champion. "The deathwish rises; in a day he will be empty of everything else."

The High Consort finally looks down at Jorah, and her eyes burn with a cold fire.

Disgust.

"Eat, Jorah Mormont," she says. "Eat."

Chapter End Notes

I know there's not much J/A here to keep all readers satisfied...they're the MCs, but the world is bigger, and a lot of threads need to come together for this to work. Big changes coming up :)

Love you all.
Your feedback makes my day, seriously, every comment I get gives me the endurance to flesh out another 1k words :)

MISSANDEI

No titles, no niceties. The letter comes directly from Jon Snow, upon the heels of the letter from Sansa and Arya Stark. The King in the North simply starts the missive with "To Daenerys Targaryen."

"He writes in haste," says Missandei, "no seal, just a signet-ring pressed to the parchment. He writes from his hunt, my Queen, do not take offense--"

Daenerys again snatches the parchment from Missandei's hands.

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To Daenerys Targaryen

It appears that I am in significant danger of being flayed, and my "advisor" alongside me--my sisters were not happy that I'd written to you without consultation, especially not that I'd offered to accept the original terms you had set.

But my kingly rebellion has earned me a modicum of choice:

Marry me, and accept the most reduced version of terms we offered. You can still have the Dreadfort; it's empty and you need to garrison your Dothraki somewhere.

Don't marry me, and you can have the North. And all its attendant problems, of course, but I've heard crowns are important to Targaryens.

Upon re-reading my words above, I do believe I sound a little bitter. But I will let them stand.

You tried to tear my family apart.

Some god watches over me, for I am far more fortunate than any man deserves to be--my blood has closed ranks about me, they stand behind me, even beyond death they lift me upon their shoulders.

You threaten, implicitly, to destabilize my claim to the North. Don't need Sansa's tongue-lashing to see that. I must warn you, if such is your goal--affidavits and marriage-licenses are not worth the parchment they are written on, if a Stark's claim to the Kingdom of Winter is to be disputed.

I am a Stark.

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Daenerys just...breathes.

"Well," says Tyrion, "that backfired quite nicely, I'd say. Couldn't have Baelish'd it any more if we'd tried."

Some god watches over me.
Jon Stark knows which god; there is too much there, too much awareness, too much bitter, brutal honesty that cloaks the truth. Snow covers the bones of the world. The bones of all worlds are dragons, the Valyrians used to say.

*My blood has closed ranks about me.*

She has traced it, in idle moments, the lineage of the Targaryens, the lineage of House H'ghar through her memories of a "loving" grandfather's lectures. One has to go back almost seven hundred years to make a link. But a link does exist, though so diluted a claim of blood is worth nothing at all.

Not unless its principles choose to acknowledge the kinship.

By blood and by oath, Jon Stark has been *claimed*.

Missandei trembles, then.

"Be careful, Daenerys," she says, and she uses the Queen's *name* for the first time. "Be careful of this king."

Daenerys is alert to such nuance in the mouths of those that serve her. "What do you mean?" she asks.

"Why do you want the Iron Throne?" asks Missandei.

Daenerys studies her, studies her own answer. "It used to be because it was taken from my family," she says. "Now...my people need me. They are dying in the thousands, for nothing but greed, nothing but ambition. A chair. And as long as someone sits on that chair, I will never be safe."

"Why does Jon Stark *not* want the North?"

Daenerys shakes her head: *I do not know.*

"Because he no longer fears death," says Missandei. "Not for his people, not for himself. You do not know the things a man is capable of, the moment death becomes a brother to him, the moment death becomes something that walks by his side instead of a fearful thing that stalks him throughout his days."

"That's a bit far-fetched," says Daenerys, her tone dismissive. "He's even afraid of his *sister* ."

"No," says Tyrion, and he is looking at Missandei very carefully. Suspicion there, but thoughtful consideration as well. "No, Dany, she's right. He needs your dragons, he's said, this army beyond the wall, the undead--"

"You believe him?" asks Daenerys.

Tyrion pauses his pacing, and his mouth twists in a grimace. "Let us say...I believe that nobody puts up a wall like that if there is nothing on the other side. But Jon Stark, he doesn't *care*, he threw your words back in your face, he doesn't give a flying dragon's ass for crowns, or your armies or your dragons anymore."

Daenerys exhales, her face troubled.

"I think I've given you bad advice," says Tyrion, frustrated. "I think I've misjudged Jon. He was very young when I saw him last. Since then he became Lord Commander of the Night's Watch,
wandered beyond the wall for a good chunk of time. Something's happened. He's changed."

Daenerys's nostrils flare. "He maligns my blood, he throws Viserys's death in my face, he tells me he'd rather have his kingdom freeze to death than marry me."

Tyrion raises his hands, palms outwards--an apology for the words he must speak. "You did try to tear his family apart, Dany. And it was an attack on his crown, since you went directly to his sisters. His first letter was a gesture of some strange kind of friendship, and you threw it back in his face."

"So it's over," she says.

"No," says Tyrion, with forced patience. "He's still offering you terms."

The queen grits her teeth.

Anger, anger on both sides. Missandei is the peacemaker on this end, the one who must soothe Daenerys. Jaqen, on the other end...what would move Jaqen to promote peace?

The bones of all worlds are dragons.

"Jon Stark is being honest," says Missandei. "Brutal, and angry, but honest. Perhaps we can try the same?"

"Yes, because all diplomacy works on honesty," says Tyrion, sarcastic.

Dany laughs, a bitter, angry laugh. "What have I got to lose?"

#

NO ONE

He wakes to a gentle hand stroking his hair. The room is dark, and the scent of his dreams pervades the waking world.

"You walk softly," says no one.

"On bare feet," whispers Arya. "But not softly enough, brother, unless you've been drugged.

The difference between Arya and our sister she calls "The Waif"--that sister would have asked for permission. "What did you use?"


"No," he says. "In your hands since I crossed the Jade Gates. Yours and Jaqen's." Jaqen must have returned; I can feel him, he's close. "What must I do, what test must I pass, to prove that the decisions I make are my own?"

The masks have been returned to his god. There is no contract left to fulfill. Everything is telling him to get up, open the window, angle his neck in just the right manner before the fall. And yet his mind procrastinates giving the command.

What have I left undone?

She weeps again, he can tell. "Ask," she says. "There is enough of Him in me that I cannot say no."
"Won't make you do it," he says. "Sing me a song--I've heard you sing, in my memory. Two verses in, I'll slit my own throat to get away from it."

She laughs, a startled thing spilling out of her mouth.

"Tell me the why of it," he says. *I procrastinate; beautiful Arya, make it into a thing of logic for me, not cowardice.*

"He's lost two to Asshai."

*What will it do to Him to lose a third? "I know that already. Not enough."*

She thinks. "How did they bind Him? If you can remember, then we can tell Ambraysis and prepare a counter."

Good one. "I paid attention." He smiles, grim. *Every spell they used with His name attached to it, I remember.* Something nags at him, something vital, that will undo this fragile story she's spun. He avoids thinking about it. "A day," he warns her. *Won't take me longer than a day.*

A soft kiss upon his forehead. "Know you the story of the prince and the thousand and one nights?" she asks.

He does, of course, since it's a story from her childhood in this very keep.

"Story's clearly wrong," he says. "The common-born woman gives the prince a tale each night so he won't kill her? It should have been the princess giving a beggar a tale each morning so he won't kill himself." He feels compelled to add something. "Septa Mordane's stories taste like dung-beetle larvae and potatoes."

"I'll leave Jaqen for you if you say that in front of Sansa, loudly," she says. "Many times."

He grins into the darkness of his chamber. "Then we cannot ever be together, because we can't tell Sansa Stark the secrets of faceless memories."

"Pity."

*What will you tell Him? "Does the princess pray?" he asks.*

"To her brother," she says.

"Ah." *We conspire.*

"Why am I going along with this?" he asks. *Why do I procrastinate?*

"Because something in you doesn't want to die," she responds.

"Oh."

*What an interesting thought.*

And he cannot locate the "doesn't want to die" she speaks of, so instead he must locate the "want to die" and see if anything is left.

"Let me give you the cause," she offers.

*Clever Arya, to make me find the counter to my own arguments.*
"The phosphorescent fish," she says.

"No cure, but there is a palliative, however undignified it may be."

"The holes in your memories," she offers.

"Nothing I'm not familiar with," he replies, "the entire period before I became no one is blank, and I know I did that."

"The fits," she says.

"Can still serve, stay in Braavos," he says, "temple duty, help our sister--know a fair bit about poisons. Teach."

"A fall from who you were."

He snorts. "And you trained to be a nursemaid?" He shakes his head. *No one has no pride.*

One by one, Arya Stark has softened each cause that makes him crave the darkness with every piece of reason in him. And when the causes are gone, the deathwish remains.

He sees the shape of it the same time she does, he reaches for her hand, grasps it.

"I am a trap."

*Kill me now, kill me before I get anywhere near Jaqen or Jon Stark.*

She wraps her arms around him. "I know you," she says. "I know you."

"The deathwish is a response to something, something from Asshai I don't remember--something they've made me forget." His voice grows colder. "It is a defense. Something bone deep, an instruction: enter the darkness before you do whatever it is their spells are going to compel you to do."

He takes a deep breath, pushes her off him, and in the motion he withdraws the dagger he felt under her sleeve. Zural extracted no one's word on the journey, not to carry any daggers of his own.

She sighs, lights a candle.

"Come, brother," she says, gestures to the side of the bed. "Let me do it for you."

Unutterably grateful, he sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed. He wonders how she will do it. He grins. Maybe he can make a request. The knife is a short one, a wrist-thrower. The side of the neck.

The knife slides in; a sharp pain. Warmth, as the blood wells out, spills over to his right. *Angle's wrong.* He tries again, a little further towards his back, but the blade is broad, a leaf-blade, it will graze the third vertebra, won't go deep enough. Shift to the side a bit. *No, he thinks regretfully, no resting against her as she does it--*front of the throat's better, always. He shifts his head to the side, tries again. *What if she angles it higher?* He tries that configuration, realizes....

He's lying on his back, staring up at a profusion of leaves. The print, of the candlelit canopy of the bed. *She drugged me again? How?* The kiss on his forehead. He tries to twist to his side, realizes someone is holding him down. He turns his head.
The god, kneeling beside him, holding Daorys's arms.

"Jaqen?" No one's voice is hoarse; he smells blood. The side of his neck stings.

"You stopped me, brother." Arya's voice.

His head whips to the other side of the bed. She stands, a knife in her hands, its tip gleaming wet. She is holding the blade at an awkward angle, and he realizes her wrist is cocked just a few degrees off-center. Wrong. A trivial exercise to assemble the pieces.

No one's jaws clench. "Should have done it myself."

"Did you want it?" asks Jaqen.

He chuckles. "Oh yes. Forgive me, Arya, I had to tell him.

She comes closer; he flinches away, but she won't let him, she gathers him to her. "Forgive," she says, and he realizes she is speaking to Jaqen over no one's head, "I thought he was...himself."

"Obviously not, and you don't have the experience to judge a Lorathi of his nature." Jaqen's voice is curt. "Brother," says the god, and the word is a command, it echoes in the room, it echoes somewhere in Daorys's lungs, "if you want mercy, it will come at my hand. Not at Arya's, not at your own. Mine."

"Owe you that much, I suppose," says Daorys.

Her arms tighten around him. It reminds him of the dreams, the sleep without fear.

Very comfortable, this being-held business.

"No," says the god. "I owe you."

He can feel them, communicating silently over his head, and then Jaqen turns, moves towards the room's door.

"Don't leave her alone with me," Daorys warns.

"She is a Faceless Man," says Jaqen.

Yes, let's ignore the sprained wrist, shall we?

"Drink this." She offers him a cup brimming with wine.

He sighs, and drinks.

#

ARYA

She massages her wrist as she walks away from her brother's room; he sleeps, he will sleep through the morning, be awake by the time Bran is ready to leave his chambers.

Tricky, convincing two Lorathi at once. The nick on his throat was a good touch. The wrist, that she didn't mention it at all, it seals the argument--after all, if she'd been trying to sell Jaqen on her brother not wanting to die, a passionate "he almost broke my wrist" would have been far better. But that would draw Jaqen's attention; he would touch my hand when we were alone, get sarcastic
at me. She hates the fact that she bruises so easily; Jaqen would notice that the angle of the sprain
could only be self-inflicted, unless Daorys has somehow learned how to invert the orientation of his
thumbs.

But if she was actually trying to give the gift, and now wants to allow her brother some dignity in
the face of his "cowardice", why, she would say nothing at all. And Jaqen will pretend with her,
ignore the injury, saving her face in turn (grace, for her saving Daorys's), Jaqen will ignore the fact
that she allowed their brother enough leverage to hurt her.

If the Seven were real, she'd have gone to her knees in the chapel and thanked the Mother for
sending her brother that fit. It couldn't have been timed better; she was running out of delaying
tactics.

She refuses to allow her brother's deathwish to be a real thing; it is a fit, like the others. It does not
hold her brother in constant thrall, it vanishes from his eyes for long swaths of the day, comes in
intervals. If she can hold him off, just long enough each time... She knows there are poisons that
can mimic suicidal depression, but nothing about their actual nature--poisons of the mind are an
entirely different order of complexity to the poisons of the body.

She needs to send ravens to Braavos.

#

NO ONE

The pack contains two sheets of parchment, message-tubes, quills. A small forger's kit--being
captured with that in Braavos gets you ten years in the gaol. But what he needs is a stack of
 parchments, and some plain, honest ink--no iron-gall, no sulphates; magic runs amok, like an over-
indulged Joffrey Baratheon with his first allowance. It is no longer safe to write down spells with
anything that can bind magic to parchment.

The Maester, he thinks, and rolls out of bed.

What time is it? He stops by the Great Hall: mid-afternoon, the clock says, fifth-watch.

Within a quarter-watch, he's quartered the public areas of the Lord's Keep; no Maester to be found,
not even a little one, not even half a Maester.

He's on his way down from the ravensloft when he realizes he did not hesitate to climb up.

Jaqen's death-groping? The tears? Whatever it is, his body obeys his commands better than it has
for a very long time. An unexpected grace; Valar morghulis, of course, but what man would choose
an undignified death?

He strolls next to the inner courtyard. He passes the sentries again, six of thirteen, dressed in the
white-and-grey Stark livery. Their placement is well thought-out--any man can reach two others in
thirty strides if there is a disturbance, and Daorys counts only three corners that are entirely
unobserved for some stretch of time--a problem mitigated by a roving patrol, the seventh man.

The Starks do the best they can with what they have.

Almost a theoretical best--there would be much better coverage and alertness amidst the guards if
each man was mobile, dynamic instead of static, with interleaving routes.

Only thirteen guards in all.
They'll burn out within two moons on the sort of schedule Daorys himself would have arranged.

*Long term.* The Starks think long term.

He finds the *master* of this long-term thinking, the one that's been thinking his way to the future through eight thousand years, apparently, in his sitting room, being trussed up like a prize hog—servants are wrapping his feet in furs, his hands are gloved up to the elbows.

The Maester stands beside Bran Stark's chair, he bobs his head at Daorys, a greeting no one returns with a nod.

"Going somewhere?" he asks Bran Stark.

The greenseer grins at him. "The cripple needs his daily airing."

The Maester winces.

"I just got mine," says Daorys. "Whist looking for yon Maester here."

"You were *looking* for me?" squeaks Samwell Tarly.

Daorys gives the Maester a very dry look: *don't play the player. Not until you're better at the game.*

"I'm going to the godswood," says Bran Stark. "Want to come?"

No one thinks about it. He's come to Westeros twice for a contract, but never to any place that holds a weirwood. "I would admit to curiosity," he says, then turns to Samwell Tarly. "Maester, may I please request the loan of some writing materials from you? Need to write a very, very long report."

"Of course," says Tarly immediately.

*What is wrong with these people? They're about to ration food, by the mutterings I heard in the kitchens; parchment is bloody expensive.*

"We use the wood-pulp sheets, though," says Samwell Tarly, as two of the servants lift the litter-like chair Bran Stark is in, and start walking towards the doors. Daorys and the Maester fall into step behind the chair. "Parchment's bloody expensive."

Daorys raises an eyebrow. "The wood-pulp sheets from Yi Ti?"

"Oldtown's had them for almost a half-century," mutters the Maester.

*I haven't been to Westeros for eighty years; little things. Little gaps in knowledge that accumulate over time.*

"No sharing with the lords or the common-folk, of course," continues Tarly, and there is a bitterness underlying his words. "Expensive parchment keeps the words to a minimum."

"Keep them dependant," says Daorys. He approves.

"Jaqen says knowledge wants to be free," says Samwell Tarly, with a sidelong glance at the one who is no one. "He says knowledge is like a thing that is alive, it strives to be heard."

*Jaqen*. The way the Maester says Daorys's brother's name irritates him. "Jaqen is an anarchist," says no one.
Tarly looks thoughtful.

My god. Not allowed to have insights about him I don't. "Do share, Maester," murmurs Daorys.

"I should share?" asks Tarly. I'm not a member of a close-mouthed guild of pitiless assassins, now, am I?"

Daorys refuses to grit his teeth. "An answer for an answer?" he suggests.

The Maester's eyes grow round.

Daorys shrugs, and trickles a bit of wry humor into his tone. "Pitiless assassins," he says, "answer for an answer, no prevarication, but if you come to learn something you shouldn't..." He grins. "Ask carefully, Maester Samwell."

The Maester swallows, and he glances to one side of the keep before drawing his gaze forwards.

Responsibilities, thinks Daorys. The child Samwell Tarly brought to the breakfast table a couple of days ago. He really would have risked his life for answers if he hadn't had responsibilities. No one almost shakes his head: scholars.

"How did you meet Jaqen?" Tarly asks.

No idea; may have met him before I became no one. "Met him when I joined the order," says no one. A reasonable guess; Jaqen doesn't interact with novices and acolytes. But the answer is incomplete, and the Maester is shrewd enough to tell. If Daorys wants anything with substance in return, Daorys needs to give something. "I have no memory of my earliest years," he says. "Head wound. From my perspective, I've known Jaqen all my life."

Samwell Tarly is considering him. "Is it strange for you?" he asks. "A god that...and he's the person you stayed up all night drinking with and then you had to hold his hair away from his face while he vomited up everything because Kalinda's fish-stew is cheap and the only hot food you can buy near the Citadel between midnight and dawn, and fish and ale are not friends when they meet in great quantity?"

No one imagines it. "Not strange," he says, gestures to his head. "I have no preconceptions as to what a god is supposed to be. Only know the god that is, and the last time we went drinking together," fifty years ago, when we were both at the House at the same time; a rarity. "I think he had to spend a fair bit of reason convincing me that it was a terrible idea to disguise myself as a vestal virgin and sneak into the Temple of the Moonsingers to tempt the pious to lay down their burdens."

"Did he get sarcastic at you?"

Daorys snorts. "Doesn't work; he's been mocking me for far too long."

The Moonsingers are not affiliated with any of the god's aspects, but all that thrives in Braavos owes them a debt; poor repayment, to make celibate priests and priestesses question their faith for a night's amusement. It saddens Jaqen, the Moonsingers' history. Eyes stopped being sad when I agreed with him, so we ended up back in the House, trading shop-talk with two Braavosi. Jaqen must have been very drunk, in hindsight, to allow Daorys to see that sliver of sadness, over the Moonsingers, of all people, with their fortune-telling and choral ensembles. God's a bit of a sap, really.

Daorys turns to the Maester. "My turn," he says. "Why does Arya not like you?"
Tarly sighs. "Lady Arya...it's complicated. Um. So I knew Jaqen as Pate, back at the Citadel."

The way Tarly says the name, "Pate", it explains much of it.

"Thought Jaqen killed my friend," adds Samwell.

"Explains why she likes me," says Daorys, and he has to grin a little. *Fiercely protective, my sister.* And Daorys himself has never given the god any reason for sorrow.

"Yeah, yeah," mutters Samwell. "Lady Arya *adores* you, along with every other murderer Jaqen's got in his pocket."

*Adore*. A very nice word. *God's wife* adores *me*. No one is moved to generosity. "Princess Sansa likes you better, though," he offers.

Samwell Tarly brightens a bit. "That's true," he says.

"How long did you know Pate for?" asks no one.

"Almost three years, give or take," says Samwell.

No one calculates, and his eyes narrow.

*I win, in terms of absolute timeframes. But cumulative time...*Four months, six days, two watches. *Ten million heartbeats, on average, I could count them, but what's the point?*

Samwell Tarly has known Jaqen longer than him.

No one will not be around long enough to even the score. There will be some sorrow in Jaqen when Daorys enters the darkness; he knows Jaqen sorrows, even for *renegades*.

*Arya'll stop liking me then. Thankfully, I won't be around to see Samwell Tarly being smug about it.*

#

**ARYA**

She finds Samwell Tarly in Maester Luwin's--Maester Samwell's--tower, sorting through haphazard stacks of paper.

"Well?" she asks.

"If I'm going to put my life on the line, I need something more substantial than just..." the Maester waves his hands, "trade concessions, alright?"

She mock-glares at him "And here I went and risked *my* life to find out what Zural's bottom line on the magesteel shipments, Sansa can push him all the way down to--" she grins. "Well. A low number. *Valyrian steel*, Sam, your very own dagger, hot off the forge!"

*"Theoretical* Valyrian steel. *Theoretical* bottom line. *Theoretical* shipments. The loss of life and limb at your assassin's hand is *quite* real, thank you."

*Jaqen's assassin, not mine.*

"He's not going to hurt you, you're Jaqen's friend."
Samwell Tarly huffs. "Yeah."

Her eyebrows rise. "Jealous, really? Of you?"

*His memories do not contain the concept of jealousy.*

Samwell Tarly shrugs, helplessly.

"He's out of his mind," mutters Arya. Then she looks at the Maester, eyes narrow. "No, it's a message of some sort—if he actually *was* capable of jealousy—which I'm not sure he is, at all—he wouldn't show it."

Tarly purses his lips. "He didn't, really," he says. "But I looked for everything Pate taught me to look for, and what you told me, and there was *something* there, I couldn't tell what. Just an impression I got. What he showed was that he was happy you like him, anyways, then he said at least Sansa likes me better than him."

*Competition by proxy?*

"He thinks you hate me, by the way," says Sam.

She nods. "It was a useful impression to give."

"It'll get me killed, one of these days," warns the Maester.

Arya smiles at him, sadly. "Everyone dies, Sam. But not for this, you won't. There's no contract out for you, you're not threatening a Faceless Man or any of Jaqen's own—you *are*, in fact, one of Jaqen's own, at least peripherally."

Samwell sighs.

She will not dismiss the Maester's impressions of her brother. That's why she asked in the first place—Samwell Tarly sees the world as a mage does, though he doesn't know it yet.

*He lit the dragonglass candle during his test. How could he not know?*

Too fixated, she thinks, on the problems of the North, as they all are. But there is an omen, too, in Tarly's killing of the White Walker with an obsidian knife.

A useful thing, this Braavosi seeking of pattern—there are two mages in the House of Black and White, one trained, *Ambraysis Alayain*, and one vociferously, rebelliously untrained, *Jaqen H'ghar*. That both have affinity for blood-magic is no surprise; neither knows the working of obsidian. Through her memories, she has seen some overlap in both Ambraysis and Jaqen's perspective of knowledge, and that is what has forged the friendship, she thinks, between such entirely dissimilar people.

Unconscious pattern is the most powerful—Jaqen befriended Samwell Tarly when he should have killed him.

She herself is no mage. She has cast two spells, both rudimentary, both powerful because it was her blood that was used. But she knows enough of herself to know she has no aptitude, nor desire, for knowledge. The spells worked because they were offered, blindly, as a sacrifice.

*Those that cannot learn, believe.*

Arya Stark is a blood-priest, should a definition of her vocation that is more uncanny than "faceless
assassin" be called for. Same as every one of R'hllor's "sorcerers".

A mage that might be able to work obsidian...Samwell Tarly's perspective is not one to be dismissed.

"What do you want to know, Sam?" she asks. "I will answer truthfully."

The Maester's eyes are suspicious. "He said he'd answer, too, but he'd kill me after if the answer wasn't something I should have."

Oh, brother, you are so you. Even now. "And you believed him?" she asks.

Samwell Tarly blinks. "He was very convincing."

She can laugh it off. But her time is running out. "Sam," she says, "do you trust me?"

He hesitates. "Yes," he says finally.

"Ask. You are in no danger."

"What's wrong with Daorys? It's not just poison, is it?"

She closes her eyes briefly. "I wish I knew," she says.

"How long have you known him?" asks Sam.

Three days. "Since I joined the order," she says.

"That sounds like a rote answer," mutters Sam.

"It's not," she says. "When we become Faceless Men, there is an... introduction, of sorts. We get to know one another."

He's working up to his real question.

"Why couldn't you cross the Wall?" he asks.

"Because I died when I became a Faceless Man," she says. Tarly's eyes widen, his mouth parts a little in concern. She raises her hand in reassurance. "Not like Jon--it was at Jaqen's own hand, a choice. You have to really want to become a Faceless Man. I died, and Jaqen resurrected me. Sort of like R'hllor with Jon, but," she puts a hand on her heart, "not like him. You've read Jonathan Pryce?" she asks.

"Who hasn't?"

It's nice to know he will live on, long after Cersei's memory has gone to dust. Arya thinks her and the High Sparrow may have gotten along quite well, had they ever met. "We teach these abstract forces to speak, so that they may share with us a portion of their holiness," she quotes. "R'hllor shares nothing. Jaqen shares everything."

Sam sits back, runs a hand through his hair. He looks up at her, then away. "It's a bit...to process. A god. Just..."

"Jon doesn't have trouble with it," she points out.

"Jon's a Stark-Targaryen King that died and was resurrected," says Sam. "His perspective is
skewed."

She considers Samwell Tarly. Very, very carefully. "It's because you're thinking with the wrong
faith," she says.

The Maester's head snaps up.

"You converted to the Weirwood," she says. "You left the faith of the Seven behind. So why do
you cling to their preconceptions? Exalted gods, omnipotent, omniscient gods?"

"But Jaqen's the Stranger," says Tarly.

"To those that believe in the Stranger," she says. "You believe in the Weirwood."

Tarly's got his eyes closed. She senses some furious thinking.

"Everything is perspective," she says softly.

"Every greenseer," says Tarly slowly, "that became one with their heart tree, that died in the roots
of the tree...the faces..."

"Our ancestors, some of them, ancestors of the First Men," she says, "taught the ways of the
Weirwood by the Children of the Forest."

"Ancestor worship, root-burial, these are old ways--the oldest ways--of speaking to Death, in a
symbolic sense." His voice has changed at the last, almost lecturing; a little bit of the scholar-
pedant comes through. Tarly straightens. "That's not so strange then, is it? Jaqen's a person, like
those people at the fair that pretend they can talk to your dead mother?"

"A medium?"

"Yes, exactly. He's a living portal to the realm of the ancestors, he's--" he pauses. Looks at her.
"Jaqen's a Weirwood."

"Good enough.

"Not so strange at all," she says. "And can you be friends with a medium in a brightly-striped tent
at the fair?"

"Sure," says Tarly, "but it's that a bit...irreverent?"

She snorts. "This is Jaqen we're talking about here. He delights in irreverence."

"So what's Daorys's problem with the whole jealousy thing? I don't get it."

She wonders how much she should speak. "Daorys doesn't have memories before a certain time,"
she says.

"He said--head wound."

She chokes on air. "He told you that?"

Tarly nods.

"Sam, Sam, he's not jealous of you, he likes you." She groans, perches on the edge of a desk.
Brother, for all the complexity you see in the world, you are very simple in your motivations, are
you not? "It's friendly competition, is all it is."

"Why?" asks Samwell.

"Because Jaqen likes you." From the look on Tarly's face, he doesn't get this, either. Secrets. Not mine to reveal. My brother remembers nothing but the pattern is imprinted upon his soul. "He's an assassin-priest, Sam, and not to the Many-Faced God or to the Weirwood or the Stranger. He's Jaqen's priest."

"We reminisced about drinking," offers Tarly, tentative.

_Focus_. "Drinking. Good. The whole story, please. Word for word."

Tarly complies.

She winces at the part about seducing priestesses. _Said it to Jaqen's face, all unknowing. Idiot._ She can imagine Jaqen's side of it, the person you're in love with wants to go swive some vestal virgins? Arya might have kicked their brother in the bollocks, but Jaqen would have unleashed his most cutting mockery. _Depends on how drunk he got--too drunk and he'd have gone mournful._

But drinking, sneaking, disguise. Amusement. That can be arranged. _Anchor him to the actions of living._ If it _is_ suicidal depression, as their sister in Braavos seems to suggest, there should be _some_ indication of it Arya will be able to read.

"Why do you care so much about him?" asks Sam, when she's been silent far too long. "I don't see you as the sort to betray everybody—you've been leaking information to us, bet Stark stuff's made it over to the other side as well—all to figure out what's going on with him?"

She smiles. "Daorys and I have very similar motivations for why we like who we like, Maester Samwell," she says. _And why we love who we love._

#

**NO ONE**

The living heart tree is both like and unlike the Tree in the House. The branches, bare, reach for the sky like skeletal supplicants. The servant spreads furs, then blankets, then sets lanterns beside them.

"Lady Arya said to tell you she will come get you in two watches," says the man that has helped carry Bran Stark out. "She apologizes she could not come sooner. Um. She said to say something. ‘Veilar Do Harrys.’"

A reminder, for Daorys: you _have work to do, still._

The thought is enough to lighten his mood further; he exchanges a rueful glance with Brandon Stark.

"You're older than her," mutters Bran Stark, "how does she bully _you?_"

He grins. "Who says she bullies me? Curiosity pulled me from my sickbed, Champion—I would learn more of the Weirwood." He raises an eyebrow. "You are the authority on such, are you not?"

Bran Stark shrugs.

To match action to words, no one reaches out a hand, his fingertips grazing over the face carved
His eyes close. "Arya," he says, "it says Arya, Arya." He opens his eyes, quirks an eyebrow at Bran Stark. "Do you have one that says Bran, Bran?"

Brandon Stark snorts. "No, only ravens do that."

Daorys's lips curl. "Annoying."

Bran Stark grins for the first time. "What did you want to know?"

No one gestures around him. "These trees," he says, "there is a distinct demarcation, between the Weirwood and other trees in the copse. How does it work?"

Bran Stark is now considering him, he thinks for a while.

"The heart tree's roots," he says, "a greenseer once lay amongst them."

The face. "Absorbed?"

Bran Stark nods.

Your fate, then, this place.

"A heart tree sends runners," continues Bran Stark, "under the ground."

Daorys thinks. "I thought it reproduced with acorns?"

"That too," says Bran. "But those are the seeds for a new Weirwood. This one, the runners go through the ground and when they find the roots of another tree, they grow up into it."

And eventually the other tree is absorbed as well.

"It's not a parasite," says Bran Stark, suddenly on the defensive.

"A parasite needs a host," agrees no one. "The heart tree assimilates; a predator?"

Bran Stark looks relieved. "They used to hang men's entrails from the branches."

No one shrugs. "Primitive people--they find analogs for truth, some crude ritual that mimics the true nature of things."

To participate in that which they call divinity.

"The Weirwood is a sort of sister-colony," he muses as he turns the concept around in his head. "There are mangrove forests, in the Summer Isles--a forest full of trees, but it is all one tree, the same organism that spreads through its shoots, takes root slightly further away from the main trunk."

"Something like that," says Bran Stark. "But each tree in a Weirwood is different too--it still wears the skin of the tree that it once was. But it is the heart tree on the inside."

He understands, finally, and then he nods, reaches out a hand again to touch the face. Arya, Arya. That is strange, it should be Jaqen, Jaqen, and the moment he thinks the thought the sound in his mind's ear changes, and now it is what it should be. Jaqen, Jaqen. But Arya's name is threaded around the god's and no one knows if he strains, if he thinks about it just a slightly different way--
he does it. *Arya, Arya* yet again.

He is reminded of one of those pictures they sell in Braavos's market-district, an engraving of an optical illusion: two faces facing each other, or a chalice between them, depending on whether you look at the black ink or the white parchment.

*Fitting*.

He smiles, even as Bran Stark idly reaches for a twig.

The boy groans.

"Arms hurting?"

Bran Stark glares at him.

"It will pass," offers no one. "The pain is an accomplishment--the muscles will be better than before, soon."

"Jaime Lannister took my legs," says Bran Stark. "Now you've taken my arms." He sighs. "Have to remember to be careful of men in love with their sisters."

That earns Brandon Stark a *very* level look. "Not in love with your sister," says no one. "You're not a dead man--you have a heart; it projects." He considers what the boy may have seen. Or *seen* as the case may be. "I feel gratitude," he says. "Pathetic amounts of gratitude."

Which makes him wonder, since his reason is working for the moment. Doesn't he want to die? He does. So why gratitude? *Shouldn't I resent her instead?*

"A grateful man doesn't go around hallucinating a girl's name," mutters Bran.

Daorys grins; he is not above some needling. "She is very beautiful," he points out.

There is a gurgle of laughter out of Bran Stark. "*Arya?*" he asks, incredulous. "Like, *Arya*, *Arya*? She looks like a boy!"

Daorys blinks. "You haven't seen very many women in your life, have you, cripple?"

"Saw one," says Bran quietly, looking down at his legs now. "She died. Maybe I don't have a heart. My friend. She loved me, I cried for her. She was starving to death and I knew and I didn't whisper words of comfort, or spin her a happy story like Arya did for Mother, I whispered her a dream so they could come save me. Wasn't fair to her."

No one does not read any guilt in the boy. Sorrow, but no guilt. "Maybe you don't have a heart after all," he says.

Bran Stark looks up. "Nobody else would sound so...approving when they say that," he ventures.

"Well, maybe it's not true," says Daorys. "Maybe you're just in shock. What would you have wanted done, had you been her and her you?" He finds himself genuinely curious.

Brandon Stark sighs. "Would want the same thing I did to her."

No heart. *Excellent*.

"Life is not fair," says Daorys. "The living can create some of that in a controlled environment."
You had no power over any environment except your own mind. You treated her as an equal, a true equal, even in death—what more fairness could any man hope to receive out of life?

Both of Bran Stark's eyebrows have risen. "This 'priest of death' thing is strange," he says.

No one nods. "The weirwood comes closest in shape to the Many-Faced God," he says and knows it to be true. "Perhaps that's why Winterfell feels comfortable."

"No," says Bran, "it's comfortable because Sansa makes sure every hearth is lit all the time."

Daorys considers this. "That probably makes more sense than my blathering," he says. "Not right in the head, you know."

"I noticed," says Bran Stark quietly.

"Just now?" asks no one.

"After the speech about fairness."

"Always after the speeches," he mutters, looks at Bran Stark. "What did this one look like?"

"Your eyes were closed, but you were having this conversation with some imaginary person in a language I don't understand."

One of those.

"What are the other ones?" asks the boy. His turn, to be curious.

Daorys brightens. "Most common's the ones where I get trapped in a thought, in circles, over and over again. Usually involves a lot of blood. Full fits are rare. Those are fun, though—this explosion of light and pain, but it's all colors and none, and the world fragments behind my eyes and everything is chaos but it makes so much sense. If I was a mathematician—we have a couple of those in the order—if I was a mathematician I think I could unlock the heart of chaos itself, translate it into symbols and balances." He grins. "From the outside that one is involves foaming at the mouth, I've been given to understand."

Bran Stark absorbs this. "That does sound like fun," he says. "Apart from the foaming."

Daorys shrugs. "A balance."

"Sometimes I dream I can fly," says Bran Stark softly, and he looks up, into what part of the black, star-studded sky he can see through the branches of the Weirwood. "I dream that I have wings and I rise above the clouds and the horizon gets further and further away, and the world is so small, laid out before my feet." He looks back to no one, enthusiasm suffusing his face. "And your stomach drops, you fold your wings and plummet, and then swoosh," he spreads his arms to the sides, pain forgotten, "you spread your wings, they pull, and you're gliding over the treetops. Sometimes I can catch a thermal, glide forever before having to flap my wings. Eventually I have to wake up, though, and get someone to help me piss."

"No foaming though?" asks no one.

"No."

"Lucky son of a bitch," he says, admiringly.

The boy's turn, to shrug. "The uncontrolled warging has stopped—went into a field mouse one time,
even when I came back I kept wanting to twitch my whiskers whenever I heard someone coming. Didn't have whiskers back then. Irritating."

"Still don't have whiskers," no one feels compelled to point out.

Bran Stark looks disgruntled. "Almost had a beard, stupid Sansa made me shave it off."

No one does not remember his own brush with nascent manhood. Still, he can extrapolate. "Shaving's probably better until it's less patchy," he offers.

"Probably," says Bran Stark, still looking regretful.

No one remembers something.

"The fits had already started in Asshai," he says, "I could almost trigger one by thinking in just the right way. They asked a lot of questions, I talked a lot," but if it got too close to something Jaqen would've wanted kept secret--like Arya-- "I'd trigger a fit. Worked most of the time." The memory tastes very good. "Pissed the crazy lady off no end." He grins, a true expression, at Brandon Stark. "Good times."

"I have one! When one of the men who was with Tyrion Lannister sent a raven off to Cersei--she was spying on her brother, sent her a raven telling them I was alive and coherent and every time Tyrion asked if I remembered what had happened before I fell off the tower, I would pretend to try to remember, think very hard and look sad, and I could see the man almost pissing himself." Bran Stark pauses to take a breath, grins back. "Good times."

Companionable silence after that, for a while.

"How..." he begins, "how obvious is the gawking?"

The gaze that Brandon Stark turns on him is suddenly remote, rings within rings within rings, and it is the same pattern that a top spinning out of control on the ground a maelstrom's vortexes at the edge of reason, the-- don't go there no need to trigger one now.

"Can't see anything," says Bran. "Had a dream. A pit and there was no one in the pit and a cold wind passed overhead and the pit writhed and seethed for it."

Daorys raises an eyebrow, disbelieving. "You get 'in love with Arya Stark' out of that?"

"'Love' was polite," says Bran Stark. "Didn't catch Jamie reading poetry to Cersei, did I? But Arya's married, so you won't try anything," statement and understanding rolled into one, a warning under it, stay away from my sister, a reflex; never-before used, the warning's a little uncertain.

"What," asks no one, "the puppy trailing around after Sansa Stark not given you enough chance to practice the dutiful brother?"

"Sandor's safe," mutters Bran, looks away.

"I'm a Faceless Man! How am I unsafe?"

Bran gives him an incredulous look. "A third of the chambermaids are almost in love with you, and you've been here three days!"

No one has to grin at that. Only three days. Haven't lost more than a few watches. "If I'm alive for nine more, you think I'll have 'em all?" he asks.
"Maybe a half," says Bran thoughtfully, "the Jon faction is very loyal; it's the biggest. You're mostly poaching from Jaqen, and there's these three that are 'Jaqen or die'--they're the ones that give Arya dagger-eyes whenever she walks by. One of them is trying to save up enough money to lure him away from the Princess; they know the Starks don't have much coin."

"Clandestine lover, he said," murmurs Daorys. "You're telling me the story is actually gigolo?"

Bran rolls his eyes.

_Oh, the mockery, the mockery that is in store for you, Many-Faced God._

"There must be a Bran Stark faction," Daorys offers.

Bran clumps handfuls of snow. "There's the mothering kind," he mutters. "They're not so bad. But there's the title-seekers, cripple and all, won't get a 'real' lady, maybe he'll settle for a commoner if she's alluring enough and be grateful any woman at all wants him, even if it's a lie."

No one's eyes narrow. "Would you?"

Bran looks at him, his eyes blank. "I'm going to end my days slowly being eaten by a tree," he says. "Don't need a woman to get that done."

No one nods. "No heart at all," he says. "I like you, Bran Stark."

Bran smiles sadly. "Do you think I should marry one of them? Then Sansa wouldn't have to pay someone to look after me; you don't pay family. She could get another spy--she needs one in the Last Hearth now."

Daorys considers it. There is the slavery-by-marriage problem, for one; Westeros suffers from that quite a bit. "No," he murmurs. "If this was any other circumstance, then it might be logical. But you are Jaqen's Champion now." He is no one, and no one has a truth written into his bones. "No man can ever hope to meet his god, face-to-face," he says. "It is something beyond human comprehension. There must be a balance to it, a payment--suffering, beyond human comprehension."

Bran nods, lowers his head. "Osha, Jojen, Meera. Hodor."

_They like their litanies of names, the Starks._ The names mean nothing to no one, but they are still usable. "One of _those_ , you need," he agrees, "someone to give you their comprehension, their fortitude, when yours fails. An equal. Not a chambermaid."

Bran's eyes rise to meet no one's. "Who gave you your fortitude?" he asks.

The weirwood's branches shiver and clatter overhead, the branches reach and it is as if they are following the lines of no one's soul; they read him as a scribe's finger follows a line of script in a book.

"Death poured into Asshai to find me," he says. _No man deserves such from his god_. Nor any Lorathi from another.

Jaqen is beyond no one's comprehension.

"Arya belongs to him," says Bran Stark, eyes boring into no one.

_One does not smack a Prince upside the head; it will derail the diplomacy business._
"All Faceless Men belong to the god, Brandon Stark, but in that other sense she belongs with Jaqen not to him, and he would be the first to say so." He pauses, checks himself for dissonance: none at all. Jaqen's principles still hold true for the god.

"All that 'Aohon' and 'Nuhor' nonsense is just foreplay," he continues and grins at the overprotective brother, the zealous Champion. "Semantics. For me it comes to the same in the end--I realized yesterday it's chancy, as a method for suicide, maybe one chance in three he'll kill me if I do it right, two in three they'll both be disappointed in me." He shudders.

"You are so strange," says Bran.

"Valar dohaeris," no one mutters.

"What's those other words you used?" asks Bran. "Aohon? Foreplay?"

No one sighs. "Here's a small stick, Brandon Stark, twirl it around, no good for the muscles to stiffen. I'm going to try to walk around a few trees, maybe drive my head into one of them."

He suits action to words again, rises, walks a small distance.

"Good luck!" Bran Stark calls after him.

#

**ARYA**

She brings a small nuncheon out to them under the weirwood: hot stew, in two covered bowls, a canister of oil hanging off her arm to refill the lanterns' reservoirs. Her brother is wandering circles around the trees, too far away even for Lorathi ears to hear.

"Well?" she asks in an undertone.

"Three distinct types of fits," says Bran.

"You see them?"

Bran shakes his head. "One--he was talking in a language I don't recognize. He told me the rest."

It confirms her suspicion: there is more than one thing wrong with my brother. But this thing with the language…

She tries High Valyrian first.

"That sounds like it," says Bran, though he seems a little uncertain.

She tries Braavosi Low Valyrian; street-cant.

Bran shakes his head.

*Daorys is of Braavos, born and bred. Why would he revert to High Valyrian?*

"The others?" she asks.

"Arya," says Bran, "it sounded like two people talking. His voice changed a little, as if he was mimicking a woman."
Me? He wore my face for a long time. But there is no High Valyrian in my memory.

"Quickly," she says, eyes focused on Bran, "he's turning back."

"Circular thoughts about blood," says Bran, "he says it’s most common; he gets fixated on them."

Interesting.

Bran looks over her shoulder, then away. "The third doesn't sound like a fit, he says it looks like one. It sounds like visions."

"Visions of what?"

"Chaos," whispers Bran, "and numbers and patterns. He likes those. He can trigger them at will."

She has no time to be disturbed, no time to be terrified: he likes those. He is within sensing distance, she can feel him against the edges of her perception, a dark shadow that deepens the shadows of the Weirwood trees, slumbering through to spring. She is no one; she subsumes her fear, and reaches out, a coil of awareness. An illusion. Her awareness entwines with the shadow of him; as if they hold hands and it is her fingers that are threaded through his. He catches a hold of her, pulls himself in to where they are sitting.

He comes into the circle of light cast by the lanterns.

She looks up, meets his gaze, and again she wonders: these mind-games we Lorathi play with ourselves, are they really an illusion?

"Two people read the same story," he murmurs as he sits beside her, "does the story become a history?"

She thinks about it. "If their names are recorded as reading the story," she says. "Then it is a history, however small, Daorys."

"It seems you have brought us food, Arya Stark."

She grins, uncovers the stew.

Bran watches Daorys dip his spoon in it, chase a chunk of meat, raise it to his mouth.

"Aren't you going to check it for poison?" asks Bran. "Ser Zural always checks for poison."

Daorys eats his spoonful. Chews. Swallows.

"Not a bad place to die," he says. "Under the boughs of a heart tree, with a friend to keep one company."

#

NO ONE

Jaqen is still in council with Jon, hasn't come to the nightmeal. Arguing, it sounded like. Zural's in White Harbor, acting the envoy, which means Daorys and Arya are free to grab slabs of bread and cheese and eat wherever they please. Where they please seems to be a chamber in the King's Tower. Waiting for Jaqen.

She reads through the papers he has delivered to her hand. She is no one; her hand does not
tremble, even at the places his hand did in the writing of it.

Finally, she is done, and she looks at him with a question in her eyes.

“Don’t tell him,” he says.

She nods, doesn’t even hesitate, she selects some of the sheets—one in three, almost, and tosses them into the fire. The blacken at the edges, curl up onto themselves, turn to thin sheets of black ash that falls apart.

_Gone._

And with _that_, no one dismisses their contents from his mind. It is still there—not annihilated, as his name, as the first few years of his Facelessness, but…diminished.

Raised voices, from inside the King’s council room.

"Thought Jon Stark danced to Jaqen's tune?" Daorys asks.

"As much as we do," she replies.

_Ah. Argument's going to take a while then._

"Did you get through to Bran?" she asks. She failed, but it is to be expected; she still plays Arya Stark with the relations of her blood.

“Did a version of the pool talk,” he replies. “He will allow himself to mourn now.” Being Death’s Champion requires great depth of resource from Brandon Stark; best that the burdens he bears _now_ be laid to rest. “He saw what I was doing, of course, had to give a lot of truth to sell the comfort of the lie.”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

He looks at her, bemused. “What is this thanking between _us_, Arya?"’’

She smiles, rueful. “A remnant of social custom.”

He nods. That is fair.

“Who is Hodor?”

“A lackwit we had around here, before,” she says. “I don’t know much more.”

“That name is worse than the others,” he says thoughtfully. Then he considers. _She should know._ “He dreamed something of me he interprets as an overprotective brother would.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“A pit with no one in it,” he says, “and the wind passed overhead.”

“ _That_ means lust?“ she asks.

“Overprotective brother, as I said,” grins Daorys. “He doesn’t know Asshai, doesn’t know what I felt when you _did_ pass overhead; I _yearned_, Arya, I yearned for vengeance such as I have never yearned for anything before, I _writhed_ for it—a sinner, in that moment, praying for cruelty instead of mercy. He saw that in me.”
Her lays a hand over his, and there is a restraint to the eyes of one who is no one that is entirely missing in the moment.

_I speak to the Wind._

“I will exact the payment that is due our House,” she says. _The Wind is implacable_. “And I will wear your face as I do it, brother.”

A cold, arctic breeze settles around his shoulders for a moment, and then it is gone.

She is no one; she smiles at him. “Wonder what he’d have interpreted if his dream had been of a watch _before_ that.”

Daorys snorts. “Overprotective Champion—he’d have warned me to stay away from _Jaqen_. ”

_Speaking of the god…_

“What _are_ they arguing about?” he asks.

“Daenerys Targaryen.” She shrugs.

"And you don't care?" asks Daorys.

She rolls her eyes. "Bored of it all," she mutters.

_A bored Arya Stark does not bode well for anyone, least of all her brothers, if Zural's stories hold any water._

He chews. "Anything to do around here in the evenings?"

She gives him a disgusted grimace. "We sit around in Mother's sewing room and _talk_."

_I see._

"It is _exactly_ as pathetic as it sounds." she says.

He pauses. "I might give that a miss, then." _Tavern's still missing a barkeep, nobody around with any musical talent that I know of._

But there's a light in her eye.

_She's thought of something._

"Does it involve exercise?" he asks.

She shrugs.

"I'm going to go take a nap, like the good little invalid I am," he says. "You wait for _Jaqen_."

She thumps her hand over her breast, a parody of a salute.

--------------------------

He didn't expect to fall asleep. But he wakes to a tapping sound. _Tap. Tap. Tap._ Someone is tapping on his window.

He throws it open. Arya, balancing on the ledge beneath the arch.
"We're sneaking out," she says.

He raises an eyebrow. "We need to sneak ?"

"Going to be in trouble with Sansa if she finds out," mutters Jaqen, who's perched on the ledge just out of sight.

Daorys shakes his head. "Jaqen H'ghar needs permission from a girl of ten and nine to leave his bedroom at night?"

He can feel the god glaring at him.

"Fucking everyone listens to Sansa around here," says Arya. "And now we've got to listen to Sansa and Zural. They're in their boxes now, mutual understanding, everyone is comfortable. Shouldn't fuck it up."

Daorys nods. "The switch was a good idea." His task, originally, to work with Sansa Stark while Zural handled the more earnest Brandon Stark. "Instinctive mistrust of me, I don't know what I said wrong."

"She doesn't trust good-looking men," says Jaqen.

No one pretends to preen. "You think I'm good-looking?" She likes you, Jaqen, so that's not it. Jaqen H'ghar is a polarizing persona--either one trusts him, or one doesn't. But it has nothing to do with his look; his look would have people throwing themselves from high windows for a chance to land in his bed, if the slyness didn't hold them at bay.

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He gathers his furs, pulls on his boots, the over-layers. Wonder why they're not feeling the cold, casually hanging outside the window in the biting wind.

Ah, gods.

He needs some assistance to climb down to the ground, but once on a level surface, it feels... almost normal. He doesn't ask where they're going. Doesn't need to, wherever it is it's better than huddling under the covers in his room, useless.

A Lorathi never does anything with a single purpose in mind. This little exercise in rebellion holds some purpose for Jaqen beyond the obvious.

Purpose is a good excuse.

------------------------

A Wildling--Free Folk--camp, a few miles east of Winterfell.


"No slaves," says Jaqen.

"Women fight," says Arya.

He watches the movements, listens to the words as they blend into a group making for one of the larger fires. Blend of Westerosi, words of the First Men. As to be expected, crude and a little limited when it comes to some vocabulary. But surprisingly effective, the simplicity. He thinks he's heard twelve variants of "go fuck yourself" so far, and not a one of them a repeat. One or two are good
enough that he *memorizes* them--useless to him, but once he dies...

*Ah.* The thing that had been nagging him in the morning. *Once I die, my memories will be accessible to Ambrasys, to Jaqen, to everyone. Don't need to write anything down.*

He grins. She did promise him a day. *Wonder what tomorrow's story will be?*

A large man, reminiscent of a bear, comes up to them. "Not seen you around before," he says. Suspicious, of course, but there's a drunken need to pick a fight driving that.

"Fought with Giantsbane up near the Wall," says Jaqen roughly.

"Yeah, and what does this man look like?"

Jaqen grins. "Tormund's eyes are like glass balls, friend, that'll jump out and eat you any time."

The joke is unexpected. *Or expected*, Daorys is not sure--the men around them burst out laughing, and the bear-like aggressor thumps Jaqen on the back. "That they are. Good man. Horns on the rack."

*Classic semi-tribal warrior society. You're "in" if you're in, but the bonds are not cohesive enough to restrain anyone if there's trouble.* Face, irony, that, saving face and giving insult will be used as pretext for fights aimed at taking another's possessions.

A slight change in Jaqen's stride as they make for an unoccupied corner...

*Covering Arya. Why?*

Daorys steps a little to the left.

A man walks past. He stinks of... *meat*? The man's teeth have been filed down to points, he's got a twitch to him.

*Cannibal. Rare, that.*

Jaqen gives Daorys a glance, a head-tilt towards the god's wife: *we don't want trouble. She will attract trouble.*

She will. Dressed in grey fur, entirely unafraid, she blends in that they'd never question whether she belongs here. But the face, the form, the eyes... *and anyone that wants to eat her may not be wanting that in a figurative sense.*

He wonders why she didn't change faces. There are a number of brothers she could have worn.

"Why didn't you change face?" he asks, as they find a spot to spread the furs Jaqen's got draped over his shoulder, take a seat. Not too close to the fire. Not too far, either, enough light to see by.

"Jon's people now, one way or another," answers Jaqen for her. "This is the last camp that's not been given some land, been integrated into the North. It's got both the fiercely independent ones, and the troublemakers. And the man-eaters. If a small woman is not safe amongst them with two warriors at her side, then no matter how much he wants to 'resettle' them, it's not going to work."

Jaqen trades a palmful of silver for a small cask of mead, breeches it. The mead's *good*, Daorys has to admit. *Might be worth resettling them if their mead's this good, man-eaters or not.*

They use a single horn, pass it back and forth between them.
Someone is making music on rawhide drums, a strange beat that makes the world unreal, something else, someplace else.

Daorys shivers; the cold's creeping up on him. She notices, of course.

"Let's see if I can compel the wind to do something kind for a change," she murmurs. There's a look to her eyes, come and gone--a white sheen over her iris. And the breeze that has been robbing his warmth shifts, is replaced somehow by a draft that comes from the direction of the fire, bearing woodsmoke and the smell of roast pig.

And heat.

The heat wraps around him.

"Better?" she asks.

"You," he says, "are divine . What were they thinking, trying to give you to Izembaro’s Targaryen?"

"How did you vote?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Opposed it. Jaqen recruited you, must have a reason. Apart from your charms, which were, forgive me, not apparent when you were a child."

She snorts. "Not apparent now," she says. "That's why I'm a good test tonight--not beauty, even the most 'civilized' man may shed restraint for beauty's sake. But small. And female, which is good enough for a lot of these folks."

Truth? It tastes like truth. No. Can't be.

He exchanges another look with Jaqen: she wants compliments? Jaqen shakes his head, rueful: no, she believes it.

Arya, Arya, Arya. Did you not see what my teacher tried to tell you, over and over? It is a weakness, not seeing the truth. You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever encountered in my life, and yours is the kind of beauty that would have only deepened with age. Were we not on the verge of losing you, I think we would have waited till you were twenty, perhaps, maybe five-and-twenty before taking a vote to make you Faceless. But then, the age she will be now has a certain vulnerability to it, and as weapons go it may actually be more effective than beauty.

"Apparent, cruel one," says Daorys.

She quirks an eyebrow at him. " You think so?"

"You do not believe a man, lovely girl," says Jaqen, sounding hurt, "but you will believe him ?"

"A man is in love with a girl," she says softly. "Her flesh is immaterial to him. The girl's brother, on the other hand, is a connoisseur."

"A connoisseur ," says Daorys, dry. "What a word for a wildling to know."

She laughs, and him and Jaqen shift forward slightly, the sound of her laughter is lost in the din, but the fire has grown larger. People are looking at them; it cannot entirely be avoided.

Jaqen's already made a decision, Daorys thinks. Too many ones that are not just lawless; they are incapable of sticking to what social compacts they may have now. No man can live in groups
larger than a single family without having some ability to honor the social compact.


But the cask of mead is only a third done.

"That one," says Jaqen, his gaze picking out a woman. Sinewy. "She's going to kill the man she's with by the end of the night."

"Hmm. How, do you think?"

"Bashing," says Arya. "Looks like a bashing type of woman."

"That one over there," says Daorys, as he tilts the horn to a side. "Killed quite a few. Doesn't like it though. Had a king, if I was to guess, followed some banner, the attitude clings to his shoulders still. Might be salvageable, looks like he has a following."

"Oh," says Arya, "Look at that one. He's reading the crowd."

Both Jaqen and Daorys shift their attention, slightly, to the man her gaze has just brushed over.

_Ah. One of those. Figures._

"Picking his next victim," says Jaqen.

Arya leans forward: _next victim?_

"One of those that kills out of compulsion," says Daorys softly. "Some broken ritual he must try to finish, over and over and over, a loop he cannot escape." He leans back on his elbows, looks at Jaqen. "Put it out of its misery, brother? We usually give mercy," he says to Arya, "unless it's inconvenient."

"Sometimes," agrees Jaqen. There is caution in his voice; he's not sure it's worth it.

"Not allowed to kill unless a name has been given," says Arya, "or if there is no choice. Yet now I find you do. All these unspoken rules I have not learned."

"What rules, love?" asks Jaqen. "You are no longer an acolyte."

"Rules are a Braavosi problem," says no one. "There is a drought in the Braavosi; rain, a flood, they will soften, they will erode, they must raise floodbanks, they must create channels, that the land may keep its shape."

"He is on edge," says Jaqen. "He has not hunted for some time."

"The broken ritual," says no one. "Can't find the right thing to put on the altar."

"Wonder what he's looking for," Arya murmurs.

"It’s usually a type of woman," says Jaqen.

"Someone that fits the vessel he has made of his compulsions," says Daorys.

"Land has no shape," she says, "save what the water makes of it. Water and wind."

She rises to her knees, stands, draws attention.
Impetuous, Arya.

Jaqen and him exchange a look. Then nonchalant, Jaqen rises as well, walks to the far flank, balances the triangle as she goes closer to the fire.

No one tracks movements--three men marked, all dangerous, then two, then five as they walk past, axes at their belt, then back to the two that are watching, the man-eater with sharp teeth, and the one that is hungry. The man with sharp teeth has found amusement, a woman that passes with a gourd the man wants, she allows him to drink from it and he staggers to his feet, staggers after her to the far side of the camp.

Arya brings the hungry one back with her; he follows in her wake. He thinks she believes she has baited a fish onto her line, he thinks what she actually has is a shark, ravening, rising behind her in utter, deadly silence.

He is not entirely wrong.

This is a dangerous one.

"Good mead," says no one.

Jaqen has returned as if from taking a piss, he refills their horn.

"Will you share?" asks the hungry man. "I like sharing."

Jaqen sits, smirks. "Every man has a limit," he says. "There are more horns on the racks, friend, help yourself."

"Of course," says the one who hungers, departs to the horn-rack, lying half-askew in the snow.

No one raises an eyebrow at her.

"Never met one of those before," she says.

"There is some fear in you," Daorys observes. Was the fearlessness the arrogance of a newly-made Faceless Man?

"He is dangerous," she says. "He watches, and it has crossed my mind that he is utterly unpredictable in his predictability."

Jaqen is listening, listening to her learn.

"Speed is nothing," she murmurs, "without the ability to predict motion."

"You should not have drawn attention?" asks no one: Now that you know, would you have done things differently?

She is quite capable of defending herself, but an attack is the best defense; she should kill him now, immediately, before something in his mind just gives way and he lashes out without giving any outward sign of it beforehand.

"Were I alone," she agrees: you stand behind me.

Between him and Jaqen, there is nothing in this camp that can harm her.

A curious shift, for Arya Stark, to court safety in another's blade.
"The Hound, Yoren, Syrio Forel, even Eddard Stark," says Daorys; the litany of names is a question.

"They could not even keep themselves safe in the end," she says softly.

Jaqen draws her into his arms, and she softens against him.

"A heady wine, this kind of trust, lovely girl," says Jaqen. "Be careful where you pour it."

"Too late, brother," says Daorys, "I have already resolved to steal her from you."

"You and what army?" asks Jaqen.

She's delighted; she enjoys the attention. She, who has spent her entire childhood rejecting the forms of courtly love, very much enjoys two assassins engaging in mock battle over her.

"Mock" is the key.

And "assassins"—this is Arya Stark, after all.

He exchanges an amused look with his brother, who is smirking, of a mind to indulge what little self-absorption his wife displays.

Jaqen and Arya separate.

The hungry one returns, horn in hand, and this time Jaqen pours mead for him, fills up his horn to the brim, and no one shifts, so the man may sit upon their furs.

"I thought of stealing you beside the fire," says the hungry man, his gaze intent on Arya. "But you have two already."

"They are my brothers," she says, crosses one leg over another.

The man looks between Daorys and Jaqen. "Don't look like brothers," he says.

She shrugs. "My dam's dead, ask her."

"You take after your mother then," says the man.

"Have a sister," she says, "she has red hair."

The man drinks from his horn. He, too, has red hair, not the same shade as Sansa Stark's, but close. It hangs in long braids behind his back, his beard is neatly trimmed.

Almost civilized, for a Wildling.

"All the world is changing," says the hungry man, sadly. "Stealing is not so common these days, living amidst kneelers." He spits out the word. "Watching, always watching."

"Better than the Others," says Arya.

"Their wives are dead," says the man, looks sidelong at Daorys. "That would be a thing, eh, a dead wife, to take to bed."

" Doesn't talk back?" asks Daorys.

Jaqen snorts.
"Smells," says the man, and there is a slavering in his voice. Few men would have heard it, it sounds like disgust.

"He thinks he's smarter than everyone else," says Daorys to Jaqen.

"They always do," replies Jaqen.

"Don't scare him off, brothers," says Arya.

The man grins. "Your sister has a mind of her own," he says. "It seems I'm more than smart enough for her."

Jaqen smirks, passes his horn to Daorys.

The man waits for a response, waits for them to react, he's watching them, the play of their hands that drift a little too close to their sword-belts each time they pass the horn between them, each time Jaqen refills it. Arya is the target, Arya is already dead in his mind, dead and lying rigid under his hunger.

And so he is surprised, when she slips the blade between his ribs, so surprised all he can do is look down, then up at her face.

Blood bubbles out of his nose, his mouth as he tries to draw harsh breaths; one who is used to suppressing screams, to enforcing silence, he tends to forget that he himself should scream sometimes.

They watch as the dull light of his eyes dims further; the corpse slumps where it sits, but the where of his sitting has been chosen carefully, his back to the fire, the horn askew in his grip. It will not be noticed till the morning, that the drunk man does not wake.

"Interesting," she says. "You were right, Jaqen."

"Always," Jaqen says. Then he furrows his brow. "About what, lovely girl?"

"He was so focused on what he was going to do to me," she says thoughtfully, "that his mind erased my movement, replaced me with a dead woman."

Blood on the mind, sex in the eyes. These are the most distracting of distractions. Everyone only sees what they expect to see.

Arya looks to her husband. "You said. 'complicated' and 'macabre' are simply other words for 'inefficient' and 'one-dimensional'."


Daorys leans back on an elbow. "Do tell."

"No," groans Arya, "please."

"She had plans for Walder Frey," says Jaqen.

Daorys raises his eyebrow.

"The Twins."

A man with a wolf's head sewn upon his body, paraded through the streets by Lannister soldiers...
"Arya Stark would have had plans, wouldn't she," murmurs Daorys.

"What was it, love?" asks Jaqen. "Ah yes--wanted to kill his son and grandson, bake them into a pie, and feed it to Walder Frey before slicing his throat."

Daorys blinks. "Macabre indeed."

She's covered her face with her hands.

"I can see how that would blind you to the moment," says no one, "the planning for the pie would be my biggest concern, I mean, do you chop them up or grind them, how long does human meat actually take to cook? Are spices necessary? Something has to cover up the body odour, I've heard Freys are not very clean."

She's uncovered her face.

"I'd have helped you make the pies," he says with a smile.

"Really, Daorys?" asks Jaqen. "Really?"

"Can you cook?" she asks.

"A year, working in a Qarth kitchen," he says, "Sorrowful Men just kept dying and they still kept coming back." He sits up, leans towards her. "Pies, beautiful one," he says, "as many as your vengeful little heart desired."

"But then I wouldn't have learned how to be no one," she says. "I like being no one."

"Me too," he says, "you'll have to tell me how Jaqen did it, so I can see if lies within my power to teach."

She blushes.

"Really, Jaqen?" he asks. "Really?" He turns to his brother.

But Jaqen's gaze is focused beyond them, towards the entrance of a large tent on the other side of the fire. A woman has emerged, one of the few Daorys has seen at the camp in a dress. Long blonde hair, braided, jewels in her ears.


Arya follows her husband's gaze, and hers is puzzled. She's as much in the dark as Daorys is.

"Before Jon died," murmurs Jaqen, "Stannis offered him a dispensation, the lordship of Winterfell, to marry this woman and bring the Wildlings under Stannis's wing. Power and beauty generally make very good bait for most men."

Arya looks annoyed.

*Have I misjudged her? Jealousy, over Jaqen, whose lips know no chaunt but the refrain of her name?*

"You're trying to find alternatives for Daenerys," says Arya.

*Ah. That.* Even no one's extrapolation is prone to error, and in this case it pleases him, that she is not inaccurately possessive.
"No," says Jaqen. "I am trying to confirm a suspicion."

Daorys speaks. "Satisfy my curiosity, brother."

"That one," says Jaqen, indicating the woman who now speaks to two warriors, "she is sister to one who was wife to Mance Rayder--the King Beyond the Wall. Aunt to Mance Rayder's son. Something about it made me suspicious. Mance was a brother of the Night's Watch, raised south of the wall. Well-spoken. Of a mind to gather others like him to himself, ones of the south that came beyond the Wall. Coincidences." Jaqen's eyes narrow. "Jon has never met Smalljon Umber's sisters. One is still alive, and it was she who pushed her brother to give up Rickon."

What happened to Baby Rickon? By the tightness of Arya's lips, no one can extrapolate. Valar morghulis.

"Why?" asks Arya, the question is dragged out of her.

Does not want to embroil herself any further in Stark sorrow. It is hard, to dance around that which makes a Lorathi "no one" in the first place.

Wonder what it was for me. An idle thought; he has no desire to know.

"A wildling woman named Osha was always with Rickon," says Jaqen. "And he wouldn't cast her out. Umbers hate Wildlings, Mors Umber drilled hatred into the bones of his family." Jaqen's mouth twists. "Sometimes I think it is irony that runs the world."

"His daughter was taken in a raid, if I'm remembering it right?" says Arya. Half a question.

"I know the name of Hildegrad Umber," says Jaqen.

"Valar morghulis," replies Arya.

"Valar dohaeris," no one murmurs.

Arya has seen the shape of this thing, as much as Daorys has.

"Irony runs the world," says Arya thoughtfully. "The Umbers were once kings, until the Starks overpowered them. Now Mors Umber's great-grandson is called 'prince'. How old is he, this son of Mance Rayder?"

"Three and some," says Jaqen. "Another shell game, with Gilly and her son, but the princeling ended up fostered with his aunt and weighed down with 'Aemon Steelsong' for a name."

Arya snorts.

"One problem solved for Jon," says Jaqen. "I could not confirm, until I had seen her resemblance to Smalljon's sister. But Val is Mors Umber's granddaughter, and she can hold the Last Hearth in her nephew's name till he comes of age. She'll have to bend knee, which she's been avoiding all this time, but if Tormund Giantsbane can tolerate the social fiction..."

"House Thenn is the limit of what Wildlings the lords will tolerate," she says, cautious.

"Ah, but now the Wildling is an Umber," says Jaqen, and he runs a finger down Arya cheek. "Noble blood. Names. A tragedy. Love, survival against all odds."

"Fictions are stories," she murmurs. "It is the storyteller that controls the audience."
A schemer has come to the House of Black and White, Jaqen had said, when no one stood upon the banks of the Ash, waiting to get into a fishing boat.

A schemer shares some properties with the hungry man that cools amidst them with a rictus grin freezing on his face. But the rituals of the schemer are different. A compulsive schemer **relishes** schemes, hungers for another to scheme **with** (or against, it matters not).

A compulsive killer **despises** death; he kills the ones he hungers for.

Arya's breath is shallow; she leans into Jaqen's touch.

No, Jaqen does not lose, not even at mock-flirtation. He just plays the game on a slightly longer timescale than his competition.

*And here I was, bragging of my baking skills.*

Daorys grins to himself, rueful.

The god looks up over Arya's head, and there is a taunting smirk on Jaqen’s lips.

"Challenge is a heady wine, brother," warns no one. "Be careful where you spill it."

"It is spilled where it has always been spilled," replies Jaqen.

Daorys keeps his face neutral, even as he fumbles for an explanation.

*What the fuck does that mean?*

He cannot reconcile the tone and the words. So instead, he takes a sip from the horn, and gives Jaqen his most innocently seductive smile.

He judges the sudden confusion blooming on the god's face to be satisfactory.

#

**JORAH**

There is a name he's not supposed to speak.

*Shiera. Shiera. Shiera.*

He's not even supposed to **think** it; he doesn't know how to do that when every caress, every half-smile, every word that has come out of her mouth is branded onto his heart.

Jorah stuffs a handful of the glowing meat into his mouth, waits for the slithering to stop, swallows.

Two slaves help him into a strange set of garments--crimson trews, a long surcoat with a raised collar, the weave chased with thread-of-gold. The front is open, it exposes his chest to the air.

More white hair.

He looked at himself in a mirror this morning.

*How can she bear to lie with me?*

It is as if he has awoken from a dream; in the dream he walked into Asshai a man short of his
middle years. In the world-that-is, Jorah the Andal is old. Jorah the Andal looks like Jeor Mormont, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, honorable, venerable Jeor Mormont.

Bitterness. He reaches for another handful of meat.

He knows when she comes into the room; she brings the light with her. And in her hands she holds a collar--a twin to her own, it seems, but made of gold, not silver.

She smiles, wordlessly, leads him to a mirror. He avoids looking at himself.

"Hush, hush, Jorah," she whispers. "Look."

He is helpless to the sound of her voice. He looks. And as she places the collar around his neck, the years... warp. They roll backwards. And it is as if he is a man of two-and-twenty again, his flesh firm and unspotted with age, his hair the gold it had been before he was wed. Only his eyes...only his eyes brim with shadow.

She leads him to the bed.

And then she dismisses the slaves, who, eyes averted, bow out of the chamber.

She straddles him, but as he reaches for her breasts, she pulls his hands against her chest, and shakes her head.

"Play with me," she says, and her voice is pure sex, but her eyes are intent.

She moans, shifts atop him.

He gets the idea, he gasps, moves his hips.

She presses the collar into his throat. Sharp pain, he gasps again; something, some protrusion behind the collar, it has broken skin. She moves the collar aside, leans down, laps at his blood.

She slices into the top of her breast, fresh blood wells in the cut. "Drink," she says, "and listen. Carefully."

He shudders aside his distress, he licks at the cut, gently, the taste of her harsh and painful upon his tongue.

"Dragon's blood," she says, "King's blood, willingly given. I so unname you--you are not Jorah Mormont, you are not Jorah the Andal." She is weeping. "You are Jerome Snow, of no house and no parentage."

He doesn't know what she wants, what she is doing.

"If you flee," she says, and her tears are silver, the light of the moon making pale tracks upon her face, "if you must flee, it is the only safety I can give you." She breathes, throws her head back, moans, and no listener would be able to tell that their coupling is feigned.

He does not understand.

"It will keep me out of your mind," she says. "A name. I ride upon a name--I have even bound a man without a name, for the absence of a thing is just as much an identifier as the thing itself."

"The assassin," he says, and then he understands.
The Lady in the Mask, the High Consort, she will never let me go--I may find a way to flee, but if I do, the Champion will be set to making me turn my blade upon my own throat.

"But..."

"If you were to flee," she says, "I would hunt for the mind, for the dreams, of Jorah Mormont. And I will not find them, because that is no longer your name."

His eyes burn into hers. "I am Jerome Snow."

She closes her eyes. "If I fail in my task, and the assassin lives," she whispers, "you must flee."

"Now," he says, "love, now."

When she opens her eyes, her gaze is sorrowful, but there is purpose to it. "I serve the Lord of Light, Jorah Mormont. I serve R'hllor with all my being. I do not serve her, though I must play at servility until my god awakens. His vision of the world, my love," she smiles, as if she sees a dream laid upon him, and the dream is good. "It is a beautiful world. She twists it, because of the Valyrian and his whore. The world should be clean, it should be fire set against ice, light against the dark. Not this morass of filth and blood. So I will not flee." She traces a finger over his face, his lips. "Because there is still hope. But if this man without a name does not die," she says, "you must run, run and never look back."

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The Lady in the Mask dismisses the Champion. He does not look at her as she departs, he busies himself in stuffing his face with bits of meat.

The High Consort likes that.

He is led along the road that follows the twists and turns of the Ash; the red of his clothes has become brown by the time they leave the city, wind blowing soot and ash and dust into him.

There is an archway, made of some material--some metal, some stone, he has never seen before.

They pass through it, the Lady in the Mask and Jorah. The slaves cower behind them.

Beyond the archway, there is a city. Vast. Brick-and-mortar houses in neat lines with sloped roofs, behind which he can see an intersection, a square, empty.

There are shadows on every surface. The silhouetted outlines of people, men, and women, and children; as if light from some sun-like source flashed for but a moment, and the shadows from it imprinted themselves on the city for all eternity.

He reaches forward, touches one of the shadows.

Not a shadow.

Ash.

Not light. Fire. Some great fire that burned, that annihilated, so quickly that the people on the street did not even have time to try to turn, to flee--they were turned into ash, their shapes burned into the walls of the houses, the chalk-white surface of the street; ash-shadows of the dead.

"Welcome, Jorah Mormont," says the Lady in the Mask, "to Stygai. The City of Corpses."
He turns to the mask, and for the first time in...as long as he can remember, now, he feels no hunger for the meat he has been gorging on. "What am I doing here?"

"You did not think Daenerys Targaryen would marry some disgraced lord-turned-sellsword, did you?" She reaches forward, runs her fingers through one of the ash-people. Her fingers come away glittering black, and she marks his forehead with it.

"You are here to rule, Jorah Mormont," she says.

He blinks, feels eyes upon him, he turns.

Corpses.

His gorge rises.

Dead men, grotesque burn-marks on their bodies, they are shambling out of the houses, pulling themselves out of narrow gaps between walls, crawling out of windows on all fours.

Their wounds burn with green fire.

"Behold," says the Lady in the Mask, "your kingdom."

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Apologies for the super long chapter, I couldn't find a "nice" place to break it. gul has been absolutely fantastic in the edits for me. I have a lot of other stuff going on right now, so you're getting the things that were written a while ago, but as you see I'm obviously falling behind in the posting schedule. Sorry, the state of affairs may have to continue for a while.

And please, PLEASE, if I don't respond to your comments within a day, I swear I haven't forgotten I'm just afk with work. But the comments are what keep me writing, are what help me shape the bones of this world :) so thank you, and don't stop talking to me :)

love you all!
ARYA

She’s timed it now: her brother’s eyes are most often clear in the mid-afternoons. A risk, taking Jaqen with her to collect him, for a face-to-face meeting with no others present. But she’s been playing this game for four days now—a story for him, a story for Jaqen, alternating the path of their movements in such a manner that Jaqen never encounters their brother when he is unwell. And somehow, Jaqen’s avoided seeing any of the other fits as well: the blanking, the convulsions. All the better for the god to believe the problem was short-lived.

But her brother has taken a hold of an idea: that he is a trap, that there is some spell or compulsion laid upon him, and that the deathwish is his own invention. She cannot dissuade him of it, and she hasn’t tried. Hard, to move a Lorathi without proof; cannot prove a negative.

*So let us give my brother the shape of a trap and he and Jaqen will race to fill it with their own expectations. Give him the trap he expects, and he won’t see me laying mine.*

No trace of her thoughts marks her face. She is no one. Jaqen, in the moment, is the god, as he has been since the Wall.

Her blouse is mis-buttoned; haste, in dressing this morning, normal for her, she never bothers to check the mirror. But the result is gaps between buttonholes, and he knows very well she wears no chemise. He is very good, not even a flicker of a sideways glance. Only, only when they turn a corner, or he must address her, and then his eyes fixate upon her for a space between a blink and the next. She knows when he sees a hint of areola, extrapolates the shape of a nipple; his mouth parts.

“He wants you to spill his blood,” she murmurs. “He fixates on it.”

She has explained her brother’s theory of his deathwish, explained the possibility of a trap the deathwish guards against.

*Sex in the eyes, blood on the mind. Jaqen is just distracted enough. And if she’s lucky, it may work on her brother as well.*

Daorys sits at the window, watching the people in the courtyard below.

“Three spies,” he says without turning around. “And a hired thug, posing as an assassin posing as a snow-shoveler.”

“House Cerwyn, House Noris, and one of Baelish’s agents,” says Jaqen. “The self-declared assassin is also House Cerwyn. After Sansa.”

Arya walks further into the room, sits cross-legged on the bed. Neutral.

Daorys turns, and his eyes stray nowhere, then fixate on Jaqen. “A breaking of your daily routine, brother,” he says.
No deathwish. She shows no relief.

“Mercy,” says Jaqen without preamble. “Do you want it?”

Their brother shrugs. “Would be good to have. Why Sansa Stark?”

Jaqen walks forward, drawing a knife from his waistband in a single movement, faster than she can move, faster than she can intervene; she is no one but fear thrums through her veins and she is barely halfway across the room when the knife finds its target.

Daorys is frozen in place, the candlelight playing over his arched throat, presented unarmoured to Jaqen.

Both Arya and her brother look in surprise at the knife vibrating in the casement’s frame, barely a fingertip away from his jugular. The blade is embedded two inches deep in the wood.

She breathes.

“So you don’t fight me,” says Jaqen. “Only Arya.”

“And myself,” says their brother. He waves his hand. “Find another excuse, usually.”

An second excuse is needed? On top of mine? The fear returns.

Jaqen is about to sit down beside their brother, but both their faces snap, suddenly, to the view outside. Arya closes the gap to the window, follows their gaze.

The snow-shoveller is clearing a path to the western bailey.

“Sansa’s doing the rounds,” says Arya.

“Sandor’s with Jon, reviewing--” Jaqen breaks off, turns.

She’s already pushing open the window. “Brother takes priority,” says Arya. “I’ll handle it.”

“No,” says Jaqen. “You are not to be compromised. Figure this out.” And then he surprises her--the god brushes a hand on their brother’s head as he steps up onto the casement.

“Everything will be all right,” says Jaqen. “Trust Arya.” And then he climbs out, a grey shape against grey stone; a breath, and he passes beyond the weak glow of candlelight spilling out of what was Theon’s room.

Arya pulls the pane closed, ties the sashes. Her hand trembles; her entire strategy just jumped out the window.

“So much trust,” says their brother softly. “Can’t figure out if he’s playing you or if you’re playing him.” He looks down at her chest, then smiles up at her.

She follows his gaze down, and her face heats--two of the buttons on her shirt have come undone in her drive to reach her brother before Jaqen’s blade did. Hastily, she re-buttons them.

When she looks up, his eyes are narrow as he considers her. “Or nobody’s playing anybody, and I’m just an idiot.”

She snorts. “The one thing you’re not, brother. I’m playing all of you.”
He raises an eyebrow.

“Her paramour has been so busy lately,” she says, imbuing her words with a lazy drawl as she climbs up to the casement right beside Daorys. She looks deep into his eyes. Blue, but the snow gives them an eldritch glow, they glow grey. “But even a Princess has needs.”

_Sandor’s coordinating troops; Sansa needs to see to Winterfell’s affairs._

Daorys’s eyes widen in disbelief. “Who,” he says, “taught you seduction?”

“Everybody knows the basics,” she says.

_Sansa’s movements are no secret, though the parts of the keep she visits depends more on her mood than anything else._

_But she made the full rounds with the “Braavosi Ambassador” the other day, so anyone watching them could have mapped out all her possible circuits._

“Learned the rest by watching Zural.”

Her brother’s mouth twitches. Even no one can be amused, after all. “That’ll explain it,” he says.

“How would you do it?” she asks.

_Yes, brother, educate me._

“Seduce myself?”

She smacks him upside the head. “Focus.”

_Distraction worked._

Because of course, sex can be on the mind not just for the wanting of it, but for the avoidance of it. _Good, here, have some blood, brother._ “How would you kill Sansa?”

“I think I’m misreading something,” he says. “Shall we take one topic at a time?”

She hangs her head in shame. He’s talking Braavosi at her. Then she feels his hand under her chin, her face lifted gently up to his.

“Not you, sweet Arya,” he says. “Me.”

And how would Arya Stark feel? Arya Stark would feel wretched, for undermining her brother’s trust in his own faculties right when he needs every grain of confidence in them he can summon. She lets some wretchedness leech into her posture, nods.

_A priming._

The only way a Lorathi of Daorys’s caliber can be made to mistrust his own judgement is to overwhelm him with contradictory information; his instinctive trust of her, along with Jaqen’s parting statement (entirely unplanned, a gift from an oblivious god) means he trusts Arya Stark’s intention more than his own interpretation.

She is no one. She _intends_ a seduction of him. She _intends_ a conversation about Sansa’s would-be assassin.
And now she must show her intent, and cast his interpretation into shadow. “Didn’t mean…” she trails off.

He waves his hand, dismisses it. She gets an impression of relief.

She is no one; she will remember for later that she was right: her brother was made uncomfortable by the insinuation, not the skin—he’s worn her face, she, his, there is nothing titillating about the self, nothing seductive about Arya Stark to anyone except Jaqen, and the god is a very strange creature.

But Daorys won’t even look at Jaqen’s wife; thinks Jaqen is a monogamist. Nothing at all to do with me.

Arya has decided to take offense at the rejection, the reason behind it. “I am Lorathi; He does not constrain me,” she snaps.

“You fixate on blood,” he says, a bit of a twisted smile.

She shrugs. Use what works.

“What did you actually mean?” he asks.

“You fixate on blood,” she says. “In Asshai, blood is always a trap.”

He will build a chain of association, from both ends: How do I want to die? At the other end, How would I kill Sansa Stark? He wants to die in a bloodbath at Jaqen’s hand. Why target Sansa Stark when another, more high-value target is far more predictable in his motions? The chain is short, it meets at: “The real target of any assassin who comes to Winterfell is the King in the North.”

Her brother’s mouth twists. “Jaqen buries his blade in me,” he says, as he reaches out, flicks the handle of Jaqen’s dagger, still embedded in the casement. The blade dislocates slightly, but not enough—it springs back to its center, and vibrates in place a few times, “a trap enspelled into my blood, and Jaqen’s blade turns on Jon Stark?”

“There are flaws in the argument,” she says, because those he will tease out in pure reflex. “Could be aimed at Bran, maybe, he’s already trapped as Champion.”

Her brother’s jaw clenches. He questions his own sanity, he thinks: I was wrong about the sex. Am I wrong about the blood?

He faces himself without a mirror, and tries to come to terms with an idea. That he, who will turn on any Faceless Man should they turn on Jaqen could be is the instrument of Jaqen’s downfall.

She leans forward, rests her head on his chest. “Forgive me,” she whispers. “Forgive me.” Truth, all truth.

“Shouldn’t have sent in the blank ballot,” he says in a tone of agreement.

“Don’t ask him,” she pleads. “Ask me. No blood, a cup of wine, a kiss to cut off your air, more tears to stop your heart, whatever you want, ask and I will give it to you. My word.”

She soothes the disquiet in him, gives him a way out of his immediate turmoil. When his eyes are clear in the mid-afternoons, the god’s concerns trump the deathwish; some of her brother’s reflexes don’t engage.
“My word,” he says. “Won’t ask him.”

*Trapped and locked.* Even no one can be gleeful.

He’s given his word to ask Jaqen alone for mercy. Now he gives his word to her not to ask Jaqen. It will hold him, as long as he thinks the promises were extracted without the intention to trap him. He will figure it out, and soon, but it’s bought her time.

*One more day.*

The vial of Blue Pearl is already one-third gone.

**SAMWELL**

“Lady Arya?”

She mumbles something, her head droops forward.

He really doesn’t like this, but he’s not *stupid* —he’s picked up a decorative pike in the corridor outside. “Lady Arya,” he calls again, even as he uses its butt to poke her in the shoulder. Gently, as gently as he can.

Between one moment and the next she’s on her feet, there is a snapping, splintering sound, and the pike’s handle is broken, the remnants of it pulled out of his hand, aimed at his throat, but end-first, as if she thinks she’s holding a staff.

Her eyes open. She looks at him, then down at herself.

Her shoulders slump. “I fell asleep, didn’t I?” she asks. She sighs. “Thank you, Sam, for waking me. And for…” she waves the pike, sets it down. “Would have hated myself if I’d done that to your arm or something.”

There’s tear-tracks on her face.

“That’s why I used the pike,” he says, imbuing his voice with a little bit of cheer—if you’re fat and soft-looking, *use* it instead of hating it.

She sits down on the stone flagstones again, back against the balustrade, heedless of the raven-droppings staining her clothes. He follows suit—he’s got a robe he uses for cleaning the ravensloft, that’s what he’s wearing now.

“Perhaps I can help,” he says gently. “I trained as a Maester, you know.” He taps the chain hanging from his neck.

She considers him. “This is between us,” she says.

“Of course. Unless it’s treason, then it goes straight to Jon.”

She grins, a little. Takes a deep breath. “My sister in the order is pulling back her efforts. We’ve tried everything I can lay my hands on here.”

It’s true—she raided his study, then the still-room, then the apothecary’s. Even rode out to Cerwyn after dosing Daorys to sleep for a full half-day.

“There’s rarer poisons, antidotes,” she says. “But he doesn’t *match any symptoms*. Which means it’s one thing, and one thing only, and it’s incurable.”
“Which is?” he asks.

“The fish of the Ash.”

*Oh oh.* “That only shadowbinders can survive?” he asks.

She nods.

“He’s not a shadowbinder.”

“No.”

Samwell leans back. *No, don’t say no, the “no” opinion has already come in. Dissent. Disobey. Defy.* He grins a little. *Jaqen’s an alliterative revolutionary when he’s drunk.* “Well,” he says, “sometimes things can’t be cured directly. Sometimes you have to look at the symptoms.”

She shakes her head. “Symptoms of the body are being managed. But my sister says it sounds like there are lesions on the brain.”

Sam winces.

“And they’re getting worse,” she says.

“So what’s making them worse?” he asks.

“The poison’s taken root in his bones,” she says, weary. “It washes into the blood, from there to all the organs. Causes tumors, lungs, throat, everywhere.”

*And this man is walking around, talking, eating?*

“Jaqen’s taking care of it,” she says. “The secondary infections, the tumors. But they keep coming back. And Jaqen can’t do anything about the mind—lesion’s not a growth, it’s a cut.”

*Poison’s in the bones. The bones.* “There was something once,” he says thoughtfully. “Read it—looking for magic, wasn’t any, but someone had gone and made notes. Alchemist.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, you know,” he says, “turning lead to gold.”

She snorts. “That.”

“Well he went and impregnated the bones of cows with miniscule amounts of lead.”

*Cows?” she mouths.

Samwell nods. “Make a lot of urine, cows.”

“And then what?” she asks.

“It was all a fraud,” he says, “lead was just for show, I mean we *know* urine has some gold in it. Miniscule amounts. He’d distill it out, claim lead had been turned to gold. Baratheons funded it for a while, just to piss off the Lannisters. Pun intended.”

She doesn’t laugh.

“But in perfecting the fraud,” continues Sam, “the alchemist, he came up with a way to *bind* the
heavy metals in the cow’s body, so it wouldn’t stay in the cow, but be. Um. Excreted.”

She’s very still. “And?” she asks.

“And all he got was lead.”

“What’s this called?” she asks.

“I don’t…” he tries to recall. “Chelation, I think. I can send for the notes, if you want them.”

She throws her arms around him. “Thank you,” she says. “Even if it doesn’t work. Thank you.”

Take that, Daorys, he thinks. Lady Arya likes me too.

JORAH

He stands atop the last tower left in Asshai. A thousand shadow-binders wait below. The mouth of the river is open to the horizon; no ships leave, no ships return, because Asshai has become...something else.

The gates to Stygai have been thrown open.

A slave comes in, bows at the waist. “Your Majesty,” he says, “Her Radiance the Holy Consort of R’hlolor sends you a gift.”

A mask, red and black, though far less ornate than hers.

He dismisses the slave.

“Every heartbeat, every minute,” says the Champion, from where she lies on the bed at the center of the room.

“Maybe he is restrained somewhere,” says the King of Corpses. “Maybe he cannot act?”

“He is a Faceless Man. It will not matter. He will find some method.”

Jorah nods. “I will learn as slowly as I can,” he says, “Buy you another day.”

NO ONE

The eastern wing of the Lord’s Keep meets the northern in a square-shaped alcove. It is a convenient sitting place. The hearth burns, casting warm shadows upon the walls; the winter remains outside the windows, covered by heavy drapes.

He sits in a tall chair, and waits for Arya.

Bad Arya.

She made very good work out of that particular piece of manipulation. He supposes he’s giving her a bit more credit than he should, he is half-mad, but still. It makes it better, somehow, that he was being manipulated into giving his word, that she wasn’t actually trying to seduce him.

I did get to see something I really shouldn’t have, so there is that.

Not the skin--the curve of a breast, dusky rose crowning its peak. He’s seen it enough times while he’s worn her face, the flesh is as nothing to a Faceless Man. But he saw a reaction she did not
intend. The blush of embarrassment—she really didn’t realize how far she’d gone—the slight stammer, the tremble in her fingers as she closed the buttons.

She used the reaction, of course, but it was real. She was no one, and yet, and yet Daorys saw something he shouldn’t have.

A vulnerability.

*Very, very good thing I’m going to drink my cupful of poison and sleep tonight and not wake up.*

Because it is overwhelmingly, almost impossibly hard to resist thinking about it.

The body is always easier to control than the mind.

And since no one is allowing oneself some last speculations, Daorys...stops fighting. For a moment.

*Draw out more than just a blush, more than just a momentary trembling in her fingers.*

*While Jaqen watches.*

The addendum is a little too much; the body may be easier to control, but not when the mind’s on its side.

*Enough.*

He drives his thoughts away from their circling, like a heartless drover with a spike-tailed whip, and towards the decision before him. Her manipulation is discovered, but her logic holds—Daorys is a trap for Jaqen, purely on the fact that he doesn’t fight the god’s blade, but he *has* fought hers.

He gave Jaqen his word, when the god demanded it. But Jaqen’s demand is born of emotion, a sense of obligation.

Reason always wins, in the end.

Whatever no one thinks is left undone, it can only be some remnant from the part of his past he’s forgotten, which means it’s unimportant.

*Jaqen comes.*

His god, striding towards him from the northern wing. In a bit of a hurry, it seems. And Jon Stark, the King in the North, *also* in a hurry, converging upon the alcove from the eastern wing.

*This should be amusing.*

They both reach Daorys’s waiting-room at the same time.

“Do you serve me?” asks Jaqen.

Daorys smirks. “Is this strictly a *religious* service?”

Jaqen’s eyes narrow. “A trade, then.”

Daorys holds up three fingers: *two truths and a lie*. It’s a nice fiction, to end it, Daorys thinks. *Will never collect*. A last service, something amusing between the two of them.
“Done,” says Jaqen. “Cover us.”

And then the god crawls behind the wing-chair, and draws the drapes over himself. Jaqen is a Faceless Man, there’s naught to tell he’s there. Jon Stark looks around frantically, then sighs and seeks the other window-drape; Daorys supposes that the shadows are thick enough--the hearth is burning down to embers--the shadows are thick enough that even the most infantile of hiding places will do.

A few moments pass, and then Sansa Stark, dressed in gold—a departure, from her mourning garb—strides down the eastern wing, from the same direction as Jon Stark. But of course, she’s not looking for her brother.

“Ser Daorys, did Jaqen come by?” she asks.

He steeps his fingers. “Yes, Princess, just a few moments ago. Heading towards the godswood, I think.” And, casually, he gestures with his thumb. Behind him, to the drapery.

She looks a bit nonplussed. Hiding? She mouths.

Daorys nods, rueful, then points at himself, makes a cutting motion: I had nothing to do with it.

She rolls her eyes. “Very well,” she says. And she turns on her heel, starts walking off.

“Happy hunting, Sansa,” Daorys calls after her.

She smiles at him over her shoulder. “Thank you, Daorys.”

A few more moments, and he hears it—her tread.

She stalks towards him from the northern corridor, her hand on the hilt of the Valyrian steel sword at her hip.

Daorys pre-empts her. “Your husband’s gone off to the godswood,” he says.

“The wind knows exactly where he is,” she snaps.

Daorys raises his hands, defensive. “I was told to cover, that’s what I’m doing.”

“Well, I’m looking for Jon,” she says.

“Forgive,” he replies, “I don’t keep track of kings unless the House is getting paid.” And his eyes shift, indicate the drapes to his left.

The look on her face...he feels a momentary surge of pity for the King. And then she turns the look on him.

She knows what I intend to ask.

“Arrgh!” She says nothing more, just turns back and walks off towards the King’s tower.

“He calls after her.

She waves a hand in his direction, disappears around a bend.

He waits till he can’t hear her anymore.
“Well,” he says. “My work here is done. Good luck, gentlemen.” He rises from the chair, and heads to Theon Greyjoy’s childhood bedroom. As he retreats, he hears them, the sisters, walking back towards the alcove, a predatory intent in their strides.

*Oh, to be a fly on that wall.*

But Daorys is unaccountably weary. She’s going to be busy this night. And he wants her alone, he has to ask her for the cup without Jaqen around, or god’ll be upset with him.

*God’ll be upset anyways, but I’ll be done by then, and not around to see it so it doesn’t matter.*

It can wait till morning. She always comes to wake him.

**NO ONE**

He wakes to darkness.

“Blackmail or sexual favors?” he asks.

Jaqen lights a candle, and no one sees a flicker of something on his god’s face for a moment: *anger*.

*At me? At her? At the world?*

No one pushes. “What did she use, to get you to wake me up instead of her?”

*How long can she avoid giving me the gift?*

Jaqen turns his gaze on Daorys. *Angry at me. Why? Wonder what he knows, what he assumes.* Not good, to have the god assume the wrong thing. Or the right thing, in this case, His anger will turn on her.

“She’s avoiding me--I didn’t think you constrained her, I said some things, she hasn’t answered yet, figure the avoidance is a ‘no’.”

Five truths that cumulatively make up a lie. Not his best work, but as long as Jaqen is possessive of her, it’ll work.

Jaqen’s mouth is a tight line. “Get up,” he says, “Sansa has invited you to a conclave of spies in the Library Tower.”

*“Me, not Zural?”*  
Jaqen says nothing.

Daorys sighs, and rises to comply with his god’s demands.

*“Brother,” says Jaqen, “how blind do you think I really am?”*

Daorys smiles at him.

*“Do you think, that if you actually wanted her, that if that would somehow, magically, fix everything that is wrong with you,” says Jaqen quietly, “I wouldn’t have pushed her into your bed myself?”*

No one is surprised at a slight surge of anger. At *Jaqen*. “Wonder what she’ll say if she hears you
offer her services like that,” he says.

“She’ll do anything to keep you alive,” says Jaqen, “no idea how anyone could care about your wellbeing, but she fucked a Valyrian, standards don’t get much lower than that. So say the word, brother, I’ll have a servant call her in.”

Daorys sits down on the bed, and lets all pretense drain from him. They never stop playing, but setting the rules for the engagement is part of the game. “Jaqen,” he says, “What are you doing?”

Jaqen leans back against the wall, raises a hand to his face. “Forgive,” the god whispers. “I didn’t…” Jaqen sighs, looks up. “It seems I’m waging a war with her.”

She’s on your side.

Jaqen’s eyes are dark with anger. “And you’re caught in the middle.”

“I’m irrelevant,” snaps Daorys. “She fucked a Valyrian so she’ll fuck anything, how anyone could care about your wellbeing, brother, you’re waging a war with yourself.”


“No. Why don’t we play a game instead?”

Jaqen smiles, sardonic. “What would you like to play?”

“Well,” says Daorys, “it seems I’m needed elsewhere, but it only takes one to play this.”

“One to play what?” Jaqen’s voice is quiet, silk and poisoned edge.

“Hide,” replies Daorys with an edge of his own. “Hide, and go fuck yourself.”

Mildly satisfying, that fish-like expression on Jaqen’s face as no one leaves the room.

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He looks around at the “reading room”--a circular stone chamber, bookshelves lining the walls, shuttered lanterns burning wax, not oil, suspended from iron chains far overhead--the light doesn’t reach down far enough to illuminate the massive, circular wooden table that takes up most of the space in the center of the room. A single candle burns upon the table, throwing shadows against the wall.

“Very mysterious,” he murmurs. “Should we wear cowls pulled low over our faces, give ourselves code-names?”

Arya smiles; the candle illuminates the bottom half of her face. Her eyes are lost to shadow. “I’m…” she thinks about it. “The Bella Donna.”

Daorys grins. “Very well,” he says, “I will be Nightshade.”

“I want a name too, come on now,” says Samwell Tarly.

They’re still waiting on Sansa Stark.

Daorys considers the Maester, who’s sitting a little too close to the candle to have the proper air of mystery. “Holly,” suggests Daorys.
“Holly?” asks Tarly. “What kind of spy-name is that?”

_Holly-Jolly, brightly coloured and it causes diarrhea._

No one receives a look from his sister: _play nice._

He raises his chin to her, tilts his head to a side: _incentive?_

She turns her right hand palm-upwards: _whatever you want._

He narrows his eyes, purses his lips: _that is a dangerous offer, sister._

Her smirk is a challenge: _do your worst._

He holds up three fingers on his left hand. _I want three answers from you._

She now turns her left hand palm upwards: _Two truths and a lie?_

She bargains.

He approves, nods.

The entire conversation has taken ten heartbeats, maybe less; each hand-motion is small, almost imperceptible, each change of expression a momentary flicker.

_Skill, intelligence, control, fanatical loyalty._

Inexperienced--but the only cure to that is time, and time stretches out before her in a neverending stream. Not Zural, if the House does not require an immediate purging. He doesn’t have the disposition to hunt renegades.

_Arya Stark, after I am gone. Arya Stark._

She’s got the _god_ on edge, second-guessing himself, suspicious and angry, and still dancing to her tune.

_For me. The thought is discomfiting. I am no one. I am irrelevant._

“Why are you grinning like that?” asks Samwell Tarly. “It’s making me nervous.”

“Laughing at myself, Maester,” says Daorys. “You can be Monkshood,” he offers generously.

Samwell Tarly brightens. “I like that one.”

Arya has said nothing, her shadowed eyes fixed on no one’s face. But self-mockery is a common expression for a Lorathi.

Steps, the whisper of velvet on stone: the Princess Sansa Stark. Pale, fragile-looking but so very cold, her red hair coiled in braids behind her head.

“Lily of the Valley?” asks Arya.

Sansa raises an eyebrow.

“We’re all getting spy-names,” explains Samwell Tarly.

“And I’m _Lily of the Valley_?” asks Sansa, and her tone is dry.
The Sansa Stark in front of him, the Sansa Stark he has seen over the past few days, she cannot be reconciled with the Sansa Stark of his memory. He needs to recalibrate, and quickly.

“The House is represented by Belladonna and Nightshade. As Maester Samwell is Monkshood…”

Through his sister’s memories, no one has isolated turning-points for the Starks. The first of them, that looms so large for Arya and yet is nothing, a small stone dropped into an ocean--it is a lie, spoken by Sansa Stark. But the ripples from that stone hitting the water...everything, everything comes from it.

Significant to Daorys himself, the alienation between Hand and King and Queen and Prince, which led to the contract for Robert Baratheon, the very well-timed goring by a wild pig; the seeds for the downfall of the Starks are sown by that one lie.

It landed Jaqen in a cage--convenient cover and transportation towards Jaqen’s next destination, if no one extrapolates correctly, but a cage nonetheless.

Daorys smiles at Sansa Stark. “Perhaps the Princess would prefer ‘Wolfsbane’.”

Sansa Stark is deceptively still for a breath. And then she smiles at Daorys: a baring of the teeth, a she-wolf that has tasted the flesh of man.

“Wolfsbane,” she says softly, and the mantle settles on her with the ease of long familiarity.

No one approves.

“Ser Daorys,” says Sansa, “I have asked you to join us instead of Ser Zural because I am assured that your loyalties lie first with your god, and then with the House of Black and White.”

No preamble.

“My sister should not be speaking of such things,” he says.

Sansa Stark’s mouth draws to one side. Almost a sneer. Princess Sansa has some unresolved issues with her sister, it seems.

“I was given the same assurances of Arya,” she says.

“Jaqen should not be speaking of such things either,” says Arya, “no matter how much he, himself, supports the King.”

“I try not to put my brothers in danger,” Sansa says mildly. “Wolfsbane notwithstanding.”

Daorys acknowledges the sally with a slight tilt of the head, an ironic smile. “So what is your source, for such assertions about our loyalties?” he asks.

Zural? A half-moon ago, he’d have dismissed the suspicion out of hand. But now he wonders how such insinuations could further the House’s agenda.

Sansa Stark adjusts the stack of parchment before her. “My sources are my own,” she says. “Are they wrong?”

Arya groans. “Just say it, Sansa, what do you want?”

“Euron Greyjoy.”
Daorys looks at Arya: What am I missing?

“There is a conflict of interest,” says Arya.

“I see no conflict,” says Daorys. Why would Jaqen be in conflict? Why was he so careful of Euron Greyjoy’s kingship at the breakfast table the other morning?

“The Drowned God,” says Arya.

No one blinks, and then he wants to swear. “He’s taken Euron Greyjoy once, ratified the kingship, hasn’t he?”

“The sea could not hold Euron,” says Arya quietly.

Daorys leans his head in his hand for a moment. “So King Jon will not ask for the King Euron’s head.”

“Jon has converted to your faith,” says Princess Sansa. No sneer this time. Interesting. “I do not disapprove—he seems happier, less prone to recklessness. But I do not understand why death by war is acceptable to your god, but death by assassination is unacceptable when he is the god of assassins.”

Daorys thinks.

His wife, his Champion, his anointed king, his family... a Stark paying for a gift to Euron Greyjoy is not too far removed from the Drowned God paying for the gift-giving himself.

A word, when such is given by a god, it has the power to bend all of reality around it.

What is dead may never die.

It is not just a saying. It is a compact, between a king and the sea. If the hand of the god is complicit in delivering mercy to Euron Greyjoy without Euron asking for it, the compact between the god and his chosen will be violated—and the god’s word cannot be untrue to one dead man while holding true to another.

It is the same reason the god is so very careful about Daorys himself asking for mercy. Execution—even a merciful execution—of a Faceless Man that is not a renegade? The god keeps His word: life for death. He cannot be false to Daorys and simultaneously true to Daorys’s brothers. A violation of this axiom is a paradox that can only be resolved by annihilation of all factors that contribute to the paradox.

If Jaqen harvests a dead man of His own making without being asked, the god will have to harvest every single Faceless Man at the same time.

Jaqen H’ghar is, by definition, a Faceless Man.

Jaqen courts His own annihilation by promising me mercy. And in His infinite stupidity, He has aligned himself with the Starks; now they can annihilate the god simply by paying for the death of the wrong person.

Well done, Many-Faced God.

Arya does not want to use Daorys’s weakness; she actually needs no one to keep Jaqen safe without telling Sansa Stark what she must not know.
He looks at Sansa, and considers it—giving the gift to her would resolve this. Jon and Bran Stark will not act without Jaqen’s authorization, which leaves only Arya, who, of course, will help Daorys arrange for Sansa Stark’s “accident” if such becomes necessary.

Sansa Stark looks back into his eyes, and he does not know what she sees there; she drops her gaze.

*Not necessary just yet.*

Samwell Tarly is biting his lip, as if he holds his tongue in check with great effort.

Daorys sighs. “In the end,” he says quietly, “we all have a framework of rules we must live in. The Many-Faced God of Braavos will deliver a gift to any man at all. So the House may accept a contract for Euron Greyjoy, if the price is met. But a *Stark,*” he says, “lives within the framework of loyalty, of commands given and received. For a Stark to ask for Euron Greyjoy’s head against the god’s wishes would be as if your Shield, Sandor Clegane, were to kill a person whose safety King Jon has guaranteed.”

Sansa thinks about it. “And if such were to happen,” she murmurs, “I would have no choice but to cast Sandor out of my service and into exile.”

Samwell Tarly exhales. “Not worth it,” he says. “No matter how bad Euron Greyjoy is, killing him is not worth losing the Stranger’s friendship over.”

*Friendship.* So Samwell Tarly does not understand either, and how could he? He knows nothing of how Faceless Men are made.

Daorys spreads his hands. “Forgive us, Princess Sansa—Euron Greyjoy must meet death in another manner.”

Sansa leans forward slightly, and she feigns some confusion. “But what about Aeron? Doesn’t your god want to save him?”

Daorys narrows his eyes, looks to Arya. “Aeron? Younger brother, wasn’t he?”

“Why’s he involved?” says Arya.

“*Aeron Greyjoy is a priest of the Drowned God,*” Arya says. “The priest. He has swum in the halls of the Deep Ones, he has seen, and the pain of Aeron’s memories the god absorbed into Himself.”

*Most excellent.* More complication.

“The memories slip away, bit by bit,” says Arya. “They are fed back to Aeron by some unknown hand. Tortured, perhaps raped, Aeron serves as the figurehead nailed to the prow of Euron the Disbeliever’s flagship.”

All play at emotion is drained from one who is no one. “Do you speak in metaphors, sister?” he asks.

“And Aeron begs the sea to take him,” she continues, her voice barely above a whisper, “and the sea reaches for him again and again, destinies be damned, even the harshness of the sea cannot deny Aeron’s pleas, but Euron Greyjoy bleeds and mutilates priests and uses their blood and their suffering to keep the god at bay.”
No one closes his eyes.

And he thinks.

*The compact. Jaqen’s word to his chosen. The giving of gifts.*

There are anomalies: renegades from the House of Black and White. The murder of Balon Greyjoy, another Drowned King, by the hand of a Faceless Man.

*By the hand of someone other than Jaqen H’ghar.*

Arya has seen the pattern already. She does not need Daorys to explain things to Sansa Stark, she needs one who is no one, who hunts renegades, to create a separation, a buffer, a truly deniable plausibility between the god and His gift.

Daorys’s eyes open, and he gives Sansa Stark a sunny smile. “Euron Greyjoy. Tell me, Princess, who else wants Euron Greyjoy dead?”

**SANSA**

Sansa and Arya walk slowly through the halls, arm in arm, towards Bran’s rooms. Arya is wearing one of Sansa’s riding dresses today, a departure from her regimen of shirts, tunics and hose.

Sansa looks pointedly at the swirl of Arya’s divided skirts, then raises an eyebrow.

Arya shrugs.

“Would your attire have anything to do with a certain ‘brother’ of yours?” asks Sansa. Ser Daorys would certainly merit such consideration from most women, if they didn’t look into his eyes.

Sansa suppresses the shiver.

She is surrounded by dangerous men--Sandor, Jon, Jaqen, even amiable Ser Zural--but of all of them, Daorys is the one that summons the picture-book image she has in her mind of “assassin”.

Arya grins a little. “Daorys does not allow himself to be distracted in such a manner. My husband, on the other hand, is quite amenable to the idea.”

Sansa sighs. She doesn’t like going behind Jaqen’s back, doesn’t like Arya using tricks on him.

*And yet he went behind ours, him and Jon, and wrote to Daenerys. It would have rankled, still, but Sansa keeps Jon’s letter in her bureau, looks at it sometimes: twice my sister was wed, without her consent.*

The letter is an attempt at a misplaced rescue, too late. By proxy. And yet Sansa wept the first time she read it.

*So many men to rescue me now, when I have no need of them.* But of course she has no need of rescue because she is surrounded by men who would, and could.

Except Ser Daorys.

A strange sort of respect he gave her, that barbed “Wolfsbane”. Like Jaqen, he is a man who sees Sansa Stark.

Unlike Jaqen, there is no compassion in Daorys for Sansa Stark.
All Faceless Men are priests of death, it seems. In a certain light it makes perfect sense—their rules, the discipline of their training (stone beds to sleep upon, Arya had let slip once), the integration of their faith into their profession, “the god’s gift”, “mercy”, “Valar morghulis”.

Sansa knows in her bones that Jaqen will be the type of priest that refuses to acknowledge the concept of “plausible deniability”.

And yet neither Arya nor Daorys seem to have a problem with it.

Integrity. Jaqen is a killer, but he has integrity. One reason, she thinks, why him and Jon get along so well.

“Do not push Daorys any more,” says Arya. “I think we have accomplished enough.”

“We have but a single candidate,” protests Sansa. “And no gold.”

Neither Victarion nor Asha Greyjoy nor Theon—kinslaying, even by proxy, is a sin to those of the Iron Islands. That Euron is a kinslayer (where Arya receives this information—this brother that was muted by Euron, perhaps—Sansa will not ask) is enough to prompt Victarion to set sail from Mereen for the Iron Islands instead of using his fleet to bolster Euron’s against Daenerys Targaryen.

Ser Daorys says the manner of Euron’s death can be specified—poisoned wine, for example—but then the timing may not be to anyone’s liking.

Their “candidate” is Sasha Blacktyde, the unmarried daughter of Baelor Blacktyde (cut into seven pieces for each of the Seven by Euron’s men), the great-niece of Beron Blacktyde (a priest put to the question by Euron’s men). She has such great cause for enmity, and so little power, that each price charged by the Faceless Men will be small.

But the gold price will still be more than a single coin.

Something in the thousands, possibly, for the killing of a king.

“Even if she can be primed,” says Sansa, “we do not have the gold to bankroll this.”

“Patience,” says Arya. “Daorys is the key. He keeps secrets. Secrets that will never see the light of day unless the revealing of them is the only way he can serve.” She smiles a quiet, secret smile. “Let him come to the conclusion himself.”

Sansa grips Arya’s arm. “Be careful,” she says. “Ser Daorys is not a safe man to deceive.”

“You worry too much,” murmurs Arya as they turn a corner. “The god will turn against me before Daorys does.”

SANSA

Sansa waits in her bower, paper and quill before her. Sandor stands at her back. She’s asked him, time and again, to sit at the table. He refuses.

A guard at the mouth of her suite announces Ser Zural.

The assassin walks in, bows. “You were asking to see me, Princess. Forgive the delay.”

She smiles at him. “What is a momentary delay between friends, Ser Zural?”
He walks closer. She gestures at a seat. He places a hand on his heart, gives a short bow again, seats himself.

“I asked to see you as a member of your guild, Ser Zural,” she says.

He leans back in his chair. “Zural, then,” he says, “Faceless Men have no titles.”

Another piece of information.

She assimilates, nods. “There is a name I would like to give you, should we be able to agree on a price.”

“A gold coin,” he says.

She pushes a coin across the table at him. A new one, its shine catches the lantern-light, the gold gleams, and for a moment it seems as if it is worth more than what it is.

“And something else,” says Zural as he places a finger on the coin. “Who do you wish to send a gift to?”

His voice has changed. No stressed syllables, no misplaced syntax.

“What happened to your accent?” she asks. All a lie. Everything is a lie with them. Can we really trust them?

He smiles at her. “I was not born in Braavos,” he says.

Another lie.

She raises an eyebrow, invites the story.

“My teacher,” he says. “He is to be speaking like this, very Braavosi-street-cant.” He puts on the Braavos accent again, momentarily. “He died.”

It is the utter, emotionless delivery that sets her aback.

Truth?

“No man is dead while another remembers his name,” she says, gently, sympathetically.

His mouth pulls to one side, a half-smile. Bitter, bitter, so very bitter.

She has plumbed the depths of bitterness. She knows it.

Not a lie.

“Names, faces, what are those to Faceless Men?” he asks, sounds almost philosophical. “But patterns,” says Zural, “ah, well, if someone holds on to a pattern.” It’s almost as if he’s speaking to himself. “The Lorathi, they mirror patterns when it suits their purposes—like a chameleon. If his pattern was mirrored in enough of them,” and he turns to her, his eyes a little too bright, “somehow, somewhere, I thought, perhaps he would hear it.” He shrugs. “Such a vague hope. Very Braavosi.”

So this is the depth of the bond between teacher and student. Between Arya and this man. She remembers his words: there was a man named Syrio Forel, once.

She had asked Arya why the Sealord of Braavos merited a Stark, when there were so many other
options for an alliance, if “Arya Stark” was to be married. Arya’s answer had surprised her: because Tormo Fregar tried to avenge Syrio Forel.

*Faceless Men are emotional about their teachers; it is a pattern in them.*

She is being played, of course, she knows that. An assassin would know how to read sudden mistrust. He feeds her truths to placate her.

Sansa decides she is not placated yet—there is another truth he has offered her on a platter, after all.

*Why do they want me to trust them so much?*

The answer: because they need me. Why, she does not know.

*As a handle on Jaqen?*

“It’s right in front of me,” she says softly, still kind Sansa Stark, the one who embodies courtesy, the noblesse oblige of a lady, “so I will ask—you are not born in Braavos. And yet you call yourself a Braavosi?”

He looks at her, and his smile has turned wry. “Lorathi, Braavosi, they are two factions within the order,” he says. “Differences in philosophy—we are all Faceless Men,” he says, then turns one of the waiting wine-glasses upright, pours. Exactly half-way. “A pessimist would say, that is half empty. An optimist would say that is half full. A Braavosi would say, ah, wine, unattended—must be poisoned.”

She pays his performance a small smile. “So would I,” she says.

He acknowledges her words with a nod, continues. “A Lorathi would say, to understand what is the true state of this thing that I perceive to be wine, in a glass, first we must invent a universe .”

“And nobody drinks the wine,” she murmurs.

“Of course not,” says Zural. “It could be poisoned.”

*Two factions. One direct, like Zural, one indirect, like…like Jaqen. Like Daorys.*

Arya is Zural’s student.

“Arya is a Braavosi,” she says slowly. *That* fits. “She is not the sort of person for philosophy or book-learning.”

Zural sighs, shakes his head. “The problem is this marriage of hers. Jaqen’s turned her, I think. But there is still hope.”

Something else snaps into place.

“The Lorathi—they are the ones that believe in the god of death.”

Zural lifts the goblet to his mouth, takes a drink. “You and I, Princess, we know better.”

*That’s why you need me—Arya is the key to a significant portion of this alliance. You need me on your side of the balance, to counteract her husband’s influence.*

Jaqen is a believer. He’s turned *Jon* into a believer. As she said earlier, she does not disapprove—
Jon has stopped walking the battlements with that look on his face.

Religion is a comfort.

Sansa Stark no longer believes in comfort. All comfort is a lie.

No god ever intervened on her behalf. It was only when she stopped praying, the day she threw every last one of Catelyn Stark’s prayer wheels into the hearth-fire of the Great Hall, that Jaqen and Arya rode into Winterfell. And they brought with them an alliance beyond all hope.

She must place her trust somewhere.

“I place my trust in men,” she says mildly. “Jaqen is a believer.” I will not come between my sister and her husband. Faith, or a lack of it, it can divide more cleanly than any blade. This family is allowed to have one good marriage in this generation. A continuation, of sorts, of the thing Catelyn Stark and Eddard Stark made between themselves.

“Jaqen is a man,” says Zural.

Fair.

“I agree with you,” she offers. “Jaqen has probably influenced my sister greatly. A woman in love does some very silly things.” I need time to think on this. “Take Lady Cerwyn, for example. In love with Roose Bolton. Now he’s dead, but she has his baby. Thinks I’m going to kill it, and so she sends assassins after me.”

She can feel Sandor tensing behind her.

And what do you believe, Sandor?

“Two, yes, at last count?” asks Zural. “Whose name would you give us?”

She thinks on it. “Killing a baby,” she says, “it is an abhorrent thing. You will, of course, discuss the details with your subordinates?”

Will Jaqen find out?

He nods.

“Arya will see the need,” says Sansa. “But, as you say, her husband is Lorathi. Philosophical.”

Ethical?

“Not all Lorathi,” says Zural. Then he grins. “If she likes Lorathi, I suspect there is another she could have for the asking.”

“So I’m not the only one that sees it,” she murmurs.

Daorys.

Zural hums.

“It makes a lot of sense,” she ventures. Arya’s orchestrated events from halfway around the world, manipulated her guild, turned all order upon its head to save him. How could he not?

“You are attuned to notice such things,” Zural offers.
Her turn, for a noncommittal hum.

“And the Lorathi are blissfully blind,” says Zural. Bitter, again, for some reason. “They think philosophy keeps them safe from such entanglements.”

Jaqen. He trusts, when he shouldn’t.

“A Stark is loyal,” she says.

“A Lorathi is promiscuous,” he counters.

“Jaqen?”

Zural blinks. “Well no, not him. Never him—his obsession with your sister, it is entirely uncharacteristic, entirely without pattern. Jaqen does not get attached.”

Which means he can be hurt, and badly.

Arya must be separated from Daorys. And Arya must be given reasons to question her faith. A very, very small price to pay for the son of Roose Bolton. Sansa wonders if there is something else there, something that makes the price heavier than it looks on the surface.

What could there be? Both of these things are in the interests of the Starks as well.

Zural is being generous. A Petyr Baelish tactic—a token price, for the first perversion in one of his brothels. And with each subsequent visit, the price rises.

This, this Sansa understands.

Play it like Oberyn Martell, not Loras Tyrell. One used the brothel for its purpose, the other was used in turn.

More footsteps. The guard announces Jaqen.

What is he doing here?

Her brother-by-law comes into the room, his eyes brimming with humor. “I saw Zural pass by this way,” he says. “May I interrupt?”

A test suggests itself. Let us see if “Jaqen the Faceless Man” is different from “Jaqen”.

“I was buying a name,” says Sansa. “Would you join us, brother mine?

He looks at Zural.

For permission. So Zural outranks Jaqen.

Something passes between the Faceless Men, and Jaqen takes a seat, pours himself a glass of wine, refills both Sansa and Zural’s. Then he rights a fourth glass, quirks an eyebrow at Sandor.

Sandor grunts.

Jaqen rolls his eyes, upends the glass again.

“Lady Cerwyn,” says Sansa, and her voice is a bit cold, “has a child. A baby. It needs to be an accident.”
“We need a name,” says Zural.

“He’s called Rolly Snow. The son of Roose Bolton and Lady Amber Cerwyn.” She gives Zural a painful smile. “What will you take from my heart for it?”

“You have a heart?” asks Jaqen.

She grits her teeth. “Evidence to the answer of that question is before you,” she says.

The coin under Zural’s finger, gleaming gold.

“The other price, we have already discussed,” says Zural.

She bows her head.

“May I render some advice?” asks Jaqen.

And here it comes. The conscience.

“Of course,” she says.

“Ask for two names,” says Jaqen.

What?

“The price will be heavy,” he says, “but you need to take out both mother and son, or you will turn her into a force of vengeance that cannot be handled. A woman who has lost a child, whom she suspects has been murdered? We do all we can to remove suspicion, but for a person in that state of mind—we cannot prove a negative.”

Jaqen takes a sip, contemplates the wine in his goblet.

“Cerwyn is becoming a problem,” Jaqen continues. “House Flint danced around the issue, but she’s at the core of their attempted defection. There are enough that chafe under Jon. And we cannot stop Daenerys Targaryen sending ravens. If his parentage comes out…” Jaqen shakes his head. “Give Zural both the names,” he instructs. “And use your history with the Boltons; the price will come down.”

Jaqen the Faceless Man. This is the first time she’s met him. I like him, too. Daorys must be removed from Arya’s consideration.

“Not being quite so fair, Jaqen,” says Zural, a gleam in his eye. “Giving discounts.”

Jaqen grins. “A shopkeeper helps a customer make a sale; this is why he gets repeat customers, old friend.”

She thinks. “But Cerwyn must be held—too many of the large landholdings are leaderless.”

Jaqen leans back. “Cersei Lannister confiscates gold,” he says. “She strips lords of their titles at whim. Surely there is someone of the South you can turn.”

That… She smiles. “The north is good to bastards,” she says thoughtfully.

“Who are you talking about?” asks Sandor.

She glances up at her shield. “Cyrelle Tarbeck,” she says.

Zural looks interested.

“House Lannister broke the Reynes,” explains Sansa. “The youngest daughter, Cyrelle, became one of the Stranger’s wives, a Silent Sister. But she had a child a few years later. We know, because our Maester has delivered to us the most comprehensive list of bastards and ill-born children of Westeros I’ve ever seen.”

Sandor’s lips are pursed. “She’s broken her vows, then, if she’s had a child. Do you trust an oathbreaker?”

“ Forced into Stranger’s order,” says Jaqen. “And what does the Stranger care who his wives sleep with? Death takes everyone in the end.”

The gesture is symbolic. But every man Twyin Lannister has ever slighted, that his daughter has ever slighted, they will hear of it. Depending on how many of them still have a backbone… it will have to be assessed.

Sansa smiles. And then she reaches into the small pouch at her belt, pulls out a second gold coin.

“Two names, Zural,” she says.

_The Rains of Castamere. Let us add a stanza to the end._

**JON**

The betrayal curls in his stomach. He supposes he can’t quite blame Daorys for it, but the man had the gall to wish her “Happy Hunting” even as he revealed Jon and Jaqen’s position.

_They must have drawn straws, or something._

Witnessing the strips Sansa cut from Jaqen’s hide, Jon is glad he got Arya. She was…almost kind.

No, not kind. Just gentle, as if she was talking to a lackwit, or a child of five.

He grits his teeth as he mounts the steps to the ravensloft. It was a bit childish, he thinks, threatening abdication just so he gets to send the letters he wants, without them looking over his shoulder. _Might as well have stamped my feet on the ground, refused to eat my peas._

Not that they have peas anymore. It’s all white-leafed radish now.

Better than nothing. And one must “ _dissent, disobey, defy_ ”, after all.

A raven, banded with the blue-and-red oblique stripes of a seafaring bird, waits for him. And Sam hasn’t had a chance to collect the missive from its leg.

_______

_To Jon_

_I am barren._

_Do you want three angry, uncontrollable dragons ravaging the land once I am gone? Given the_
war to come, my chances of living to a ripe old age are far lower than yours--no blood to close ranks about me.

Dragons can be killed, but a lot of people will have to die before that happens.

And Drogon and Rhaegon and Viseryon are the children of my soul; it’s them I will be rooting for.

I don’t want that frozen wasteland you call a kingdom. I want you. Specifically, your children. Blood of the Dragon. If you’ve a bastard or two you’d like to give me for an heir, we can forget any of this ever happened.

Daenerys

Chapter End Notes

This comment has been revised since it went up.

I was exhausted and down and a little bit human today, so I whined, like a little bitch, and you folks repaid *that* with an outpouring of support that seriously left me...overwhelmed.

And the feedback--good, bad, critical, effusive--just fucking amazing.

Love you all. Thank you.
JORAH

He holds the wine in his mouth, swishes it from left to right. Then he spits it out on the ground before him; a slave will clean it up, the floor will be as pristine as it was before--white mosaic tiles arrayed in a repeating pattern of roses and thorns. But it feels as if his mouth will never be clean again. The coppery tang of blood clots in his gums, coats the back of his throat.

*R'hllor's blood*. 

The King of Corpses grits his teeth against the nausea. He steps over to the window and looks out to the city below.

The chains spread through the city, lie in complex patterns that his eyes keep skittering over, as if he cannot hold the whole of them in his mind at any one time. But the chain of events the assassin’s death triggers is a simple one: the assassin dies and the “god of death” takes the assassin’s soul back into himself. But the assassin’s soul isn’t quite clean anymore.

*Neither is mine.*

*R’hllor’s blood* coats the soul of the man with no name--a barbed hook snagged upon the man’s essence. The assassin's soul is bait, and the god will consume it, be hooked upon the chains in turn. And then the god of death will be dragged out of the body he inhabits, along with the one that binds him to that body. Dragged, thrashing and fighting, reeled into the center of Asshai.

The god escaped once. It will not be allowed again, they have two names now: Jaqen H’ghar. Arya Stark.

*That* name is a bitter one. The men he presumed to be sorcerers were *Faceless Men*. And it was to this god of death they would have taken him, to be “healed” of stoneskin.

*Trapped, either way.*

Jorah feels a strange kind of camaraderie with the man of no name, who escaped from Asshai, who wore Arya Stark’s face for Jorah. That one is trapped as well, and an entire chain of causality waits upon his death.

Afternoon, evening, the Champion dreams, her eyes filmed over with white. She says she looks for the hole in the world, a hole with a very interesting shape--the shape of a man who truly has no name. She loses it often, when the god of death intervenes. But she finds it just as often.

The only time she stops looking is during the hours of morning prayer, when half the city is compelled to its knees to sing R’hllor’s praises; not wise, for the Champion to not be seen praying with the others.

She breathes a deathwish into the assassin, since it seems neither his god nor his fellow assassins will do the merciful thing and kill the man. Jorah himself doesn’t understand why the man didn’t take his own life; it shouldn’t take encouragement.
The hunger for the fish of the Ash cannot be countered, it twists at the soul. They’ve told Jorah, and he believes it—the hunger will kill you, if you don’t feed it, your entire body will tear itself apart longing for it.

Jorah didn’t want to drink R’hllor’s blood. They wanted him to be willing to drink it; it is more powerful that way, he was told. Others, that had to be forced to it, like the one with no name, invited a lot of other unpleasantness.

Jorah knows what R’hllor looks like.

Jorah refused to drink.

So they put him in a room and didn’t feed him for half a day.

He was ready to cut his own throat to get away from the hunger, to cut Sheira’s throat, if only they’d give him a taste of the phosphorescent fish again.

They let him out.

Jorah drank the blood.

ZURAL

They’ve taken two wooden lathes up to an abandoned open-roofed terrace, a level above her mother’s bower. No one comes up here in the dark, the snow is knee-deep. She shovels clear a circle, while he watches.

“The subcommittee’s vote has been tallied,” he says. The wind steals away most of his words, but he knows she will hear him.

She pauses, arm resting on the handle of the shovel. “And?”

He considers her. It was a risk, bringing the Many-Faced God’s bride into the circle of those in the know. And she is close to the renegade hunter, far closer than Zural has ever been.

And yet Daorys does not regard Zural with suspicion; Jaqen plays, offhandedly, at tug-of-war over Sansa Stark’s loyalties.

She’s told them nothing.

“It is agreed,” he temporises. “But it is only an interim move, a holding. Until he returns to us.” He is careful; the word “renegade” must never be suggested in association with Jaqen.

She bows her head; the wind around them dies down. “What would you have of me?” she asks.

Arya Stark sees reason. Arya Stark will not ask for anything more than her due. Arya Stark stands here, in Winterfell, a place that calls even to me through her memories, and she does not waver.

An inordinate amount of pride grows in Zural’s chest.

Arya Stark will make a magnificent Many-Faced God.

Jaqen H’ghar can be a Faceless Man, like any other, when he returns to the order. It’s in his best interest as well—it’s what Jaqen’s always wanted to be.

He throws her one of the lathes, steps into the circle. He twirls the second lathe in his right hand,
then shifts it to the left.

He strikes. She doesn’t block, as he expects her to do. She steps out of the circle, into the snow, then dances back in with a low, horizontal swipe at his midsection.

He approves.

No Faceless Man should obey something as arbitrary as a circle demarcated on the ground.

“Caution,” he says, as he pushes her back onto the snow, away from the clearing. “There are questions that need answering, first.”

And we cannot move too quickly. Jaqen’s power keeps Daorys alive. Four hundred years of experience in herding death cannot be replicated; she’ll kill Daorys if she tries to do what Jaqen does.

“You will need Daorys,” says Zural, taking a step back, then another, under her assault. She is fast—faster than him, now. Lorathi.

She purses her lips. “Daorys does not steal from the god. If Jaqen is attached to me, Daorys cannot be.”

Zural sighs. She is wrong; she doesn’t see it. Daorys is “no one”. No one does not make decisions like this—the power for making such decisions lies with Arya and Jaqen.

“For now,” says Zural, “we train.”

And we make Arya and Jaqen decide.

It has already begun, with Sansa Stark—the more Sansa tries to keep Arya away from Daorys, the more defiant Arya will become. And Jaqen doesn’t like arbitrary circles any more than Arya does; the more Zural pushes Arya and Daorys apart, the more Jaqen will push them together.

Simple, where the Lorathi look for complexity. Simple, because Lorathi dismiss a single-layered ploy as child’s play and don’t bother countering it while they hunt for deeper meanings.

Action, reaction. A sword strikes. A wound opens. Simplicity is effective and powerful.

His lathe swings; he sweeps out her legs from under her.

ZURAL

“You fill Sansa’s ears against our brother,” says Jaqen, his tone observational.

Jaqen suspects something; Zural must offer some truth to appease him.

“Daorys is Lorathi, brother,” says Zural.

“So am I,” says Jaqen.

They stroll along the market path. Two new merchants, it seems. Rather, old ones. Old men, farmers perhaps, setting up a cheesemonger’s.

Zural shakes his head. “You are you. But him.” He pauses. “I do not ask questions. Much is
accommodated. But there are many rumors.”

Jaqen shrugs.

“He has no standard at all,” says Zural. “He mirrors. She trusts her brothers without question. She will do anything she can to save him. He will mirror this. It will keep him alive, but it is dangerous for her.”

“She is a Faceless Man.” Jaqen seems entirely unperturbed. “And Lorathi. She is not constrained.”

“She is my student,” snaps Zural. “I have a responsibility. I respect him. But she is my student. Ten and seven and exposed to the depraved sexual appetites of a Lorathi of Daorys’s nature?”

Jaqen smiles. “Zural,” he says gently, “this is dangerously paternal.”

“Pah,” says Zural. “You are not listening.”

Jaqen’s mouth twitches. “I am, brother—depraved sexual appetites? Perhaps there is something to be learned there.”

Zural catches Jaqen’s sidelong glance. Zural shows nothing on his face.

“What would you advise, should I be of a mind to take advice?” asks Jaqen.

“I say what I am always to be saying,” says Zural, “a woman’s worst enemy is always her husband.”

**ARYA**

She stands, alongside Jaqen, upon the battlements above the East Tower, looking down at the ravensloft.

Jon is busy tying a message-tube to a bird’s leg.

“Is this actually happening?” she asks.

Jaqen snorts. “Apparently.”

Both of them have been foiled. Jon’s sending off another letter to Daenerys—refuses to show any of it to Arya or Sansa. Refuses to show it even to Jaqen.

The exchange of letters would have been wonderful for Jaqen’s plan, but one of the maidservants in Widow’s Watch, the seat of House Flint, managed a “glimpse” of the letter Jon wrote to Daenerys during the visit. She reported it to her employer—Sansa Stark.

Insults. Which Daenerys returns in kind, probably.

“Well,” says Arya philosophically, “nobody expects a Faceless Man to be a good matchmaker.”

“Worked once for you,” Jaqen mutters. “You matched us, you and me.”

She draws His arm around her shoulders, nestles into His chest. “Could never match you,” she says. “Just belong to you.”
Him of the Many Faces cannot fail this spectacularly at an objective.

*What are you doing with Daenerys, beloved? What game are you playing?*

“So,” she says, “the Salle is ready. Want to drag our brother and Bran away from their ‘meditations’ at the weirwood for some healthy, Braavosi exercise?”

“Meditations?” He asks.

She sighs. “Something like that. Caught them tallying the affections of the chambermaids yesterday.”

Jaqen considers it. “*This* is dangerously paternal,” He says quietly, “but perhaps Jon or Sam or Sandor should speak to Bran.”

“He’s not sleeping with chambermaids,” says Arya, dry. “And neither is Bran.”

“How do you know?” asks Jaqen. “He’s...very egalitarian, your brother.”

They enter some hard-to-navigate terrain.

“None of them is no one’s standard.” she says.

The god raises an eyebrow: he has confided his standards to you?

She looks into His eyes, and she can read nothing in them. “I extrapolate,” she murmurs. “Very similar to mine, I’d say.”

“Careful, Arya,” He says softly.

*He’s using his dangerous voice.*

A delicious shiver runs down her back. She looks up at Him with hooded eyes. “Mmm. Careful of what, my lord?”

“Me.”

She smirks: *later*.

---

**NO ONE**

The stone hall is lit by large, wrought-iron lanterns hanging from iron chains set into the vaulted stone ceiling overhead. Nine sources of light, nine shadows for each fighter to cast on the floor, upon the walls.

He has not seen his sister fight, or even spar, outside her memories. Zural says she has gone soft--no one is not sure how a Lorathi can become, in Zural’s words, a *pudding*. A twitching mess of mind-rot is exemplified in Daorys himself, but *dessert* seems a bit extreme.

He is very curious.

*So curiosity returns. His body is in better shape than it has been for moons. Tumors and secondary infections, that was all there was to it?*
His sister walks upon the viewing-balcony, closing and locking doors. A stipulation has been made: only those that belong to Jaqen belong in this hall. The small windows inset into the upper rafters (useless, now that the sun does not rise) have been covered with the spare sailcloth from Sansa Stark’s ice-breaker boats.

Jon Stark ducks under Jaqen’s cut, steps to a side.

*First mistake.*

The tip of Jaqen’s blade comes to rest just under the king’s chin; in fighting Jaqen, a man’s first mistake is his last. But the boy is very good.

Jon Stark and Jaqen clasp forearms briefly, then walk on over to the bench where no one sits.

“What do you think?” asks Jaqen, looking to Daorys.

Daorys leans back against the wall, considers the King. “Within the best thirty in the world,” he says to Arya’s brother. Only one other who was not a Faceless Man ever broke into the best twenty: *Arthur Dayne*. Not pride--the House is very careful in tracking such things; Jon Stark’s skill will have to be reported by Zural. “But your problem is that you want the fight to end.”

Jaqen’s lips twitch: *tell him.*

“When fighting an opponent of equal or greater skill than yourself,” says no one, “you can control either the haste with which the fight ends, or who ends it. You get to choose one. Your opponent chooses the other.”

He can see Jon Stark considering the words, rolling them around in his head. Then the King sheepishly runs a hand through his hair. “Didn’t get to fight too many like that,” he says.

Jaqen comes to stand beside the bench. “It’s a difference in application,” he says, “A battle, where there is always another opponent, and you must conserve strength, end each engagement as quickly as possible, move on to the next.”

No one considers this. “The chance element also,” he says--a battlefield has far too many rogue chances swirling over it, an untrained pig-boy can take down a seasoned knight, not for skill or strength, but because the knight stepped in some horse-shit at the wrong moment.

The King takes a seat beside them. “Hate it,” he says. “The randomness.”

“Not truly random,” says Jaqen. “One thing leads to another--there is always a causal chain for everything.”

Jaqen is looking at no one with something almost like expectation, as if Daorys should jump in with an observation. *What would I know about it?*

Daorys shrugs, takes a moment to check on *his* Stark charge--Brandon Stark, who is positioned near the far end of the hall, and who balances a severed table-leg over his head. No one spares the greenseer a nod.

“Thank you,” says Jon. “For what you’re doing for Bran.”

“Not doing anything, it’s all him,” says no one absently as he considers the boy. “The amputation would be beneficial.” Bran Stark has suggested it himself.
Jon Stark shakes his head. “Appearance,” says the King. “If I fall in battle, I have been promised peace.” He returns his gaze to his younger brother across the hall. “A lack of function may be accepted as the next King in the North, especially as a warg king. But...”

*Can’t see that Bran Stark cannot walk when he sits on a throne. Can see he has no legs.*

“There’s a reason I hate politics,” says no one. “The boy would move under his own power with swiftness and surety if he is not forced to drag around useless dead weights.” He looks to Jon Snow. “You should explain your opposition to him--that it is not born of sentiment. It is far easier for one to serve if the reason for the service is explained.”

Jon Stark nods wearily, and rises from the bench, crosses under the swinging lanterns; light and shadow plays across the King’s face.

“Jon is changing,” murmurs Jaqen.

*Regret*. Jaqen regrets the change.

“Balance,” says no one. “Your people always balance on a tightrope between the Black and the White. To have compassion for the dead, he needs to lose compassion for the living.”

Jaqen says nothing.

“You should stay away from me,” says no one to his god. “I will die soon, and then my observations on your disloyalty to the House of Black and White will be open for all Faceless Men to dissect.”

“That is a disloyal statement in an of itself,” comments Jaqen.

Daorys snorts. “Loyal to you, not Zural’s construct. Which is why I’m telling you to stay away--better not to stir the hive, or you’ll be pulling stingers out of your flesh for decades.” No one prefers to think of Faceless Men as bees, not wasps; a bee pays a price for its sting.

“No.”

And Jaqen seats himself on the bench, close, so close to Daorys that their shoulders touch.

“Going to die soon myself,” says Jaqen. “Keep getting this strange feeling Sansa will release the hounds at some point.”

“Ah, that’s why you’re sticking so close--using the sick man as a shield from your sister-in-law.”

“You object?”

“Valar dohaeris,” says Daorys, wry.

Arya is descending from the balcony--she does not use the stairs, just climbs over the rail, then quietly backflips onto the stone floor. Jon Stark and Bran Stark look a bit startled. She makes her way towards Jaqen and Daorys, slow, a sway to her hips. He’s worn her body long enough to know that so seductive a motion does not come naturally to her.

“She’s trying,” Jaqen murmurs.

“Prove something to Zural, I think,” says Daorys.

“He buying that?”
“Not unless it’s sold,” replies no one.

She sways towards them, close, and no one can smell her skin again; closer, and she stands over Jaqen, almost straddling him.

Jaqen’s hand’s rise, caresses the outside of her legs, upwards, until his fingers rest on her hips. A test, of her resolve: her Stark brothers can look away from their conversation any moment, see the almost-Dornish display.

“Dos your heart beat faster when I do this?” she addresses Daorys. A pink tongue snakes out, licks at her upper lip for a moment. A small movement, accompanied by a slight dilation of her already dark pupils. She is Arya Stark in the moment, not no one, and yet there is a confidence to her tone that tells him three things: Jaqen is obsessed with her mouth. She will never carry through a seduction to its end; she will kill before it goes too far. There is something seriously wrong with me.

But he is no one; his autonomous response to her can be moderated. “Did you want it to?” he asks, dry.

“I want to see your heart beat for me,” she says.

Ah. We’re playing the healer-patient game again today. So tumors and secondary infections are what they have always been: secondary. Even to the body.

He smirks at her. “Inspire me then, Arya Stark.”

She grins, and backs away from Jaqen. The timing is good--Zural is just descending from the balcony (he was listening for listeners again), and he is using the staircase.

“You worry for her as well,” observes Jaqen.

Daorys sighs. “She’s young, brother, and even when the both of you are no one, neither of you understand the word ‘restraint’. You give too much, you give all of yourself, you hold nothing back. Both of you serve, and it is as if she competes with Jaqen H’ghar to see who can serve more.”

“And you?” asks Jaqen, “What do you hold back in the service of the Many-Faced God?”

Nothing. As it should be. It does not need to be vocalized. “And you’re seeing the result,” he says. “You want her to end up where I am?”

Jaqen turns to Daorys, no expression in His gaze.

“Not regret, not for me,” says Daorys. “And none of this paternalistic entanglement the Braavosi play at; I am being objective. She should be in Braavos for another two decades, training, taking local missions like any other Faceless Man. Instead, she’s going head to head with two gods—you, and R’hallor. That I am the battleground doesn’t make it any less her war.”

“The battleground is left desolate in the wake of battle,” says Jaqen.

Daorys snorts. “Some metaphors are carried too far.” He considers his next words. “I’m not much use to you at the moment, so I allow no one some slack in the discipline.”

“Which is?” Jaqen asks.

“Gratitude,” says Daorys. “I am nothing. I am no one. To anyone. All Faceless Men, my student,
my teacher, they hold themselves back from me; it is as it should be. I serve. Served. And yet, for no rhyme or reason that I can see, you walked into Asshai for me. You came for me and you trapped yourself and yet you do not count it as a price. What am I to you? A faceless creature, one of a hundred, and yet you came. She turns herself inside out for me, she goes to war for me. We’ve known each other for a bit more than a sevenday, and I have never known anyone that close, Jaqen, I do not simply mirror her, she mirrors me.” He takes a deep breath. “Gratitude, brother,” he says, “for the inexplicable mysteries of the universe, and of gods.”

It feels as though heat radiates off of Jaqen; fury.

“This is what you want to take for yourself, at the end of it?” asks the god, bitter. “This is all no one claims from me, from the world? The sensation of gratitude?”

He props his chin up on Jaqen’s shoulder as he looks out across the hall. “I’ll grade it down to vague satisfaction if you think it’s too much.”

**JON**

“Why am I suddenly uncomfortable,” mutters Jon, looking out across the floor.

“Because Daorys is sitting far too close to Jaqen,” says Bran.

Jon clears his throat, shifts his attention to Arya. He’s never seen her fight. This should be interesting.

“Be careful of Daorys,” says Bran. “Arya asked me to see if I could see something in his history, something that would help her determine something. We visit the godswood together often.”

“A risk,” says Jon, disapproving.

“It was nowhere near the Night’s King,” says Bran. “Or the Masked Woman.” His voice drops, almost to a whisper. “I am safe there, in that time--Jaqen wasn’t bound then. The god’s hand was held in protection over the Titan of Braavos.”

Arya has taken up her saber, she stands at the ready, four paces from her teacher.

“What did you see, in Daorys’s past?” asks Jon.

“Nothing,” says Bran. “The pit of chaos almost swallowed me.”

Jon almost misses the moment--Arya moves, and Zural raises his own saber to block, her movement seems to have taken even him by surprise; the older man steps back, and Arya follows, aggressive, she slashes upwards in a long arc, the tip of her sword cutting through the air.

Zural steps back another pace.

Jon leans forward, all thoughts of Daorys, of Braavos, a distant hum at the back of his mind and he focuses on Arya’s movements.

She’s making mistakes, he realizes. She over-extends her slice, once, she steps too far out of her own reach before closing.

*It’s just that she’s so damned fast you can’t take advantage of her mistakes even if you see them.*
Zural takes advantage of a mistake Jon hasn’t seen—the Faceless Man casually tosses his saber to his left hand, slices, back-handed.

A line of red appears on Arya’s upper-left shoulder.

Jon’s muscles are taut, his eyes wide as she counters, traps the flat of Zural’s blade with her guard, shoves, hard.

Zural’s blade clatters to the floor.

Deliberate. That mistake I didn’t see her make—it was a deliberate one.

And now Zural, now any other fighter will be leery of taking advantage of any openings he sees—any of them could be traps.

“The mind is the first field of battle,” murmurs Jon. A saying of Arthur Dayne’s.

Except...Zural drops, rolls, and when he comes up on one knee his saber is in his hand, It seems almost perfection, that he was disarmed as he was, that the blade fell where it did, because with the smallest, most efficiently economical of movements his blade whispers through the air, passes below the her arc of defense.

The edge of Zural’s saber comes to rest across her gut; a slash of the arm, and he will eviscerate her.

The point of her saber hovers a fingertip away from Zural’s right eye.

She grins, lowers her blade, and he rises off his knee.

“Sandor doesn’t know,” says Bran slowly. Slightly incredulous. “Sandor thinks she’s a bit better than his trainees, but only just.” Jon risks a quick glance in Bran’s direction. But Bran displays no jealousy, no anguish; he looks impressed, and thoughtful.

“She’s got some reason for hiding it,” says Jon. By his assessment, he gives his sister one in three chances of taking him, and he’s the best swordsman the North has produced in a generation. In the best thirty fighters in the world, Daorys had said, and the man had no cause to lie. What does that make her? Within the best hundred at least.

“This,” mutters Jon, “this I need to ask about.”

“Take me too,” says Bran.

Jon nods, hauls Bran onto his back, and crosses the floor over to the bench where Jaqen is sitting—Daorys is still too close, his chin propped up on Jaqen’s shoulder.

An Essos custom?

Even women in the North don’t sit that close to anyone that is not their spouse, or a girl-child.

Arya has already reached the benches, she sits down on Daorys’s other side. Zural joins Jon and Bran on their much slower trek across the hall.

“Is it common, Ser Zural,” asks Jon, his voice low, “for men to sit so close to one another in Essos?”

Zural looks up, as if he hasn’t noticed, takes in the scene. Arya casually swings her legs up onto the
bench, drapes them over Daorys.

*Common for a man’s wife to make free of his friend’s person?*

“Lorathi,” mutters Zural, and it sounds like a curse in his mouth. “No concept at all of the boundaries of the self.” He glances sidelong at Bran, slung across Jon’s back. “You get a group of them together, like as not they’ll be sitting around wearing each others’ faces. Or the same face, all of them.” He shudders. “Safest not to read anything into it; nobody understands the Lorathi.” And his tone seems to suggest that nobody would want to.

*Wearing each others’ faces? And he expects that Bran knows what that means, because of his visions. And he expects that Bran would have told me.*

“Bran does not share information he is not allowed to,” says Jon.

Zural raises an eyebrow. “You are not curious?”

*Yes. But not enough to put anyone at risk. Jon trusts Bran--Bran has told him not to ask. “Jaqen will tell me what is necessary.”*

“Deists,” mutters Zural, and that too sounds like a curse in his mouth. “I am to be liking your other sister better. Princess Sansa, now she makes sense.”

**NO ONE**

“Not bad, for a mere four years,” says Daorys as they watch Arya disarm Zural. “*Pudding may have been extreme.*”

Jaqen is thoughtful. “I’d give her one in four chances to take Jon, if neither--or both--had Valyrian steel in their hands.”

Jaqen’s overly generous. Jon Stark is an exceptional fighter, and seasoned by war.

*I’d give her one in five.*

“No,” says Jaqen. “Fury. It doesn’t madden her; it focuses her.”

“One of those,” Daorys murmurs. Cold fury. *Fitting, from His mirror.* From what he’s seen of Jaqen’s memories, Jaqen burns hot, and trades skill for raw strength in his rage. The cold calculation is a painstakingly acquired attribute; He leashes His aggression.

But no matter how cold she may burn, acquiring fighting skill is a game of diminishing returns--a year, to learn how to use a sword, ten to learn how to parry most blows. A hundred, to learn how to perfectly parry but a single type of blow. Measured in this way, Zural is a hundred years Arya’s senior, Jon Stark is a decade ahead of her.

Arya reaches them, seats herself beside Daorys.

“How are you *inspired* now?” she asks. A great deal of pained self-mockery in her tone. The swiftness of her mind and her movement make up for skill. Not enough, and she knows it.

**Zural didn’t hit her hard enough, if she’s come here looking for encouragement.**

Daorys inhales, measures his own breath against Jaqen’s. Distress, but he will say nothing. Jaqen is walking his own tightrope, between “bride” and “Faceless One”. For a Faceless One, the greater the potential, the harsher the mind must be treated; ego, and its sister, insecurity, must be made
And so no one finds the thing that must be said, he looks into her eyes and says it, as gently as no
one is capable of saying such things:

“So liar speak, what risk oblique
And praises you pursue
Naught in nought in circular thought
Whose worthless worth are you?”

Her eyes widen, on the verge of tears. He holds her gaze.

Waits.

And she closes her eyes against him, and speaks:

“Let there be no want for wish-fulfillment,
All circles close, all trees grow, all stars burn
And bit by bit the lie in us withers
For want of wish-fulfillment.”

He exhales, and only then does he realize the change in Jaqen’s breath heralds some other distress.

His turn, to lean away from Jaqen: Brother, did I overstep?

Jaqen shifts, shakes his head: no, and his “no” is tempered with gratitude.

So whence comes the distress?

Arya changes the subject. “It looks like we’re making Jon very uncomfortable.”

Daorys strains to hear Jon Stark. Something, customary, men, Essos.

Arya’s “we” is a charity. “It’s me,” he says quietly.

She rolls her eyes.

My god set the rules for the game in this hall. But the players have very different perspectives. Who
should adapt? The King in the North, whose land this is, or the no-name guest?

Arya does not let him decide. Her motion is deceptively languorous as she swings her legs over his
lap. Her ankles flex; her feet nudge Jaqen’s thigh.

“True adaptation is a reciprocal process,” observes the god.

“Three versus three,” says Daorys.

“Cumulatively, more than six hundred years of Lorathi versus, what, a hundred and fifty of
Braavosi and Westerosi?” Her mouth twitches with disdain. “We tip the scale, though I add not
much to it.”

The three with “a hundred and fifty years” between them arrive; Jon gives the three Lorathi a tight
nod, then sets Bran Stark on the bench next to theirs.

“Perhaps I should go sit apart,” persists Daorys, in Westerosi, “on the ‘disgrace’ bench. You can
join us, Arya.”
“So busy upholding my dignity by proxy,” mocks Jaqen.

No one gives in. “Oh, I am very disgraceful, brother.”

“I can see that,” Jaqen’s voice is smooth, like a blade parting silk. “And if the other disgraceful ones are ‘Jaqen’s champion’, ‘Jaqen’s bride’, what am I to call you?”

“Whatever you want,” says no one.

“Thought I had to get you drunk first,” murmurs Jaqen.

He can see Jon’s eyes widen.

“Well,” he says, his own voice in turn a mockery of Jaqen’s flirtation, “that’s the excuse we give Arya when she discovers us in compromising positions.”

Jon sits down next to Bran Stark, carefully not looking at them, his ears flaming.

No one can feel Arya grinning. “My discovering you is pre-planned, then,” she says.

“Thought it was the whole point,” murmurs the god.

She shifts, allowing both Daorys and Jaqen to rise. A nod, for Jon Stark and Zural, and the two Lorathi head to the weapons rack.

**JON**

He blinks. 

*What just happened?*

“Stakes?” asks Zural. “Give you three to one on Jaqen.”

“Three to two,” she responds. “The way I see it, Jaqen will want to end it before Daorys is pushed beyond his reserves.”

“Maybe you’re right,” mutters Zural. “And Daorys will *not* back down, not after *that*.”

Jon feels compelled to ask. “After what?”

He can still feel the heat in his cheeks. Sansa had said these kinds of insinuations were a part of Dornish court life, when she’d been of a mind to tell them stories of King’s Landing, but... *Jaqen*. And *Arya* was *participating*!

Both Arya and Zural are looking at him as if he’s the one that’s gone sideways. Then Arya’s expression clears.

“If you think it’s about sex, Jon,” she explains, very patiently, “then it’s *never* about sex. Those,” and she tips her head towards Jaqen and Daorys, pacing off, each wielding two swords, a long and a short, “were fighting words.”

“You people are so strange,” says Bran.

“Three to two on Jaqen,” interrupts Zural, “but agree before they start.”

Arya spits on her hand, Zural does likewise. They shake.
Jon turns to Zural. “What stakes would you give me against her?” He points his thumb to Arya. The Braavosi man seems to think. “Three in four, all else being equal, I am thinking.”

“Four in five,” says Arya. “Jon’s got experience I don’t. That fight-or-flee fear before every engagement--Jon knows it, he’s mastered it again and again when there’s real lives on the line. I...extrapolate.”

Jon blinks. “I was thinking two in three,” he says.

Arya snorts. “Yeah right,” and her gaze shifts to the center of the hall. “Wish they’d take off their shirts,” she whispers, and her voice sounds... libidinous.

Jon very carefully keeps his gaze on the fighters as they stretch, rotate their arms to warm up.

If you think it’s about sex, it’s never about sex.

And if that is the case, why would Arya want them to take off their shirts? To see what’s underneath. What is underneath? Shirtless men? Yes, but what else?

Muscles. Skin. Veins.

Poison.

She wants to assess Daorys’s condition, in movement. Jon realizes it’s not just him--Arya cannot tell what weakness Daorys conceals.

Controlled. He is always controlled.

“My discovering you is pre-planned, then,” she had said. And Jaqen had replied with “Thought it was the whole point.”

Jaqen’s task is to push Daorys beyond the bounds of his control.

NO ONE

He stumbles; it seems his right knee refuses to cooperate with him.

First mistake.

And Jaqen’s sword almost finds a home in his right lung--Jaqen pulls the tip further right, redirects the momentum behind the thrust, and simply scores a line against no one’s chest and upper arm.

They clasp forearms, turn, to rack their weapons. And over his shoulder Daorys catches the look on both Arya and Jon Stark’s face--an identical expression, like that on the face of a desert nomad who has had a houri appear before him with a platter of grapes and three wishes. But while Jon Stark’s gaze is unfocused, Arya tracks Jaqen’s movements with the predatory intensity of a falcon.

Jaqen’s seen it too. “Would pay anything right now to know precisely what is going through her head,” he says as they walk slowly towards the bench.

No one looks at his god, mildly incredulous. “You cannot read that?” he asks. “And you call yourself Lorathi.”

No one snorts. “Don’t we all.” But lust is good. Lust has a tendency to warp under pressure, it already has once, for her: “Want to be like Jaqen H’ghar” to “Want Jaqen H’ghar”. The inverse is easier.

He doesn’t pay much attention to his body until he collapses on the bench, realizes he’s reached the limits of what he may command out of his limbs without damaging them. Immediately, Arya is upon him, rubbing down his face, his neck, the sweat from his arms with a soft cloth she folds and places into a satchel.

He raises an eyebrow at her.

“See if it can be sweated out,” she explains. “And if it can, what it actually is.” Then she switches to High Valyrian. “You haven’t blanked out once this morning.”

High Valyrian so the King doesn’t find out he’s hosting a mentally deficient Faceless Man in his keep.

Could snap, precipitate a bloodbath any moment, couldn’t I.

“Thought our sister told you,” he replies in the same tongue, “told her. Didn’t blank out in Asshai once the god came. Never blank if He’s around.”

Arya’s mouth twists. “She omitted that particular piece of information in the notes.”

“Why did you not mention this before?” asks Jaqen.

No one gives his god a look. “Groping’s bad enough. Now what, you’re going to follow me to the privy?”

Jaqen’s jaw clenches; he says nothing.

Arya’s eyes evade the god’s.

What does she hide?

His mind returns to the well-trodden paths of the verse he gave her, it’s oft-used, though none can attest to its origin. So liar speak, what risk oblique…

The verse she used is newer, obviously, since Daorys has never heard it before: ...want for wishfulfillment...want of wish --he interrupts himself before he can wind himself into the circularity of it.

The order of the words, the hint of repetition, the verse is is looser than the first one. As if it doesn’t care for structure anymore. An intuitive certainty (he has no chain of logic to fall back upon): the same pattern of thought that created one created the other.

And if the verse that Arya has given no one is more confident in its voice, is newer, how new is it? And where did she get a hold of it? The first one, Daorys knows none outside the Lorathi in the order know it.

Lorathi.

He loses his breath for a moment, he sways; Arya reaches out, grabs his forearm, steadies him, even as Jaqen winds an arm around his shoulder.
Jaqen. Jaqen, Jaqen what are you doing, composing something so very bleak for her? You are in love, why do you mourn?

Daorys’s hand tightens on her arm: be careful of Him.

They’ve kept their tones friendly; flirtatious.

Jon Stark’s dreamlike expression finally resolves into a question. “Ser Zural,” he says, “can I please hire an army of Faceless Men?”

Zural snorts. “You can’t afford it.”

Jon grins. “Gave you my sister, what more do you want?”

“Gave you our god,” counters Arya, “what more do you want?”

“An army of Faceless Men,” murmurs Jon, as if he’s watching some inner vision.

“Can you imagine?” asks Arya, dry.

Daorys grins. “Horrible. A hundred or so people, dressed in wildly different fashion, sort of sauntering in the general direction of the enemy? Towards R’hllor, I suppose.”

“All in grey,” says Jaqen, “that’s important, apparently.” The words are aimed at Zural.

“Miss my robes, wish I could wear them here,” says Arya wistfully.

“An army…” whispers Jon.

Zural’s caught the infection. “War elephants,” he says, focused on an inner vision of his own. “Saw an elephant charge once. We need war elephants.”

“Arya’s Kindly Man right out front,” says Jaqen, “beating on a drum, a beat nobody marches to except him and the lone, confused war elephant that’s got Zural here perched on top of it.”

Daorys groans before Arya can take hold of the idea. “No,” he says. “Just…no. We do not ride elephants to an assassination.”

Zural narrows his eyes at Jaqen. “Least the elephant’s grey,” he counters.

ARYA

She can feel the storm brewing behind her eyes. Jaqen doesn’t give any indication of his state; she cannot read him. Nevertheless, something compels her to take a right instead of a left when they reach the corridors that branch at the head of the Long Gallery.

“Shortcut,” she says, though he has not asked. It will take them through the ruined portion of the northern wing.

“Do not,” he says, “use him. Ever again.”

He was waiting.

They are entirely alone, their footsteps muffled in the snow that has fallen through the broken roof;
blocks of stone and charred timbers surround them.

“Did he remember anything?” she asks.

He does not reply.

*That’s a no, then. How can I tell the difference between willful forgetting and R’hllor’s magic if he refuses to remember?*

“You should have pressed him harder,” she says.

They have come to a stop in a round chamber. Half the outer wall is missing, fallen outwards into the snow, and wind whistles through the timbered supports that remain, like the skeleton of a beached whale, eaten away by scavengers.

“Are you angry because of the verse?” she asks.

“It was entrusted to you,” He says.

“It belongs to him,” she counters, “he should have it.”

“A cumulative six hundred years of Lorathi,” he says, his tone deceptively light. “A sum to which a girl contributes, what, two months?” And now he turns to her. “How *stupid* do you think I am?”

She shrugs.

The god grabs her by her hair, draws her head back; his fingers curl against her scalp. “Are you Braavosi now, my love? Do you attempt to manipulate me?”

“I breathe,” she replies.

He slams her against a wall, his forearm across her chest. His eyes blaze into hers, black-in-black, and the fury of him is a scorching heat she can feel through all the layers of cloth between him and her.

He bears down on her chest, until her breath is coming in short gasps.

“Never again,” he says, and his voice is utterly level, “will you use me against Daorys, or him against me.”

“How else am I supposed to serve?” she gasps between breaths.

He pulls back, and she takes a deep lungful of air. “You serve well enough by spreading your legs for me,” he says. “It’s the only honesty there is to be found in you.”

The air around them stills; the wind drops. All is silence.

She strikes.

An elbow, driven into his midriff the fingers of her other hand, shaped like claws, raked across his face.

He’s still close to her, he grabs her wrist, twists her arm behind her, slams her into the wall again face-first, and she feels the scrape of stone against her cheek, the drip of hot blood on the back of her neck.
Not playing anymore, Many-Faced God.

The wind steals the breath from his lungs, freezes the air around his feet. But he doesn’t need to breathe for another hundred heartbeats; he holds her against the wall with unfathomable strength.

He paws at the ties to her britches, rips them open, pulls them down to her knees, exposing her naked flesh to the air.

She drives her head back into his face; a short, sharp pain at the back of her skull, he staggers, stumbles over the ice forming around his ankles.

Her turn, to push him down, onto the cold ground, undo his hose, expose his cock, erect, pulsing with heat and rage.

She straddles him.

“You want honesty?” she asks. Her voice, a mirror of his; there is no inflection to it. He’s gasping now, his turn to beg for breath. She reaches down between her legs, rubs his cockhead between the lips of her sex, coats him in her wetness. “Is that what you want?” she asks again.

“Yes.” A choked whisper. No less furious.

“My brother and I are playing a game between us,” she says, “because you need to be coddled like a child. He pretends he doesn’t want mercy from you--he begs me for it instead, and every day I find an excuse to say no.”

She gives him his air back.

Incoherent rage; he grabs her by the arms, surges up into her, even as death rises out of the ground around them and stones begin to crumble. He rises, and she finds herself on her stomach, her face pressed into the dust, and he is on top of her, pinning her down with his whole body. He fumbles between them, and then she feels him pushing into her, stretching her cunt, he buries himself in her and he starts to fuck her, brutal, and there is no pleasure to be had in it for either of them, just punishing, hard thrusts that drive her forward onto the ground each time.

She waits until he pulls back, submerged in his rage, sweating with it, and she scissors her legs, turns to the side; he is unbalanced, his britches are down around his knees while hers have been ripped off entirely, and she uses the breath between balance and imbalance to curl her fist around a handful of stone dust, and throw it in his face.

She follows it with a piece of roof-framing, the timber is rotted and charred but it’s solid enough; she catches him in the side of his head.

He goes down, dust turning one side of his hair white. Blood pools on the other, black, in the moonlight reflecting off the snow.

Not enough to drop any Faceless Man into unconsciousness, much less a Lorathi. He rolls away from her, rises, a rictus grin on his face. “You serve the Starks,” he says, “you serve the House of Black and White. You do not serve me.” He reaches for his dagger.

“You servants don’t do so well, my lord,” she says, holds aloft the dagger she’s taken from him as he fell. “Aeron. Our brother. They served you, didn’t they?”

She’s not fast enough to evade the kick entirely--she twists, raises her forearm to block it but there is too much strength behind it; it sends her sprawling.
She spits blood, heaves herself to her feet, a silent snarl on her face. “You are powerless to save anyone, so I have to save them for you,” she says, “powerless to save even yourself, chained down in R’hillor’s pit because of your stupidity. Not your ignorance--you know what you are. You know and you hide from it behind the anonymity of faces stolen from those that give everything they are to you.”

He has his dagger back; his kick wasn’t aimed at her solar-plexus, it was aimed at her hand. Her fingers still tremble, she cannot move them without pain. Again he lunges for her, she throws herself aside, barely evades him. She is fast; she knows she is, she’s gotten into his reach before.

**He was holding back.**

She realizes Jaqen has always been holding back.

*With Jon, with our brother, with--* she has no time to finish the thought before he is upon her, and her back is pressed against the stone wall yet again, the knife at her throat.

She looks up into his eyes, smiles.

She took his dagger, he took it back.

*Her* knives, however, she has kept all this time: the one coated in Strangler rests at the base of his abdomen against his skin.

His mouth descends on hers, hungry. She strains upwards into his kiss, her tongue raging against his; she pulls back, bites down on his lip. Tastes blood, black blood.

The hair on the backs of her arms rise.

He leans to a side, his tongue scraping over the cuts on her cheek, lapping at her blood in turn. The darkness coiled in her breast comes awake, it rises to meet him even as the wind howls outside. She seeks his mouth again, but he turns her. Gentle, almost, but inexorable, and she is raised against the wall; her legs dangle in air as he pushes them aside with his knee and his cock is forced into her again.

His forehead rests on the stone wall next to her face, his eyes bore into hers. His face shifts, from Jaqen to Zural, to the Kindly Man, to others, with each thrust.

“Him of the Many Faces,” she mocks, even as she feels sharp shards of stone dig into her stomach, the front of her thighs, as the feel of the hardness in her changes from breath to breath, unfamiliar, all of them. “Do you want more honesty? I’ve manipulated our brother to arrange for a gift to be sent to Euron Greyjoy.”

Their mouths clash as he wears Jaqen H’ghar again, pain and hunger and blood, she pours all her frustration into him even as his cock slams into her, hits the entrance to her womb again and again, sending lightning shocks of pain down her legs.

“Our brother is very helpful. He keeps his word.” She laughs softly. “He will take his name back from you soon, and he will think it’s his own idea.”

He pulls out of her, still holding her by the back of her neck. Then she feels his cockhead, pushing against her other opening, the tight ring of muscle, he is too big, engorged; it burns.

Her eyes are tightly closed, braced against the pain. “No.” The word is a whisper, less than a whisper.
He stops. His hold slackens, his arms around her now straddling the boundary between confinement and comfort.

He leans back, takes her with him, and each of them is holding a dagger and she’s not sure which one is which anymore. She is leaning against his chest, and her arms tighten around his.

She pushes him down, insistent but no longer violent. He allows her to, and she drops to her knees beside him, cuts off the rest of his clothes with the dagger in her hand--his blade--even as hot tears drip down onto his body. The blade with the Strangler on it, he sets aside very carefully. There’s others, of course: strapped to her thighs, his, one in the bodice of the tunic he pulls off her.

She lies down, draws him over her.

They couple, surrounded by snow and dust and blood, and the wind is in his lungs and his darkness coils in her, and their release takes both of them by surprise, it leaves them gasping and boneless.

“So this is what everything means,” he says, almost to himself. “You turn on me, and still I turn to you. Nothing is anything to me except you.”

Her reserves of endurance are deep--he’s given them to her after all--and so she twists out from under him.

“So I served you well enough?” she asks, bitter, as she looks for the remnants of her clothes.

He reaches for her then, gathers her to him.

She allows it.

“I hide,” he whispers. “Because I am terrified I will lose you.”

“Can’t lose me, my lord,” she says, twisted subservience in every word, “I’m a Faceless Man now. Either you have me, or if I go renegade--you have me still. Valar morghulis, I think it’s called?”

“Don’t need to be mine to be faceless,” he says. When she says nothing to that, he sighs. “Do you want to see me?” he asks quietly. “I will not hide anymore if you don’t want me to.”

She leans away from him, sits with her knees drawn up to her chest. “I’m waiting.”

The silence lies in heavy folds around them; his eyes, his eyes they draw the world into themselves. The world shudders under the weight of Him; cracks, in the stone floor, radiating outwards from him, whipcord lighting in the snow as it burns to vapor around them.

Him of the Many Faces removes the last face He wears.

Afterwards, she cradles his head against her breast, and they lie entwined in each other’s arms, skin to skin.

“You wanted Jaqen H’ghar,” he says.

“Jaqen H’ghar died five hundred years ago in Valyria,” she says. “I never knew Jaqen H’ghar any more than Samwell Tarly knew Pate.”

His arm tightens around her. “How long have you known that?”
“Since the barrow,” she says.

“Oh.”

“How long have you been walking on eggshells?” she asks.

“Since the Wall.”

She blinks. “You’re even stupider than I thought,” she marvels.

He mumbles something into her chest.

“No, not a Valyrian; you merely wear his face.”

He looks up. “I am not allowed any delusions anymore?” he asks quietly.

“Not if you want to keep me,” she says gently.

His arms tighten around her. “Stay here,” He mumbles. “Let time pass. Storm’s coming, we’ll be buried under the snow. No one will ever find us again.”

She wants to reply with a witticism: Sansa will find us. Naked.

She cannot.

She bows her head, her turn to tighten her hold on Him. “Forgive me,” she whispers. “I lie. I withhold mercy. I disobey. I trespass upon your domain.”

His tongue snakes a path between her breasts, up the side of her neck, to her lips. His kiss sears into her, too slow, too soft, too everything.

“Jon doesn’t know everything that Sam and Sansa do for him,” whispers the god against her lips. “Because there are some things a king should not know. He does not trust them any less for it, does not resent them for it--they sacrifice their integrity so he can keep his, and he sees their loss and he grieves and he loves them yet more for it.” He strokes gently down the side of her arm, over her breast. Unshed tears glimmer in his eyes. “Forgive me,” he says.

Her eyes glitter. “Take back the thing you said. About spreading my legs.”

He winces. “That was idiotic. And false.” A momentary flash of humor. “Our current position notwithstanding.”

Not allowed to find it funny, beloved. “Didn’t spread my legs,” she says. “You made me.”

She’s never seen quite that look on His face before--horror, disbelief: I did?

She draws it out, waits, until she sees Him start to crack. “I am the breath in your lungs,” she says. “As demonstrated--could have cut off your air at any time.”

He sags against her, trembling in relief.

“Stupid, stupid, god,” she mutters as she strokes His head, even as she thinks back to the wall.

What happened on the Wall, apart from the whispers of the dead, that He was forced to confront who He was?
He threw himself behind Jon.

“There is no such thing as a soul,” He says. “From nothing to nothing. From darkness to darkness, and a brief flicker of a life lived in between.”

No soul?

“I would understand,” she says.

“Not the things poets conflate with souls--heart, love, compassion, memory. An actual soul. Something exalted, something beyond a man’s body, an immortal element that will take the imprint of a life lived and continue on long past the dissolution of the flesh, the mind, long past each and every person in the world forgets the man’s name.”

“He feels the absence, as if it is a physical pain?” she says.

“Jon is in torment,” the god whispers. “He was ignorant before he died, ignorant that he had no soul when he was alive. The body, the mind, the heart, it is reanimated. And now it knows it doesn’t have a soul.”

“Trust a Stark to turn an existential crisis into physical symptoms,” she says.

“The mind is a powerful enemy,” the god agrees.

So for Jon’s sake, you looked at Yourself?

And for the dead, chained to the Wall.

He looked, through the depth and the breadth of Him, and could find no mechanism to give them a soul.

“Who needs one anyways?” Arya mutters. Some part of her--must be the darkness in her, it can’t be the wind--some part of her holds on to her attachments. She is distressed, on Jon’s behalf, on every mortal’s behalf.

But this is self-evident. Why would He turn his face from me for this? Why would He think He would lose me over…

“All Faceless Men are dead,” she says.

He is entirely too still in her arms.

“And yet we do not feel the lack as Jon does.”

“There is some substitute, for that which hungers for permanence.” His voice is calm; He mirrors her tone.

That which hungers for permanence.

Perfect mirrors, Arya and Jaqen: they both hate losing people. Death goes to war with Himself--another variant of the pattern that is Jaqen H’ghar.

What else of Himself does He wish to deny?

And then she knows--she has known, in the days, weeks, moons since she became faceless, but the thing that she learned in Asshai, she finds the words to articulate it now:
“You do the same thing that they are trying to get R’hllor to do,” she says. “That monstrosity that absorbs the faces and bodies grafted onto him. You hunger, and you feed, just like R’hllor does. You feed upon us, those that would become faceless. There is no difference in the nature of gods, only their dispositions.”

Not a lie: true believers shall be united with their god.

The god takes a shuddering breath.

R’hllor. His priestesses dribble thin gruel down their god’s gullet with the faces and bodies they graft onto him; a parody of a feeding.

R’hllor created the concept of the Lord of Light through the prophecies. Jaqen H’ghar did not create death. He assumed every god that was conflated with death in the slave-pits. The weirwood, the Stranger, the Drowned God.

He assumed them all.

And then he defined a new aspect of Himself, one that could feed the hunger for permanence.

The Many-Faced God.

“You do the feeding better than R’hllor,” she says thoughtfully. “You do it so perfectly that we do not notice.”

His eyes are closed. “You notice,” He says. “You die.”

Regardless, R’hllor shares nothing. Jaqen shares everything.

“You kill us, yes,” she says, stroking His head, “and then we are resurrected. But unlike R’hllor, you do not simply absorb. You portion out the feeding—the faces of the body, the memories of the mind—into each of the corpses you’ve fed from.”

Faceless Men do not feel the lack of a soul. Faceless Men are fed upon the substitute of a soul—the memories, the faces. A Lorathi illusion—they are appeased by the appearance of a soul.

We never stop playing.

He exhales. “I don’t think it happens all at once,” he says. Almost a whisper.

She continues stroking His hair as she takes the thought to its conclusion: all the Lorathi are old, but no Braavosi is older than a century and a half. Lorathi illusion—a Lorathi believes in a soul.

She grins. “A Braavosi is a Lorathi waiting to be eaten.” She places a kiss on His forehead. “You’re just consuming me faster than the others—you like the taste of me.”

“And you wonder why I hide from myself?” He asks quietly.

“Yes?”

His head turns, he looks up into her eyes in disbelief.

“Married you,” she says, “no lies between us in the darkness, beloved, I knew what I was getting into—vengeance embraces horror; revels in it. Forgot a lot—human mind doesn’t take too kindly to death, not for how long I was out for. Needed to relearn some things. Still learning.”
“Him of the Many Faces wears the skins of the ones He has eaten,” says Jaqen.

“As does every Faceless Man,” she says. “So?”

He closes his eyes, rests his forehead upon her breastbone. “Terrified of you right now.”

“Remember that,” she whispers into his ear. “Before you accuse me of not serving you ever again.”

In response his head shifts, and his lips close around her nipple; she gasps with the sudden warmth of his mouth on her.

“How can I kill that which I love,” he whispers, “and empty it out, and love it more?”

Really? We really have to go into this?

His hand cups her breast as he suckles on her, nods without lifting his head.

She sighs. “No living man has a soul. The only thing that would fit the definition of a soul--something exalted, something that remembers the names and faces of men that had once walked the world, carries the imprint of them long past their death--is a god. A god sleeps, and must be awakened.”

She ignores the jolts of pleasure his mouth is sending through her, the warmth pooling between her legs again.

“When you took Arya Stark into the darkness,” she says slowly, thinking, “you couldn’t take everything of her, she walked beside you in the nothing and she was a something. Will, perhaps--sometimes the will is too strong, even for a god to counter, especially when the god Himself bolsters the will as you did for me in Harrenhal. Like the sea couldn’t take Euron Greyjoy--a dead man, but he lives. For now.”

She sidles out of his grasp, mounts him. He reaches between her legs, guides his rigid cock into her. With a sigh, she lowers herself onto him.

“Didn’t want to take you,” He says. His hands rise, grip her hips, move her, up and down, upon him.

She bites her lip.

“The darkness eats away at me,” she says, rolling her hips, “I feed it all the things Arya Stark would feel but no one should not. But since the Night of Ice, when I awakened in the barrow, you have the wind in you--it binds you to your flesh, binds breath to your lungs, to Jaqen H’ghar’s body.”

Jaqen H’ghar is imprinted onto the wind.

She cannot bear the separation between them. She leans down, rests all her weight upon Him, lies on top of him, skin to skin. He exhaled, sinks further into her, and this time when His arms tighten around her there is no slack to them.

“Real,” He murmurs.

She kisses his chin. Everyone is real--even Faceless Men; what does the nature of souls, or their absence, have to do with reality?
“Reality,” she says, “is blood and brain. Everything else is a Lorathi illusion.”

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“This is ridiculous,” she mutters as they tiptoe through the halls of Winterfell, half-naked, bruised and bleeding. She knows she has his seed running down the inside of her thigh, nothing she can do about it save try to wipe herself on the tattered cloth she needs to cover her legs with. But at least her breasts are covered, her tunic is intact. Jaqen’s in worse shape, his clothes were deliberately cut off of him—he’s wrapped half a shirt around his groin, the other half around his rear, sleeves knotted at the sides to sort of hold everything in place.

Twice, they have to hide from servants, once from Davos Seaworth, of all people, hovering near the Long Gallery.

“Not sure who will be worse to run into,” says Jaqen as the emerge from behind a tapestry in the east wing, just a few corridors shy of “their” area.

“Sansa,” says Arya with certainty. “She asks questions.” She thinks about it. “Or Zural. He’s my teacher.”

“The exercise does raise some interesting philosophical questions on the powerlessness of gods,” he says.

“Not powerless,” she says, “we could kill them--asphyxiate them, age them to dust. But we constrain ourselves. That is not powerlessness, that is whim.”

“Interesting philosophical questions, as I said.” He turns to her, and his lips twitch; she cannot resist placing a small kiss at the corner of his mouth, nor can he resist deepening it. Just for a moment. “But philosophy will save neither girl nor man if they are found like this,” he murmurs.

She nods.

They reach the stairwell to the children’s wings, climb. They’re almost at the door to their rooms when Arya hears something.

“What’s--”

“Arya? We were looking for you, where did-- Jaqen?”

Sansa and Zural have emerged from the schoolroom. Both have near-identical looks of shock on their faces.

Jaqen groans, hits his head against the door to their room once, twice, then he steps inside. “Arya will explain,” he calls out from the safety of their chamber.

“Coward!” she shouts after him, then turns to Sansa with a smile plastered on her face. “Religious duties,” she says. “Very secret--tell her, Zural.” And with that, she follows her husband into the chamber and shuts the door firmly behind her.

Pretend it never happened. No Sansa, no Zural, we made it to our chamber unobserved. Pretend it never happened.

He slides the bolt across the latch, and then their mouths are upon each other, kisses that sting from the cuts in their lips, kisses that taste like chalk and glass from the stone-dust clinging to them, but she cannot stop kissing him, nor he her, and they move together, lips still seeking the other’s
tongue, teeth, onto the bed.

“Kissed you a lot in the dreaming,” he murmurs.

“Hours and hours,” she says, breathless, drowning in the taste of his mouth. She pauses. “Was that a fight we just had?”

He considers it. “No,” he decides. “We don’t fight.”

Makes sense.

She entwines her legs with his, and his mouth returns to hers, his tongue seeking entrance, she grants it, and breathes, breathes with him as flakes of snow begin to fall upon the ground from the storm-dense sky, like the vanguard of an incomprehensibly vast army.

MISSANDEI

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Daenerys,

Why am I a lot happier about being wanted for your little Targaryen stud-farm than for power?

Can’t believe I’m writing these words, but I apologize, deeply--I haven’t sired any bastards.

It’s allowable to root for dragons, apparently-- they’re not interested in slaves, or torture, or dominion over all mankind, they just want a nice volcano to bathe in, a few hundred sheep (or horses, or humans) every so often.

One problem at a time?

-Jon

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Daenerys reads the letter aloud. And then she sits, a little off-balance. The Mother of Dragons is one of those few that never gain their sea-legs; she dips and staggers when she crosses the deck.

“Well,” says Tyrion. “He has a sense of humor. Unless it’s coming from this advisor of his.”

Missandei ventures an opinion. “Lord Tyrion, it seems it is the same hand that penned the first letter from the hunt. This one believes it is composed by Jon Stark.”

Daenerys sits, the parchment in her hands, and says nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Thank you so very much for the feedback and support you gave me last chapter :) I listen, I really do :) cut out a lot of the word-play sub-chapters, ones that did nothing
but advance some convoluted internal plot. Left the SIMPLE bones behind :) and I think it works better for it. So, thank you all, again and again.

Also including a tl;dr in the end-notes now, with pertinent points:

TL;dr (w.r.t. important plot points)
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1. Jorah's being fed R'hllor's blood, and now we know the nature of the trap for Jaqen/Arya: No One is contaminated, he's bait, he dies and Jaqen takes "him", his death memories into the nothing (as usual for Faceless Men). Now Jaqen's contaminated, it's a "hook" on the god, will pull him and Arya into Asshai and the chains.

2. Zural and a group of FM back at the HBW are thinking of declaring Jaqen renegade; they need a substitute god, and Arya is it. She's cooperating, atm.

3. Theology: nobody has a soul, Jaqen and R'hllor are doing the same thing, i.e. "absorbing" the faces and bodies and people with some important differences. This one doesn't work well under a tl;dr.
Coherence

Chapter Notes

sorry the story went down for a half-hour, I had to make some edits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARYA

She daubs the white-and-yellow paste on Jaqen’s eyelid, then smooths it in with her fingers.

He’s splinted the fingers of her left hand. She doesn’t have quite the collection of bruises he does, mostly a plethora of small nicks and cuts and scrapes from the stone.

She blends in the darker shade of his cheekbones into the line of his lower-eyelid, then pulls back to survey the result.

Mummer’s paint doesn’t hide everything, but it makes the bruises less startlingly purple.

“You are very well-prepared,” he murmurs.

“Some of us carry the tools of our trade,” she says. “Others, books of poetry.”

His mouth twitches. “Fair.” His finger ghosts over the long vertical scrapes on her cheek--already scabbed over.

He leans back till his head rests against the bedpost, eyes closed. “I am dangerously out of control,” he says. “Have been, since the Wall.” He opens his eyes, looks at her. “Love,” he says voice soft, hesitant, “should I step aside?”

_Anger_, she realizes, is an oscillatory thing. Almost indistinguishable in structure from lust.

She kisses him then, harsh, nips at the cut on his lower lip. He winces, but doesn’t pull away. “No, my lord,” she says. “You don’t get to absolve yourself of your responsibility to the House _that_ easily.”

He is watching her, wary. She circles the bed, her eyes locked on him. She climbs onto the surface, then goes on all fours, crawls, till her face is a breath away from his. He makes no move to close the gap, to kiss away the defiance in her words.

Her anger rises then, turns her voice to sharp shards of ice.

“You haven’t lost control,” she whispers against his mouth. “You’ve lost your _will_. You cannot kill me, you cannot even _fight_ me without wanting to fuck me.”

She feels no rage in him. And so she is surprised when he moves, and she is on her back, her wrists pinned to her sides.

She arches into him, instinctive, even as his weight keeps her pressed onto the bed.

He gives her a wry look, and his gaze traces a path to her breasts, where her nipples have hardened
visibly under her shirt.

“Don’t tell me you hadn’t figured that out, after all this time,” she mocks. “After the banquet, after the Wall?”

I like playing with fire.

“You were not playing last night,” he says, and releases her.

She rises to a half-sitting position. “Because it stops being play, beloved, when you open your stupid mouth to hurt me.”

He is not looking at her. “The Wind is a pristine thing,” he says. “A clear, cold reckoning; no lies to the Wind, no horror to it. Whatever kind of faceless god you make, it will be better than me.”

She rises, gets up off the bed. “No,” she says. “You don’t get to make a mess and then not clean it up.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” he asks, bitter.

How? Stop hiding.

“Begin by dealing with Sansa,” she commands. “Zural is shaping her perception of you as a Braavosi. It will bring her into conflict with Jon, at some point. Tell her who you are.”

“What I am,” he murmurs, gaze distant.

“No,” she says. “Who you are.”

“And Zural?” he asks. “He plays the protective teacher a little too well.”

“I’ll handle him.”

SANSA

She is giving a page instructions when she sees Jaqen walking slowly to a balcony overlooking the practice yard.

“…and thank you, Beron,” she says to the page with a smile. The child bobs his head, bows—a little shaky, he’s still learning—and backs away.

Sansa gathers her skirts in her hand, and strides to the balcony after her brother-in-law.

He doesn’t turn to look at her, though of course he knows she’s there. Bruises decorate one side of his face, his hands, he has a split lip.

“Somebody’s going to explain something to me,” she says, “and it’s going to be you. Ser Zural said you two were sparring?”

And it looks like you let her win.

Jaqen turns, sighs. “Suppose he had to say something,” he replies.

A fight.
“It’s Daorys, isn’t it?” demands Sansa. “She hovers over him all hours of the day; she’s got her coils wrapped around his heart.” Her jaw clenches. “If she asks him to jump off one of the towers he’ll do it.” Bitter, the sound of those words out of her mouth, more bitter than she thought they’d be.

*Starks are loyal. She says she is no longer a Stark.*

Jaqen shakes his head.

*She’s got her coils wrapped around you too, Jaqen--it’s love but it’s darker than that, it’s not like any love I’ve ever seen; she’s under your skin.*

Zural doesn’t say much, but Sansa reads between what is said and not said. He has great hopes for Arya within the order; he says she always gets what she wants.

Arya wanted vengeance. She saw an assassin at Harrenhal.

*Did she seduce you then, Jaqen? At eleven?*

It seems entirely out the realm of possibility--she finds it impossible to match the Arya of her childhood (and the Arya she knows now) to that picture. “Assassin” fits, seductress doesn’t. And it doesn’t fit Jaqen, either.

But the *story* holds together. He protests too much about bedding children. He has integrity, but he is still just a man.

*She seduces him, he saves her, arranges for her safety, then flees, guilt-ridden. Marries her the first chance he gets, as an honorable man would, stays away from her until she’s older. She seduces him again, and again he’s off, helping her kill the Freys.*

The silence is impregnated with undercurrents. She waits, and yet he does not speak.

“Jaqen,” she says finally, “I love my sister. But I’m seeing a side to her I never thought was possible. You need to get her away from him.”

Jaqen appears torn. “No.” He takes a deep breath. “What I say doesn’t leave here, please.”

She nods.

*Here it comes—the protest. About how much she loves him, how he corrupted her when she was just a child, she’d never leave him.*

“Do you remember how Jon looked down at the ground from high places?” he asks.

She stills. “Yes,” she says.

“You’re right,” says Jaqen. “If Arya gave him her permission, Daorys *would* jump off a tower.”

Sansa’s jaws clench.

Another story suggests itself .

“Who poisoned him?” asks Sansa.

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “A priestess of R’hllor.”
Sansa closes her eyes. *The tears, the hovering.* “Jaqen, forgive me,” she says. “I didn’t...I misinterpreted.”

Jaqen smiles; kind. “Daorys is not seducible,” he says. “Arya’s not the one who’s got their coils wrapped around his heart; I do.”

“Starks understand something of loyalty,” she offers.

“I know.” And now he grins, his usual, somewhat sardonic grin. “The... *sparring* ...began with Arya and I disagreeing about the nature of plausible deniability. Daorys should not be used like that.”

She flushes, looks away. “I’m sorry,” she says in a small voice.

“Not your fault,” says Jaqen. “Mine. I have a lot to learn,” he says quietly. “A bit stubborn about the learning of it. Jon is a very good example to learn from.”

She steps up to the rail, leans over it as she watches the recruits break from their ragged ranks to take a breather.

Sandor looks up, raises a mailed fist towards her.

She raises a hand, a half-wave in her shield’s direction.

“What do *you* have to learn about?” she murmurs to Jaqen. *How to muck up marriage-treaties?*

He does not answer. She looks at him—his eyes are distant, focused beyond the tops of the towers. “The balancing of paradoxical needs,” he says eventually. *Reluctantly.* “Leadership.”

Everything suddenly falls into place.

*It was not considered a mismatch, for this man to marry a Stark.*

Jaqen’s depth of knowledge, the way he treats the servants and nobles with equal courtesy and mockery by turns—not merely the equality of an assassin’s gaze; Zural’s not like that. *Jaqen* bears the assurance of a man so certain of his station that the scrabbling for rank that underpins any social interaction is entirely irrelevant.

Jaqen is the guildmaster of the House of Black and White.

And now, *now* the story matches the people she knows: A man raised to the head of one of the most powerful guilds in the world--some augury, some prophecy manufactured by the priesthood, if she must guess at the *why* of it, to counter the growing rationalism of Zural’s faction. But it comes with too many burdens, too young, he evades responsibility. Marries a woman for love, and instead of simply distracting him she turns around and forces him right back into his role.

Jon. The Starks. A last rebellion, before Jaqen returns to his duties.

Other explanations suggest themselves: why Jaqen sides with Jon on the issue of Daenerys Targaryen.

She needs more information, and Jaqen seems to be in a talking mood.

*Nobody is in any danger if the guildmaster tells me things, surely.*

“This question is not a slight against you, Jaqen,” she says, “it’s a questioning of Arya’s morals.”
He snorts. “She is a Faceless Man. A poor one, if she has morals .”

Sansa smiles, a little. “When was the first time you and Arya were together, as man and wife?”

Then he turns to her, brow furrowed. “What is going on in your head, sister mine?”

She raises an eyebrow.

“On the road,” he says, still a bit nonplussed. “The night of the big blizzard, just before we got to Winterfell. That night, I--um. Why would it be a question of Arya’s moral standards?”

A mere tenday before they came here? But they behaved as though they had been lovers for years .

Behaved. Acted.

“Bedding and partnership are contingent upon each other?” he asks, raises his own hand in a half-mocking salute towards Sandor Clegane.

No, they are not. “I was wondering if I got her wrong--whether she seduced you at Harrenhal.”

Jaqen chokes. “At Harrenhal ?” He shakes his head. “Your cynicism , Sansa…Has she told you how she got the House’s coin out of me?”

“No, she hasn’t.”

“Told you I offered her three names,” he says.

Three kills, yes.

“She took two, one as a test, one because she was recognized. And then she named a third. Jaqen H’ghar .”

“What ?”

He’s grinning now, and there is a look to his eyes as if he remembers a fond memory. “It’s a sacred pact, the promise of death when one gives a name--she wouldn’t unsay it unless I got her, the smith-boy and the pie-boy free of that place, along with fifty of Robb Stark’s soldiers.”

Now see, that sounds like Arya.

“So no seduction,” says Sansa thoughtfully. “And yet…” she gives him a knowing look. “How early did my sister get her hooks into you?”

He leans back against the balustrade, returns her look with his own. “Claws,” he says, and a small smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. “Claws and fangs. And about, oh, twenty heartbeats or so after meeting her? I was in the cage, asked her for water, and there was no fear in her at all.”

Oh dear gods, it’s true.

“You really are a hopeless romantic,” she says. “Love at first sight ? A girl pretending to be a boy, saves the life of the foreign prince traveling incognito? Reunited years later, only to be married, and then you find out she’s a princess herself?”

He raises a brow. “Bard’s tales must come from somewhere , must they not? But incognito ‘prince’ is...inaccurate.” His brows furrow, as if he’s looking for the words to speak aloud.
Not allowed to say he’s guildmaster, she guesses. And one whose duties must be assumed when the need arises.

“Incognito assassin, then,” she says, conciliatory.

He sighs, nods.

Something she must think upon: how can Jaqen’s support to the Starks be turned from something the guild disapproves of to something that is essential to the guild? Because Jaqen’s power, his position, it must not be undermined—no matter how high Arya may rise, she will never be guildmaster.

If he assumes his proper role, Jaqen H’ghar should be able to bring Braavos to its knees; all men tremble, Davos has said, when they invoke the name of the House of Black and White.

There is dark satisfaction at the thought.

“Do you know the guildmaster of the Iron Bank?” asks Sansa.

And again, it seems she’s thrown him. “Interesting change of topic,” he says. “Why the Iron Bank, may I ask?”

“Wondering if he’d like to marry a Stark as well,” she says. “Recently widowed, very influential with the King in the North.”

He considers her. “The holder of the Skeleton Key—the head of the Iron Bank at the moment—is also a widow. I’d be happy to arrange an introduction. There are some particularly sapphic verses I can lend you if you want to court her.”

Sansa bursts into laughter. She rises on her toes, gives him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you Jaqen,” she says. “For being you.”

He turns aside, faces the courtyard again. His mien darkens, a quicksilver change of mood she’s only seen in Arya so far.

“You shouldn’t be thanking me,” he says. “Least of all for a stupid joke. I hurt her yesterday.”

She got a few of her own hits in, it looked like, from the blood around your head last night.

Then, suddenly, the direction of the conversation, the dark, unknowable thing she feels hovering under the surface, his sudden loquaciousness… It drags Sansa’s mind to an entirely unexpected thought—a pail of ice-water flung into her face: He took her.

Violence and violation are two sides of the same coin. Not impossible, she knows, for a man to go from delivering a beating to raping someone.

Not possible. Not with Jaqen. As impossible as Jon hurting a woman.

She grits her teeth, her heart hammering under her ribcage. She clasps her hands together tightly, her nails digging into the backs of them.

But they fought. They bear the wounds.

“Did she ask you to stop?” she asks, her voice very neutral.

“Yes.”
“Did you?”

“Yes.”

She exhales. “Then why bring it up?”

“Because you need to set the dogs on me,” he says, and his voice is very matter-of-fact. “Maybe not the whole pack, but one or two at least.” He’s not looking at her.

Sansa knows the mien of a woman who has been violated. In the mirror, in the faces of women at King’s Landing, a thousand variations of it in the faces of the women that “worked” for Petyr Baelish. Violated by force, violated by fear, violated by coin.

There was none of that in Arya’s bearing last night.

“Did you rape my sister?” Each word is precisely enunciated, each word hovers in the chill air.

She can only see his face in profile. His face is utterly without expression.

“It just because she says no and I say no,” he answers, “doesn’t mean we’re not both delusional.”

Zural’s words come back to her: *Jaqen’s pattern is one of substitution*.

The question changes: *What has he been trying to build up his courage for, throwing false guilt and guild secrets at me to give himself more time?*

The answer is so very simple she’s not sure it’s right. But how does the man she know as “Jaqen” reconcile himself to being not just a simple murderer for hire, but their *leader*? He doesn’t. Until he cannot avoid it any more. And then he must choose an identity for himself that fits.

“Ser Zural told me something interesting about you,” she says.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“He said you’re a coward.”

Jaqen snorts. “He’s not wrong.”

“You sought me out,” she says in a tone of musing. “Because of my history, you tell me this and expect me to tell you you’re a monster.”

“No telling needed,” he says. “I know exactly what I am.”

“Does Arya?”

“Yes.”

“Did she learn it last night?”

“No.” Jaqen exhales, rests his head on the balcony’s stone rail. “And I thank my god for that--she knew long ago.”

She didn’t turn her face from you.

He sighs. “Hypothetically,” he says, “how *would* you react if you found out everything you think you know about me is a lie? That Jaqen H’ghar is a persona that preys upon your preconceptions,
manipulates your perception of him to serve some end he doesn’t realize himself?”

She considers it. “I am no stranger to humiliation,” she says. “Survival requires one face it, and find a way to live with it--if someone else forces an indignity upon you, even something as subtle as the indignity of misconception, the humiliation belongs to the liar, not the one that is lied to.”

He smiles then, twisted. “And so you see the problem.”

“The fact that we are having this conversation,” she says, “tells me the problem is smaller than you think.”

The words are a gesture, an overture.

“The problem is me,” he says.

She doesn’t know what to say, whose voice to use that would steer “Jaqen” down a path that reconciles him to “Jaqen the Guildmaster”.

She has a dutiful voice, she can hear its owner calling out commands to the trainees in the courtyard. She has a courageous voice--Jon’s in council with his riders.

You have another one as well, don’t you?

She summons the coward’s voice: what would Jaqen H’ghar say?

“If I put you alongside Joffrey and Ramsay and all the other monsters that dwell within me,” she says, “would it make this conversation easier for you?”

He grins. “Much easier.”

The silence is broken by a harsh yell from the recruits.

“No,” she says then. “No. If you’ve misled me all this time, you don’t get to choose the easy path, brother mine.” She draws her hand away from his shoulder. “The only thing that would make you a monster is if you’d taught her how to fear.”

“She will never learn that.” His tone is vehement. His posture has changed entirely; he straightens, stands tall.

He believes in stories, she thinks sadly. Where the hero, however blemished, retains the unconditional trust of those he loves.

What would Jaqen H’ghar’s cunning sister say in this story?

“I’ve seen and heard a lot of things in King’s Landing,” says Sansa, stepping back, drawing the Mockingbird’s urbane drawl over her. “Rough bed-play is not really anything special.” She shrugs, one shoulder. “If she’s still upset, give her a chance to take it out on you, before she takes it out on Daorys.”

He blinks. The smirk reappears, though, quickly enough. “Better go rescue him then,” he says. “Because he won’t survive that.”

It doesn’t hit her until she’s halfway to the Maester’s study, and then her legs grow weak. She sways, leans against a wall for support.
Guildmaster, monster, perception, misconception, these are distractions. The truths of the body are *real*, they cannot be dismissed as “stories”.

Arya.

And then she gathers up her skirts and *runs*.

———

“Arya!”

The stillroom is dark; Arya bends over a table, measuring something into a small fist-sized crucible by candlelight.

“*Just…one…moment.*” Arya very, very carefully places the vial aside, puts a lid over the crucible.

Sansa tries to calm the racing of her heart, the heaving breaths.

Arya straightens and she’s at Sansa’s side. “What’s wrong? Breathe, Sansa, what’s wrong?” Her hands are on Sansa’s shoulders.

Sansa swipes at her eyes. “How bad is it?” She realizes her arms are around Arya, she’s clutching her little sister to her chest, almost smothering her. “*How bad is it?*”

“Let go!” Arya struggles out of her grasp. “What the *fuck* did he tell you? We were sparring.”

Sansa’s jaw clenches. “I’m *fine*.”

Sansa waits. There is too much truth between them in these matters, Arya knows *everything* there is to know about Sansa’s truths of the body.

Arya’s eyes flick to a side of the shadowed room. Sansa’s gaze follows, and she steps back involuntarily.

Daorys raises his hands in front of him, reassuring. “Apologies. I would have said something. Um. Should have.”

*What are you doing hovering over my sister in a darkened chamber?*

“I should leave,” says Daorys.

“No!” snaps Arya. She turns to Sansa. “Do you know how hard it was to get him in here in the first place?”

*I need to know, I need to know how bad it is, Arya. Please.*

“Just outside the door,” says Daorys to Arya. “My word.”

She nods, and with long, purposeful strides, he leaves, shutting the door behind him.

Sansa braces herself.

Arya lowers her voice. “We fought. It got physical.” A grimace. “Obviously.”

“When did you say no?” Sansa asks, and she cannot keep the tremor from her voice.
Arya’s looking at her, wary. “What the fuck did he say to you?”

“Answer me.”

Arya sighs. “I said no before he crossed the line,” she replies.

*From violence to violation?*

“He was rough,” says Arya. “Rougher than our wont—it felt like lightning bursts of pain. But I fucked him first, turned around and rode him while I was choking the air from his lungs.”

The thought of *that* snaps Sansa out of the breathless sense of panic crowding her thoughts. “You would,” she says, half on the verge of hysterical laughter. She takes a deep breath, processes the information, draws the false-calm she uses when handling a political crisis for Jon.

“Say no to him for the next few nights,” she says. “Bruise on top of bruise takes a long time to heal, inside.”

“Say no?” Arya asks, “but it’s the only thing I’m good at.” And there is so much bitterness in Arya’s voice, Sansa doesn’t know what to do with it.

*He said something to her. Something that diminishes her service to the guild. Jaqen should have been appreciative of her sacrifices—sacrificed her name for him. Instead, he took out his frustrations with himself on her—that comment about learning leadership from Jon wasn’t a platitude.*

*What did he say?*

“Horseface,” says Sansa, “you can tell me. *Anything.*”

“I don’t know,” Arya whispers, “I don’t know how to stop being hurt.” The tears overwhelm her and Arya clings to her and *sobs*, quiet little heartbreaking sobs. “He’s supposed to read poetry to me,” she whispers between gulps of air. “Sansa, he was so angry. He said he could never be angry at me.”

*They lie. Even the good ones lie.*

They hold one another till the shoulder of Sansa’s dress is wet, and Arya’s face has gone blotchy from the tears.

*Didn’t think Arya would get blotchy; her skin is so perfect all the time.*

Sansa strokes Arya’s hair—it’s growing out now, slower than she would have thought. “Are you afraid of him?” she asks, when she thinks Arya’s wrung out. “Even a little bit?”

Arya shakes her head. “Just... *hurt.*” She sniffs, wipes at her face. “He’s an *idiot.*”

“I wish I knew,” whispers Sansa, “I wish I knew what a loving marriage looked like from the inside so I could tell you what to do. I know people in love fight—Mother and Father did, once, a bit after Rickon was born. And the charwoman and her husband have screaming rows, you can hear them from the East Gate. But I don’t know how they go on after that, how they keep loving each other.”

Arya makes a sound—something between a gurgle and a laugh. “We’ve figured *that* part out,” she says. She takes a deep breath, steps back.
Reluctantly, Sansa lets her go.

“I think I just needed to cry a little,” says Arya. “There is nothing left to me but service, to the guild, to him—don’t serve the Starks anymore.”

“I know, I know, love,” says Sansa soothingly.

*She married the guildmaster, and she’s trying to prove she’s not just his beautiful, noble-born wife.*

“Go back to Braavos for a bit, things have settled here.” It pains her to say it, but Zural has intimated there could be a significant increase in Arya’s power within the guild if she but stops siding with the religious faction.

Arya shakes her head. “He needs me at his side.”

But there is a hitch to her voice.

“Show them,” says Sansa. “Jaqen, Daorys, whoever it is back at your guildhouse that thinks less of you because of who you are. Take a few contracts—it will be a far more effective demonstration of your service than all this scheming and healing. Go. Kill some people.”

But Arya just...looks at Sansa. Something changed, between one breath and the next, it is as if Sansa is only now seeing a glimpse of the real Arya underneath that shell of tomboyish-vulnerability she wears, underneath even the cold, scheming assassin Sansa’s come to love as dearly as the other.

There is such a depth of sorrow in Arya’s eyes, Sansa doesn’t know what to do with it.

“Oh, Sansa,” Arya breathes out, and runs a hand over Sansa’s hair, “oh, my beautiful Sansa, what have they done to us?”

Sansa’s vision blurs.

“You were supposed to be the Queen of Love and Beauty.”

*And you were supposed to be a virtuous knight, like Lady Brienne.*

“Not supposed to be anything but dead,” says Sansa. “Given all that’s happened.”

*The time for fables is over.*

Arya shakes her head, stubborn. “Supposed to be like Father and Mother.”

Sansa relents. She cannot bear to take away this last story, her story, from her. “Then be like Jaqen and Arya,” she says gently, kissing the top of Arya’s hair. “They’re good to each other. They don’t fight.”

**NO ONE**

He’s leaning casually against the wall, next to the closed door of the stillroom.

Listening.

Inside the stillroom, she breaks, and she is Arya Stark. Arya Stark weeps. He, who has worn her indomitable face for moons on end...she affects him.
He allows her to.

_Twelve, and blinded, begging on the streets and avoiding blows. Fourteen and drinking poison by a pool so she can spend the rest of her uncountable years killing people for coin._

He is no one.

_What have we done to her?_

Daorys bows his head, and his eyes sting.

The door opens, Sansa walks out. She closes the door behind her, pauses. Their eyes meet. He blinks, furiously, trying to clear his vision; her eyes are reddened around the edges.

“Please,” she says to him, “please don’t.”

His brow furrows. _What is she asking me not to do?_

“Don’t take advantage of this rift between them. It happens. It will pass.”

_Oh._

The most surface truth: _No, never, inconceivable._ And it will not work, not with this woman. He smiles a crooked smile, looks into that heart of hers she wears as a shield, and mirrors a truth of his own back to her.

“If I could, Princess,” he says, “I would take her away, to a land—West of Westeros, perhaps—that had never heard of the War of the Five Kings, or the Starks, or the House of Black and White, and she would spend her days doing all of the things that she should have done ere she had never gone to King’s Landing.” He laughs silently at himself. “Would take Jaqen, too; my brother bears a thing that will break a thousand men in the carrying of it. Set them up in a small house by the sea, and keep watch from somewhere far away so nothing gets to them.” His mouth twists. “And there is naught at all that I can do, except beg a little bit of shelter under your roof and wait to die.”

“Jon, Bran,” she says, wipes at her eyes. “If you teach me how to build a house, I’ll come with you and I’ll build a little cottage for my brothers by the sea, and nothing will ever hurt them again.”

_And so we come to the inevitable end of our intentions; brother begets brother--who will Jaqen take with him? Who will Bran Stark want to drag along?_

_Bit by bit we will transplant the whole world to this virgin landscape of ours and pain will inevitably follow._

The only place one can go, and be free of the world, is the darkness. And it is the one place Daorys cannot drag Arya and Jaqen into behind him.

_Valar morghulis:_ Him of the Many Faces is the god of assassins and liars both.

He takes a deep breath. “Better go back in before she comes looking for me,” he says.

Sansa nods, takes a breath, then another. Regains some semblance of control. And then she turns, and walks away, her heeled boots ringing on the stone.

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He enters the room to find Arya bent over the table again. She’s laid out almost two-score little
“Feel like I should owe you something,” he mutters. “Strange.”

“Very strange,” she says, looking up at him. “Have you been drinking?”

He shakes his head.

“No debts between us, brother.”

“No, of course not,” he agrees. “Just a feeling.”

She grins impishly up at him. “Pay me back with some blood, if you would please.”

“Knew there was a catch,” he says rueful. “How much?”

“A drop or two in each,” she replies, then raises a hand to forestall his motion. “Not yet, need Jaqen to come play Lord of the Little Deaths.”

Daorys does not allow himself to be deflected with humor.

“I heard, from outside,” he says quietly.

She is no one again. “Was it good?” she asks.

“Very,” he replies.

“Learning from the best,” she says. “Heard you outside too.”

Daorys gives her a little half-bow. “I think I’ve just wrested Sansa from Zural.”

The more he has observed the interactions of the Starks, the more he has come to believe that the god’s sister shouldn’t be in the hands of a Braavosi. Properly, Sansa should be managed by Arya. But Arya’s busy with him.

He studies her as she measures out a spoonful of yellow powder into a bowl.

She plays all the players.

But she’s not good enough at it yet. Hasn’t learned how to turn a lie; she has to use the truth.

She pays a heavy price for it. Truth hurts.

Valar dohaeris.

“Secrets between you and me, Arya?” he asks.

“Two,” she says. She takes a deep breath. “House politics. Your name.”

He dismisses the first with a flick of a finger. He doesn’t play at politics. He gets a name, he gives the gift. He is given a ballot, he fills it with what he extrapolates the god’s choice to be. The latter…

“Forgive me,” she says softly.

He draws her hair away from her face, tucks it behind her ear. “Carte blanche,” he reminds her.
She stares down at the striated table-top, then shakes her head. “If your name served a purpose,” she says. “But no. I will not give it to you unless you ask; cannot disobey Him to that extent. And whatever it was that you left behind, it must have been bad. Bad-bad.”

“It must have been,” he agrees. *A kill gone sour?* Whatever it is, it is irrelevant to the current conflict.

The god keeps no one’s name. Arya keeps his memories from before he was a Faceless Man. It is enough, though there is a gap in their knowledge, she says—between his becoming a Faceless One and his becoming no one.

A pit of chaos, according to Bran Stark, she says.

“You do not need to revisit any pits,” she says.

He chuckles. “Very protective.”

A pained grimace from her. “So is the god.”

And to *that* he has no explanation that makes sense save one—that the god has placed a face upon Daorys: *the perfect servant.* And, compromised as He is, the god cannot help but bend to His own expectations of Himself: the duty of a liege-lord.

*That* pleases no one, though it shouldn’t.

It also explains why no one could not mirror Sansa Stark before now; he would have had to play at being *Sandor Clegane,* get at her through the thing in her that resonates with the “perfect knight”.

“He attacked you because of me?” Liege-lord notwithstanding, it strains credulity far beyond the realm of the possible.

“I have no idea what He was playing at,” she says. He tastes a rawness to her words.

Daorys straightens. “What did He say that had the power to hurt the wind?”

She looks away. “Said the only way I serve was by spreading my legs for him.”

He winces. “Didn’t…sorry.”

*I can’t seem to predict Him, for some reason.*

“My tactics, brother,” she says, and groans. “The best thing I could think of in the moment was clawing His eyes out.”

“And that’s the Arya Stark we know and love,” he murmurs.

“No one does not love,” she says to him: a reminder. Her hand rises, tightens over his for a moment. And he steps away from her.

Lust is a thing of the body. Things of the body are *tools,* they are to be used. The only way they can be turned around to become *motivations,* become a thing of the mind, is if one has a heart, to conflate *want* with *need.*

All tools are to be used in the service of Him of the Many Faces.

“It wasn’t about me,” he says. “I am *nothing.* An excuse.”
She gives a twisted half-grin. “He hid Himself from me, thinking I do not know.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“No man has a soul,” she says.

Every time more than five Faceless Men end up in the same room, eventually the argument leads to this. Jaqen has never taken sides.

*He took a side?*

“The *Braavosi* are right?” he asks, and even no one allows himself incredulity. “Are you sure He wasn’t just…being bleak? Too much maudlin drinking with Jon Stark?”

“The *Braavosi*,” she says, “are just Lorathi waiting to be eaten.”

“Ah.” He thinks about it, iterates the words backwards and forwards. “No man has a soul,” says Daorys slowly, “Lorathi play at having one. We pretend?”

Which means there must be something to pretend *with*.  

*Which means the god is like R’hllor*. Better to say, R’hllor *tries* to be like the god. R’hllor is clumsy and inelegant, if one is attempting to win a tourney in understatement.

*Jaqen*, on the other hand…

“My god’s better than their god,” says Daorys in a sing-song.

She giggles. “Yeah. Now go get *Him* to see it.”

*Jaqen is at war with death as well? And what, He has to defeat the Shieldmaiden before He can attack the god?* It doesn’t fit, it makes no sense.

She sighs. “He accepts the sea, he accepts the Stranger, the Weirwood, the Lion, even the fucking *Serpent* and that one I’m still shuddering about. Why does He have a problem with the *entirety* of it?”

“I like the Serpent,” says Daorys. *Letting snakes slither into you mouth, I suppose it may take a bit of getting used to, but venom orgies don’t just happen by themselves.*

“You would,” she mutters.

He grins absently, and thinks.

*The Braavosi believe a man with magical powers has set himself up as a god, like the god-kings of Leng.*

“The Braavosi truth,” says Daorys, “is that the god is a Lorathi mind-game Jaqen H’ghar plays with himself.”

*The Lorathi believe that a god is pretending to be a man, like the legend of the Hooded Wayfarer.*

She rolls her eyes. “The Lorathi truth—*we believe Jaqen H’ghar is a Braavosi pretense at a core—just a name—that used to belong to the corpse the god possessed, emptied out and used for His own purposes.”
Each is a valid truth, when looked at by itself. *Neither is true, by itself.* The god cannot balance between two paradoxes. He must exist at the point of their union.

“But there’s *more*, dearest brother of no name,” she murmurs. No one listens, attentive. “And pertinent to you. They *burn* men as sacrifices to R’hllor, but the ones they *feed* to him are god-touched. Perhaps in the hopes that he’ll absorb whatever it is in us that can create a substitute for a soul.”

*The acorn, a new weirwood? A stillborn theory, that.*

“Jaqen’s the only god around,” she says. “Makes sense that *His* god-touched would end up on the menu.”

*I am not god-touched, or they’d have flayed me and fed me to the monstrosity instead of using me as bait.*

“ I am *inhumane*, Arya,” he says. “Not inhuman.”

“Arrgh!” she snarls.

“I allow myself arrogance,” he corrects. “This is not a Lorathi homily. The simplest explanation is sometimes the most accurate—R’hllor’s priests identified the pattern of god-touched in the order. Our brother and sister we lost to Asshai, you—brother, teacher, lover. I was wearing your face when I walked off the slave-ship into Asshai; I am no one, unlike our brother and sister they’d taken before. I resonated with you, as you, as no one always does with the face one wears. They made a mistake, thought I *was* you. Because there is *nothing* else that ties me to the god-touched. And if there was—I see your objections—if there was, it was from the time before I became no one. So whatever was in me, I repudiated. I know not why, and I don’t really care. They couldn’t get it out of me in Asshai because there was *nothing* to get; the acorn, if there ever was one, is gone, cut out, cast out. The darkness grows in me,” and no one touches his breast, “it *thrives* as it has never before, I feel His tread upon the ground, I *feel* Him, as a lodestone points North.”

*It is as it should be.*

She mirrors his gaze—her eyes are hard.

“I serve,” he says.

“So do I .”

“By spreading your legs?” he asks, wry. “Please tell me you got a good rejoinder in, at least.”

She looks away. “Told him he was useless, that he couldn’t save you, couldn’t save Aeron, so I have to save you all for him.”

He rolls the words around in his head. “Not witty,” he observes. “But it balances.” It does, to his ear.

“I still hurt,” she mutters.

“Then hit him again.”

“No,” she says.

He considers her.
“Want me to hit him for you?” asks no one.

Her eyes widen a fraction.

*I’ve moved too close to her again.*

No.

*She* moved this time.

She backpedals now.

*“Don’t mirror it,”* he warns: *my lust, my want, my body, my problem. Shouldn’t become yours.*

She studies her mixtures again. *“Help me,”* she whispers.

Silence stretches between them.

And one by one no one closes off the tendrils of his awareness; withdraws from her, defines as “irrelevant” the thing in him that craves the smell of her.

There is a tremor in the air, in his lungs.

**Jaqen comes.**

The god opens the door, steps in, closes it softly behind Him. *“Forgive the delay,”* says Jaqen, *“Sansa worries you two might be fornicating—”* He pauses, takes in the meticulously arrayed samples on the table. *“What do you do?”*

*“Something Samwell told me about,”* replies Arya. *“Chelation. He got the recipe from Oldtown for me, but it has to be modified for the poison, and I don’t know what will work.”*

Jaqen comes closer to the table, looks down, then picks up one of the dishes. Sniffs. *“Butter?”*

*“Have to find something that binds the poison,”* she mutters, placing the last of the powders she’s been evaporating in the crucible. *“Something that binds it to itself more than the poison binds to the body. A few drops of blood in each, and if the blood stops dying,”* she shrugs.

Daorys takes a closer look at the samples: fats of various kinds, poisons and cures, sugars, meats, salts, everything and anything that is safe for him to consume, even in small quantities.

*“Exhaustive,”* he says.

*“First batch,”* she replies. There is determination in her eye.

Daorys prepares a tourniquet around his upper arm.

His breath stutters in his lungs, and almost without thought Jaqen reaches out to steady him; the darkness within no one pulses, in time with Jaqen’s heartbeat, and it slows his own until his breathing evens out.

Arya walks to Daorys, a long, flat black shard in her hand.

*Obsidian,* he realizes. *An obsidian knife*.
“Sharpest edge possible,” she says.

And it is, he doesn’t even feel the cut until the blood wells out of his upper arm, and the cut is deep, its edges cleanly parted. She catches the blood in a funnel-capped piece of glassware.

“So,” she says, casting a look towards Jaqen over her shoulder. “You handled Sansa, did you?” She carefully unties the tourniquet as the flow of blood slows, clots.

Jaqen sighs. “The entire conversation kept slithering out of my grasp. I have no idea what is going on in her head; haven’t since Zural started spending time with her.” He shakes his head. “Tried to tell her, beloved, danced all over and around it. Couldn’t. Left her with the best analogue I could—that I was the leader of the House. And that I’d mistreated you.”

“Well done, Jaqen,” says Daorys, “we were just now looking for a good way to explain the Many-Faced God. A rapist guildmaster is exactly right.”

“Yes, you cleaned up that mess very well,” adds Arya, acid.

“She asked me questions,” says Jaqen. “You love me--you are biased towards me. I answered truthfully.”

Daorys and Arya exchange a look; they’ve spoken of it, the way the god manages Sansa Stark’s regard of Him--let her think the worst, then make her backtrack when evidence counters her misconception so she overbalances, time and again, in Jaqen’s favor.

Every married man wants to placate his mother-in-law. The god helped kill his, and now he’s latched onto Sansa Stark as a substitute.

Sansa Stark plays the part well, it must be said.

And unconscious patterns are often the most powerful—especially with Jaqen, who seems to have turned unconsciousness into an art-form: Jaqen H’ghar’s mother had red hair; the red of Catelyn Stark’s hair, that lightened to Sansa Stark’s auburn in the summer.

The god’s spent almost five hundred years dying half his hair red—in conscious rebellion, he says, against Valyria. Rebellion against a civilization that doesn’t exist? It’s a bit too much, even for Jaqen H’ghar. No, Jaqen used to dye his hair half-red in apology for his own existence, an apology to Niobe of Lorath, for being forced to bear a dragonlord’s son. An apology and a prayer: what was her lives on in me, and that part is not a monster.

“But you tarnished the halo a little, at least?” asks Daorys.

Jaqen nods.

Arya snorts. “Halo needs a lot of tarnishing.” She mimics Sansa Stark’s voice. “Don’t tell Jaqen how I lied to Fat Robert, don’t tell Jaqen I’m thinking of killing a baby, don’t let Jaqen see my wounds, Jaqen needs to be protected from the ugliness of the world.”

“What a strange place this is,” says Daorys. “An assassin being protected by a princess.”

Would have called it offensive, if I wasn’t spending my days undergoing similar indignities at Princess Arya Stark’s hand, with no complaints whatsoever.

Jaqen shakes his head. “Tests of my will aside, she doesn’t need to know.” He holds up a hand as Arya opens her mouth to argue. “No, she doesn’t. What purpose will it serve?”
Arya gives the god a dark look. “And so you hide yet again,” she says as she turns back to the samples.

The god turns to him. “You’re silent. No further observations on the ridiculousness of it all?”

“Hmm? No, just thinking.”

Arya and Jaqen are moving down the rows and columns of samples, Arya makes notes as Jaqen’s hand hovers over each bowl; the god shakes his head “no” a lot.

Jaqen looks up. “What are you playing at? Or has our ‘fight’ affected you as well?”

“I am no one, Jaqen,” he says. “Arya, is the blood sufficient?”

She nods.

He grins. “Earned myself a nap, I think.”

“Say it,” says Jaqen.

“Is that an edict?” he asks with a smile, then holds up a hand as Jaqen starts forming a cutting reply. “Jest, brother. But if I was to say something, I’d start by observing that one heeds Zural’s every word when it comes to maritime infiltration. One dismisses Zural’s every word when it comes to marriage.”

He’s gratified to see his extrapolation has found something of a mark—there’s a bit of a wild look in both their eyes.

“Both of you, right?” Daorys asks. “What did he say, ‘a person’s worst enemy is their spouse’? He loves saying that.”

Both have the grace to look abashed.

Then Jaqen stares at Daorys. “When did you go to Zural for advice on marriage?”

“The Myr mission,” says Daorys. He points a finger at Jaqen. “You backed out, I had to marry all three of them!”

“Sorry,” Jaqen mutters.

Arya’s smiling now. She sets down her paper and quill, comes forward, winds her arms around Daorys’s waist. “And what would your marital advice sound like?”

He looks down at her, stares into her eyes. “Lie back,” he says, “and think of your god.”

“You are pitiless,” she replies.

He furrows his brow. “Did you expect something else?”

Advice isn’t aimed at you, beautiful one, it catches you only in the periphery. It’s aimed at Jaqen-the-idiot.

And it seems it’s found its mark, because he looks up to see a half-smile twisting at the god’s face. “Is that what you do, brother?” Jaqen asks.

Arya’s heartbeat speeds up.
Daorys is swimming in deep waters here, and they are far outside his own area of expertise, he’s only ever been married for the space of a single day.

“No,” Daorys says quietly, “I kill the target before it gets that far.”

Jaqen’s expression doesn’t change. And yet Arya calms.

Worked. Good.

“I’m going to go have that nap now,” says Daorys. And no one, very carefully, nonchalantly, backs out of the stillroom.

JAQEN

“I have an idea,” says Arya, “how about we not go to any assassin for marital advice?”

Jaqen looks at his bride.

Daorys is not wrong.

Jaqen has taken the point, though his bride mistook epiphany for hurt.

Only intention can hurt, beloved, and it seems your brother remembers nothing that can hurt me.

He grins and walks forward, gathers her to his chest. He kisses the top of her head. “So protective of my heart?” he asks.

She kisses his chest. “You better not have one,” she warns.

Jaqen grins, and bends down, sweeps her into his arms.

He doesn’t set her down till they’re in their chamber, and then he drops her on the bed. She bounces, a bit, then swings her legs over the side, looking at him, bemused.

He kneels in front of her.

“What can I do to take back what I said?”

“It is true, isn’t it?” she asks sadly. “The best way I serve you is by spreading my legs.”

He rises, holds out his hand, and she draws him onto the bed beside her.

“Truth always hurts the most,” he agrees. He places a kiss at the corner of her mouth. “You do serve me. You balance me.” He takes in the radiating lines of her iris, depth upon depth, not gray but blue and black and green and a thousand other colors layered one upon the other. “You find me when I am lost. You control me, when I cannot control myself. And you do it in this way, skin to skin and mouth to mouth, because it is the only way that I seem to be able to learn. Talking didn’t work with me, did it? Reason didn’t work, for all my venerable four hundred years as a Lorathi. I listen to reason as much as...as Joffrey Baratheon ever did. You know no other way to reach me; when I am between your legs there is no room for any thought in me save you, you tame my greatest enemy, my mind, and you set it to useful purpose.”

She is tucked into his arms; his chest is wet from her weeping by the last word.
“Lovely girl?” he asks.

“More,” she demands.

“Oh, but we near the end of this truth,” he murmurs into her hair.

“Then give me the next one.”

“Mmm.” He shifts, so he can find her mouth again.

She traps his thigh between her legs.

“But I serve you to in this way as well,” he whispers, dark, his finger tracing her spine. “You use me for your needs.”

Saying the words, it loosens some of the straps he’s tied his lust down with.

“I like playing with the fire,” she says in a small voice. “I hunger.”

“Do you?” He kisses her throat. “And here I thought you tangled. You asked me to teach you how to be uncomplicated, once. There is nothing more simple than you and me.”

Her fingers tighten upon his arm.

“I do use you,” she murmurs. “The whole world focuses down to nothing but you.” She draws back, looks at him as if she is seeing him anew. “You make me beg for coherence.”

“Coherence?” he grins. “That is a very flattering definition for my cock.”

She glares at him, but there is no heat to it.

A smirk pulls at his lips, unbidden. “Shall we let the moniker stand?”

She bites her lip at him; he sees the intention in her eyes: yes, please, yes.

He slides his hands into the waistband of her velvet trousers, finds her slit, moist.

“No, no begging,” he warns, “I think I’ve hurt you enough.”

His fingertip moves, gentle, focusing on the tight bundle of nerves that crown her womanhood.

“Didn’t hurt me,” she says, stubborn.

“Really?”

“Not breakable,” she says.

“But bruisable,” he says.

Her eyes are focused upon him, and they are dark with need.

Just because she’s not using her mouth to beg... “I lose all control with you,” he growls.

“I love you,” she says.
He buckles.

He flips her upon her back, slides down her body.

“I would like to serve, if such is allowed,” he says. “Don’t want to presume, you know, make you spread your legs.”

“Serve me,” she commands.

He draws her knees apart; she helps him drag her trousers and smallclothes off her. He grins and then his mouth is between her legs.

He tastes her. And he sets to his task, the thing he’s been wanting to do all morning. The taste of her under his tongue intoxicates him, the little sighs as he fastens his mouth to her core; suspended between famine and feast, she is water to the dying, absolution to the penitent, she is the focus of all need in him and he exists only at the tip of his tongue, his fingers against her pulse, until she moans and her hips rise off the bed, and his mouth is covered in her juices.

He raises himself upon his elbows, crawls up her body until he is lying half on her, their faces next to each other. She kisses him then; he knows she tastes herself on him.

“Did I serve well?” he asks. “Will I be allowed to do it again? Will I get a reward for it?”

“Yes,” she hisses. “Please, yes, and what do you want?”

He kisses her forehead. “For you to hear something,” he says, “and not rage.”

She stretches. “Mmm. No rage left in me. You consumed it all.”

“Oh good. It worked.” He draws her into his arms again, and she burrows into him, as if she’s trying to crawl into his skin.

“Want the Wind,” he murmurs.

It begins as a breeze, cool, it is in his mouth, his nostrils, his throat, his lungs, it disperses in every part of him.

“Better,” she sighs, relaxes into him.

“More,” he says.

The Wind in him rises, it spreads out from his throat, his lungs, into his blood, every vein scalded from the inside with ice, with the taste of her, it rises and he drowns in air, and when it returns to his lungs, he kisses the side of her jaw, her temple.

“The Wind is very gentle with me,” he says.

“Wind’s in love with you,” she replies.

“Always nice when one’s god is particularly fond of one,” he says.

She tries to draw away. He holds her closer. “A new god,” he continues, “you don’t have any texts I can follow, no rituals, no customs. No Valar morghulis, no witty sayings. So I have to make it up as I go along.” He kisses her throat again.

“Jaqen,” she whispers, “what—”
He silences her with his mouth, breathes in time with her.

“Braavosi make an enemy out of everything,” he says, “their bodies, their targets, their weaknesses. Their god.”

“Give me your truth,” she says, “because Zural has given me his, and it resonates.”

“It does,” he says. “It is a seductive truth. I am seducible, apparently.”

He feels a featherlight touch upon him; her hands have wandered, it seems.

“I desire coherence,” she says, her voice throaty, low.

So it is allowed to stand.

“And you can’t argue with your mouth full,” he says thoughtfully.

“I bite,” she warns.

“A lie,” he says.

She turns, and her mouth, warm and wet, engulfs his erection.

It is very hard to concentrate with her lips working him like that.

For the first time since every failed attempt at the Wall, he reaches for the discipline, the detachment of a Lorathi.

It escapes his grasp again.

Sensation does not subside, he rises, and feels the movement of her tongue, the suction of her mouth across every nerve, at the edge of every thought. He pulls the thoughts that are relevant, the thoughts that reach for her like tendrils of light and darkness.

“A man who kills easily in cold blood cannot ever be a Faceless Man,” he says. “He cannot ever attain the discipline required to give a gift. It is a difficult thing to reconcile, the ability to be merciful and the ability to be utterly detached from the murders you commit. Braavosi do it as soldiers do—they follow orders, they build attachments, camaraderie.”

She pulls him deep into her throat.

He groans.

“Lorathi submit,” he says once he finds his voice again. “Everything that they are. To me. Jaqen H’ghar submitted to the god, as long as Jaqen H’ghar could maintain the delusion of it. And at the Wall I knew I needed to submit to something; cannot live with myself elsewise.”

She has paused, she pulls her mouth away.

I am no one.

Chanting it to himself doesn’t make it true.

He lays a gentle hand on her head, guides her back down to his cockhead.

“Not avoiding argument,” he murmurs, as her tongue and lips and throat resume their ministrations,
“just very close, need —”

And of course she redoubles her efforts and even theology must take a back seat to the sounds she draws from him as she takes him to the pinnacle and then draws him down in a long, prolonged shuddering in her mouth.

She swallows, and then it is her turn, to turn and kiss him; he tastes the bitter residue of himself on her lips.

“That looked very much like some form of submission,” she says, teasing.

“All kinds of submission,” he replies, and the truth in his words resonates through both of them. He half-rises, his hand cupping her cheek. “I have no idea what form the Wind’s doctrine will take,” he says, “but ‘The Starks will rise again’ seemed like a good start.”

Her eyes are wide, her gaze trapped in his.

“Did I guess well?” he asks softly.

He doesn’t let her reply, he kisses her, mouth open, slowly; her turn, to lock him to her, the kiss drawn out like a mouthful of sweet wine, allowed to trickle down one’s throat, into one’s bloodstream a drop at a time, with each swipe of her tongue.

“This is all backwards,” she whispers.

“Circular,” he corrects. Then, more gently, “I am not your enemy.”

She closes her eyes, lays her head on his chest. “You are my heart,” she says finally. “You are the filter of perception through which I see the world.”

*And so we each come to the other’s truths at last.*

“My heart,” he says gently, “have you aught to add to the doctrine of the Wind for your first convert, or shall it be the shortest holy book in all the world?”

“Save him,” she breathes, rests her head on his chest. “Save my brother from himself.”

Him of the Many Faces turns on his back, stares up into the darkness.

“You test a true believer,” he says, his voice utterly neutral.

“Not a test,” she says. “A supplication to my god.”

**ARYA**

The cellars underneath the “embassy” still smell like shit—sulfurous fumes leaking from the hot springs; the air is clouded, flickering torches illuminate shafts of steam rising from cracks in the ground. Vaulted stone arches lead into darkness, and she dances between them.

Zural is pushing her harder than he’s ever pushed before.

She’s learned a considerable amount, under Jaqen’s tutelage.

Not enough.

But there is a conditioning imparted to her body by the cold air, the ride to the Wall; her heartbeat
remains slow, rises and falls at command. She wears a brother’s face, the pockmarked brother from
the Summer Isles who carried a gift in the form of the plague when she was still an acolyte.

Zural pushes her back, blow by blow, to the wall; she ducks under, narrowly avoids the hilt of his
blade being backed into her chin.

“Care to explain,” says Zural, well into his second wind, “why two of my brothers showed up
bloody, half-naked and covered in dust yesterday?”

She sighs, raises a hand; a request for a break.

The request is curious enough that he stops—Arya Stark never asks for a break, Zural has to force
them on her, even when her arms tremble and she can barely lift her sword higher than her
shoulder. Zural lowers his sword.

“You asked,” she says, shrugs, “needed to provoke Him to have it answered, sex-and-blood seemed
the best way. The answer, by the way, is ‘no’. The Wind can go head-to-head against Him of the
Many Faces, if she’s given the range—useless in proximity; He will turn her to dust if He ever
withdraws His favor from her. But she cannot substitute for him.”

Zural crosses his arms. “How is that being? He said it himself.”

She snorts. “And He’s never wrong? No, Zural, his power is already shared amongst all of us, the
faces, the memories, it will not take much to assume the rest. Even the dreaming He has taught to
me. Those functions I could assume; He may not even fight me over them.” She looks at him. “But
you and the old man did your work too well,” she says sadly. “There is nothing in me. The same
thing that led to His compromise for the Starks—it cannot lead to mine. The Wind has no
compassion. So why the fuck would she care about some man’s vengeance, his life, his sorrow?”

Zural doesn’t quite understand yet. She allows her face to show him the truth.

Mercy, to eat their pain, mercy to grant them fortitude that is not theirs, mercy to lay their ghosts to
rest.

There is no mercy in the Wind.

“So you can be assuming all the functions of the Many-Faced God, in time,” he says slowly, “But
not the making of new Faceless Men?”

Her mouth twists. “I’d make something. They’d look like us. A little frozen, maybe, but they’d
work. You’ve seen wights.”

And now Zural is disturbed. Truly disturbed. He’s been taken to see a wight; a stray one, fished out
of the river and quenched with Valyrian steel.

“No capacity for mercy in them,” she says softly. “No capacity for anything but following orders.”

Zural leans against a pillar, arms crossed before his chest. His hair is even curlier in the humidity.
“It is good to knowing this now, before anyone’s conjectures go too far,” he says quietly. But then
he brightens, looks up, raises an eyebrow. “But there might still be a way…Ambrasys cannot be
made to cooperate, I think, any more than Daorys. But there are other questions to be asked. And
you can be taking Jaqen in a fight?”

“I’ll show you?” she asks. He nods. “Brace yourself.”
Seeds of sudden doubt splinter his mien. She doesn’t allow them to bloom. She takes the breath from his lungs.

Not much. Not long.

“Asphyxiation,” she says, when he can breathe again. “His power, now that He is bound, needs proximity. Far stronger than me, when He is proximal. But I just need a passing breeze.”

Her teacher’s eyes are gleaming. “Prodigious! Far greater range than him!”

You would focus on that, dear teacher. Braavosi can be rampant optimists.

She nods.

“Enough training then,” he says. “For today.”

She grins. A reward? Breaks are shameful, but rewards, now those can be taken quite readily.

“Well done,” he says. “Very well done.”

She preens a little as she walks away.

She is not good enough yet to sell lie as truth. And so she tells the truth, all truth, and gives just enough gaps between truths that everything accumulates to a lie.

The Wind has no interest in being fed; it feeds upon the rise and fall of masses of air. The Wind does not need to eat men from the inside-out, she will simply bind breath to their bodies as she bound Jaqen. They will be Braavosi, all of them, forever. And unable to access the memories, the faces of brothers. But they will be “good enough” assassins, and the death-masks will still work.

She uses even the Wind against itself--for the Wind not to take the burden from Him when she can? It is very cruel to the god.

She who is no one, she who is Arya Stark, “loyalty” is still a defined concept for her. But the Wind, the Wind doesn’t understand such concerns. The Wind only knows one thing: it submitted, in Asshai, or it could not have lived with itself.

It remembers the taste of the submission, His lips upon hers.

“You look sad, Arya Stark,” says Zural as they climb the stairs, side-by-side, out out of the humid stink of the cellars.

“Sorrow,” she agrees, “that it has come to this.”

Zural shakes his head. “This is the problem with religion, child—religion is making slaves out of us. Unthinking, obedient slaves. Once he was of the same mind as us. But he has grown blind to where his assuming power as a god leads to. Jaqen has brought this upon himself.”

“I am learning,” she says quietly. “That all men bring their end upon themselves.”

The Wind has turned its back on the House of Black and White.

JON
A new raven; the King in the North studies each word.

Jon,

Very well. One problem at a time.

Cersei Lannister, Euron Greyjoy, your armies of walking dead. Then I open a stud-farm.

-Daenerys

He can’t help the grin.

She’s not showing this to her advisors either.

Because he can’t imagine diplomatic, smooth-talking Tyrion Lannister lending himself to such aggressive directness.

The grin carries him all the way over to “his” tower, and the council-chamber at the base of it. It slips from his face only when he looks at the map-table again.

The wights are massing to the east.

Almost as if they can think, almost as if they ready themselves for an assault.

Almost as if the Night King has found a way to control them from beyond the Wall.

Chapter End Notes

so this and another chapter of setup, and then plot CASCADES. Wheeee!

Thank you all! Love you!
So I'll start adding some notes on "important" things from the books/universe that didn't make it to the TV show. In this chapter, this is rather important:

Cheese (The Rat Catcher)--excerpt from the ASOIAF Wiki:

Cheese is the alias of a rat-catcher who, during the Dance of the Dragons, helped murder six-year-old Prince Jaehaerys, King Aegon II Targaryen's firstborn son and the heir to the Iron Throne. Cheese's true name is lost to history.

Cheese was a rat-catcher in the Red Keep. The hidden doors and secret tunnels that Maegor I Targaryen had built were as familiar to Cheese as the rats that he hunted. However, even Cheese knew of no way in and out of Maegor's Holdfast except over the drawbridge that spanned the dry moat and its formidable iron spikes. Cheese spent time in Flea Bottom.

After the death of Prince Lucerys Velaryon, Cheese, along with Blood was employed by Mysaria, Prince Daemon Targaryen's spymaster, to slay one of Aegon II Targaryen's sons.

Using a forgotten passageway in the Red Keep, Cheese led Blood into the heart of the castle unseen by any guard. The two men crept up through the walls and slipped into Queen Alicent Hightower's chambers. Once inside Cheese bound and gagged the Dowager Queen whilst Blood strangled her bedmaid. Then they waited for Queen Helaena Targaryen and her children to arrive.

Once Blood and Cheese confronted Helaena in the Tower of the Hand they told her to name which son she wanted them to kill. Helaena offered herself but they refused, stating it had to be a son. Although Helaena eventually named her youngest son Maelor (after Cheese threatened her that Blood would rape her daughter Jaehaera if she did not choose one), they killed Jaehaerys instead. It was Blood who slew Jaehaerys, striking the boy's head off with a single blow. After killing the prince Blood and Cheese did no further harm to Helaena or her surviving children and fled with the prince's head in hand.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA

She smiles at Zural, and draws another card.

The Empress.

It gives her a winning hand; she doesn’t gloat, just places it carefully on the table and turns to Jon.
“Jon,” she asks, “is this any good? I can never tell.”

Zural looks at her from lowered brows. He sighs, then places his own hand upon the table: *Ten of wands, two of discs, the Drowned God*. Wands and discs are inimical to each other, and the Drowned God has no power to make peace between these suites—the very definition of a losing hand.

Zural passes two pieces of silver to her.

Finally, she allows herself to grin. “Have I mentioned how delighted I was that you joined the family tonight?”

Zural mock-glares at her. “And that pile of silver that grows at your right hand has nothing to do with this?”

Jon finally looks away from his own hand, glances down at hers. “Ah, she’s got you, Ser Zural,” says Jon with a grin of his own. “And all I’ve got is cups.”

“Empty cups,” mutters Bran. Apparently Daorys recommends ale in the morning, and *only* milk or water at night. To build muscles. Sansa thinks it’s a “crock of horse-shit” to use Sandor’s words, but it does no harm that she can see.

“Right, I think I’ve got it,” says Samwell. “Deal me in.”

The five sit around the table in her mother’s bower, playing the Braavosi variant of “Pauper’s War”, a card-game the Dornish claim they invented. Arya sits in their mother’s favourite chair, *reading*, for once. Sansa peers at the spine: *Weak Convergence Methods for Random Processes*. What does that even mean? Arya found it in Winterfell’s library, obviously, but why would she pick it? *Trying to impress her teacher?* If that’s the case, then Arya’s got an account of a battle tucked in within the pages. Sansa had caught onto the trick when they were children, emulated it from time to time—a thin book (love stories, in Sansa’s case) in between the pages of the Seven-Pointed Star.

Arya groans. “I give up,” she says, slams the cover shut. “*None* of their references point to anything relevant.”

“It is as I am telling you,” says Zural. “They are not approximating or calculating—they are feeding a hundred years of logbook records back to us.”

“What is this?” asks Samwell.

“Tide tables,” says Zural. “Your Mercantile-Captains’ Union is to be trying to sell a thing in Braavos, a ‘new and improved method of calculating the tides’. Except that it is being no such thing—a fraud. And it is becoming *our* problem because it’s a Westeros union dealing with the Sealord.”

Sansa sits up. “But the Mercantile-Captains’ Union has *nothing* to do with the North; they operate out of King’s Landing.”

“And the Iron Bank will be having no dealings with Cersei Lannister,” says Zural, and he shakes his head. “So Captain’s Union is trying to pretend they are a Northern entity.” He shrugs. “No need to take it any further; they have nothing worth buying.”

Sansa’s mouth twists. This is the same union that refused to see her clerk a year ago, turned
Sansa’s message away at the door. “How the tide changes,” she murmurs, and exchanges a look with Sandor. He’s sitting in a hard-backed chair near the door, drinking.

She wishes Sandor would join them; he never does, when anyone outside the family is present. He’s become even more rigid about rank since the day she asked for the kiss.

“Family knows what’s what,” he’d muttered, when she’d demanded an explanation. “But the Keep’s getting busier, hundred people around now. You don’t want rumors.”

What, of impropriety that never happened?

She will not force him to return to the easy association they’d had in his earliest days at Winterfell. He is right about the rumors—there are quite a few already. But he is wrong about their implication; Sansa Stark’s reputation has already been made. Soldiers talk. They’ve seen Ramsay’s torture-rooms, they’ve heard the accounts from the Bolton serving-women.

They’ve seen the slaughter of the hunting hounds—can’t trust dogs that have tasted human flesh.

Her reputation, pieced together out of a thousand rumors, contains no hint in it of a woman that cannot bear to touch most men, that used to go to tears every time she walked past certain rooms, that trembled for a year each time she hears the departing clatter of Jon’s horse-hooves in the courtyard.

Her reputation is a dark thing—when you want justice, you go to Jon Stark. When you want a solution, you go to the eldest of his sisters.

An alliance between Sansa Stark and Sandor Clegane does not muddy her dress; it enhances the menace clinging to his cloak.

Silly Sandor.

She gives her shield an arch look, returns to the next hand.

On the other side of the room, Daorys and Jaqen are involved in some sort argument, and they’re getting louder.

“…that is merely an assumption,” Daorys snarls.

Jaqen leans forward upon his elbows—they sit cross-legged on the ground, in the corner. “So according to you, the fish can be, in fact, a goat.”

“No, I’m saying it’s just as possible. The class of an animal does not presume it’s shape. You assume a fish is not a goat.”

Jon draws a card. “Jaqen ran into Daorys outside the council chambers,” he murmurs, not looking up. “I think the original question was ‘how are you?’ and Daorys revised it because he felt it wasn’t precise enough. The matter escalated.”

“Do they always argue in this manner?” asks Sansa, her gaze divided between Arya and Zural.

Zural snorts. “That is not an argument, that is foreplay—it is not being a proper Lorathi argument until someone pulls a knife over the definition of the word definition.”

Arya sighs, somewhat dreamily. “I missed it, these past few moons,” she says. “The tangles of logic, like a cat playing with a ball of yarn. I can’t always follow the thread--I just listen--but
sometimes, someone just says something that is so right it cuts through the knot, like a clean blade.” She shivers. “Feels so good when that happens.”

“Far too much time with the Lorathi, Arya Stark,” Zural admonishes. “Far too much time.”

“It is so good,” she says, rebellious.

Zural sighs. “Go, Arya Stark, go.”

She happily rises to her feet, crosses to the other side of the room and sinks to the floor, laying her head in Jaqen’s lap. Jaqen hand rises, absently, to drape around her waist, but he doesn’t stop his impassioned argument.

“Your deal, Sansa,” says Bran.

She stacks the cards together, shuffles. She lets a few of the cards slip “clumsily” out of her grasp. Zural’s caught on, but Jon and Bran still underestimate her.

*If I win the next few hands*, she thinks, *a new dress*. The first dress she will ever have bought for herself. *Something…Braavosi.*

When it comes time to place bets, she realizes Samwell’s attention has wandered.

Jon snaps his fingers under Samwell’s eyes. “Maester. Maester! Your turn. Wake up now.”

“Um. Sorry,” says Samwell. “I fold. If I may.”

“Wrong game,” says Jon. “Go, Sam, go.”

Samwell bobs his head at the others, pushes back from the table and crosses the room in Arya’s wake.

“May I join in?” he asks.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “Always welcome,” he says.

“Except you are not allowed to put your head on anyone’s lap,” adds Daorys.

**ARYA**

She is only peripherally engaged in the argument. Instead, she watches her brother’s eyes as he speaks.

There’s *something* in his eyes; a depth to them, that there is a world behind them. In her memories of him before he died, such depth was not his, even at the height of his acuity. An entire world, when he plays the game of faces as “Lorathi” with Jaqen, and the world is built of jagged shards, and each shard contains a smaller shard, a recursion that is like no mirror she has ever seen.

*I cannot tell him the pattern behind it, not without disclosing what Jaqen doesn’t want disclosed.*

But she knows, in her bones, they didn’t lure him to Asshai because he was wearing Arya Stark. It is a theory, only, but she watches his hands, focuses on his nails.

*The ridges.*

The ridges running down the length of his fingernails, flicker, lengthen sometimes, then vanish altogether. She knows where she’s seen them before—every Faceless Man has. On aged corpses
she’s washed in the House of Black and White.

The aging of his body has accelerated, somehow.

*How often is he changing faces?*

There would be no outward sign of it, if he went from the same face to the same face in a short span of time. He could do it a score of times each watch, and no one would be able to tell.

Except Jaqen.

And Jaqen is the excuse she’s used today: *need you, brother, to make Him see reason--He undoes all chains of my reasoning, I resort to the logic of the body when He needs the logic of the mind.*

It holds both Jaqen and Daorys to the present moment, and lets *her* focus on her brother’s body.

There are no *records* of the symptoms of those that survive the fish-poison. The victim dies, and grotesque growths are found all over his body, growths that continue to grow long past the stopping of his heart. But Jaqen is *managing* the tumors.

*So what else is there?*

Something opposes Jaqen’s will. And there is only one thing that can do that--another god. And yet there is nothing of R’hillor in Daorys--Jaqen would have been able to tell. The darkness hums in her brother, leaves no room for anything else.

*Does it?*

She angles her shoulder, leans further into Jaqen, re-adjusts her posture from hunchback to odalisque.

“Daorys,” she purrs; her brother looks up expectantly. “I want to fondle your lungs,” she says.

Daorys just stares at her, no expression at all on his face.

Jaqen breaks first—a sharp bark of laughter. “Zural!” he calls to the other side of the room in Lengenese, “Zural, your seduction training is *most* excellent!”

“She is to be learning weapons work before she learns unarmed combat,” says Zural complacently, studying his hand. He plucks a card, places it on the table. “Three silver,” he says in Westerosi.

Jon and Sansa and Bran are looking between the assassins, a bit confused. But then their eyes focus on something behind her. She turns.

Her brother has fallen over sideways, he’s shaking; immediately she moves to him.

He’s *laughing*.

“Help her, Jaqen,” Daorys wheezes, “help her, for the love of god, *help her* .”

It earns her brother another smack upside the head, and she retreats back to Jaqen’s side. “I’ve seduced a kill before,” she snaps.

*Raff the Sweetling.*

Slowly, he regains control of himself, draws himself to a sitting position. He’s breathing deeply,
still trying to suppress the chortles. “Yes, O cruel one,” he says. “We know, remember?”

“She broke you,” says Jaqen in a tone of wonder.

And that’s when she realizes the laughter was not feigned, not controlled, not anything but a reaction. Her eyes harden.

*If he can laugh like that, he’s still in there.*

*Not letting him go.*

Jaqen’s arm tightens around her waist.

“Tell me, *sugarplum*,” says Daorys, “how did you get Jaqen the Unseducible in bed with skills as...Zural-like as yours?” Absently, he catches the knife she throws at his head for the “*sugarplum*”.

“He wasn’t in his body at the time,” she replies. “No seduction required when he’s *dead*-dead.”

Her brother smirks at Jaqen. “Gives a new meaning to *resurrection*.”

She snorts. “Poor Jon, if R’hllor’s priestess had tried that with--”

*R’hllor. Blood, bubbling in the mouth.*

“Arya?” Jaqen asks.

“The only reason you are alive, brother,” she says to Daorys softly, “is because they fed you R’hllor’s blood.”

“They *fed* you--” Jaqen’s voice has risen, his eyes are darkening. God-darkening, no lust in them.

“Calm down,” hisses her brother. “Unless you want to make a scene.”

“I want to know about the blood,” says Jaqen.

Samwell Tarly swings his bulk forward. “All righty then,” he says, in tones of false cheer. “When assassins start hissing and spitting at each other in a language I don’t even recognize, I think it’s prudent to vacate the area.”

Jaqen holds out a hand. “No,” he says. “*We’re* leaving.” He rises to his feet in a smooth movement, no feigned awkwardness. So of course Arya and Daorys have to do the same.

“I did not think it needed to be said,” says Jaqen as he strides towards the door, “that you do not keep *anything* from me that involves ‘blood’, and ‘R’hllor’.” His voice is low. Cold.

She is no one. She does not react. She follows her god, Daorys at her heels.

“*Not you,*” he snaps at her. But there is something under the rage, something for her: *trust me.*

She bows her head, retreats to the corner of the room. But trepidation grows in her breast—*that* was a command from the god. Zural saw the god *command* her to do something outside the parameters of a mission. As *Himself*, as the god.

The Braavosi will retaliate, sooner or later.
She exchanges a glance with Zural across the room. It works to her advantage, that Jaqen left her behind. *I’ll manage him,* her gaze says to Zural.

Her teacher gives an almost imperceptible nod, returns to his cards.

**NO ONE**

Jaqen leads them to the tallest roofed level of the Lady’s Tower, the snow-blanketed battlements unmarred by footprints before theirs; no furs, no cloak.

Daorys summons the discipline of the Lorathi, and tattered though it may be, it answers to his call without effort.

_Cold is a sensation. A sensation is a signal to the body. The signal is received, deciphered. It is not needed anymore._

The sensation does not retreat—his mind simply categorizes it as “irrelevant”.

The cold fades, and he stands in the biting wind; he is no one.

“Blood,” says the god, his eyes black-in-black as they had once been in Asshai.

“I’ve been making a list,” says no one, “of what rituals and sacrifices I remember from there. They bled R’hllor, sometime near the end, fed me the blood.” He gives his god a tentative smile. “It did nothing. Nothing at all, Jaqen.”

The god is impassive. “How long has she known of this?”

“Six days,” he replies.

“R’hllor’s blood,” says Jaqen, advancing a step, “in you. And she didn’t think I should know about it?”

Daorys says nothing, he holds his god’s gaze. “The decision to keep silent was mine,” says Daorys. “Not hers.”


Daorys grins, cocks his head to a side. “Truths are expensive, brother. A trade?”

“Still,” snarls Jaqen. “Still you play?”

No one smiles. “We never stop,” he reminds the god.

“Ask, then,” says Jaqen.

Almost, no one closes his eyes against the god’s. _Almost_ too much, even for him. He sways; Jaqen does not reach out this time.

He chooses his words carefully—there is naught he _needs_ to know. But there are some wants.

“Did you ever know me,” he asks quietly, “not just _you_—I mean Jaqen H’ghar. Did you ever know me before I became no one?”

He does not expect the surprise in the god’s mien—surprise, followed by _sorrow_.

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*Original text by A. C. Milan, translated by E. S. Milligan.*
“She has *not* given you your name back,” says the god slowly. Almost *wonderingly*.

“Of course not,” says no one. “I didn’t ask; she will not disobey. I would *tell* you if I knew, Jaqen.”

Jaqen takes a breath, and something in his posture relaxes. “I recruited you,” he says quietly.

“*Did you*?” Too much disbelief in his own voice.

And the pattern resolves: their brother and sister that were lost in Asshai. Arya Stark. And him. All the ones Jaqen recruits are god-touched.

*She was right. She knew*. And no one sorrows, a little, for that unknown thing Jaqen gave him that Daorys repudiated alongside his name.

“Curious?” asks the god.

“No.” His tone is flat. “Those times are gone for a good reason, whatever the reason was. You, along with whoever I needed to get rid of. Can’t pick and choose or who’d get rid of their *god*?”

He thinks on it, on the god and the why of Winterfell, of Asshai. “Love,” he murmurs.

Jaqen looks startled.

*You walked into Asshai for love.*

“A pattern,” says no one. “All the faces of love. Two memories, ill-formed and incomplete though they are, our brother, our sister. Her. You would have loved her even if neither of you had been interested in wedding or bedding the other.” He grins at Jaqen. “Brother. Teacher. Lover. Servant.”

Even no one is allowed momentary glee.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow, sardonic. “That *pleases* you?”

Daorys gives his god an incredulous look.

Jaqen shakes his head. “I forget how much of a deist you are.”

“You forget because I don’t pray,” no one says quietly. “It would burden you.”

“And *that* doesn’t burden me?”

“I am no one; no one needs nothing that is not essential for the body’s function. No one does not burden anyone. That you, that Arya, that gods choose to burden themselves—that is your choice.” He sighs, bows his head. “Ask, brother. I know all I’ve wanted to know.”

“R’hallor’s blood,” says the god softly. “Why does she think it’s the reason you’re alive?”

No one remembers the bitter-bile taste of it, acidic against his teeth, a screeching, tearing at the soft tissue inside his throat as they forced him to swallow.

He grimaces. “To *that*, I have no idea. *You may.*” And he speaks. The spells, what he remembers of the before and after. The force-feedings.

Jaqen’s face is impassive.

Jaqen knows blood.
He expects rage—futile, but the proper response of a liege-lord in the face of his servant’s violation.

He does not expect the god to reach for a dagger, raise it, slash at the inside of His own forearm. Blood—black blood wells thickly in the cut.

No one looks up at the god’s face, and Daorys allows no one a little bit of panic.

The god steps closer. “I have no idea if this will help anything at all,” says Jaqen, “But...” he holds His wrist out to Daorys: an offer.

No one’s gaze fixates on the cut, and his entire being twists with a hunger of the mind that feels far sharper than the fish-induced hunger of the body. The blood gathers, it flows, slowly, down the side of Jaqen’s arm.

*Wash the other out of my mouth, the cloying taste, the slithering morsels of light, the acid, the sex, wash everything out of me.*

The discipline holds. *No “want” is allowed to become a “need”, not hunger, not lust, not rage. Not even this.*

*I am no one.*

He eyes the black welling. “Assassin, Jaqen,” he says dubiously, “not a vampire-bat from Southros.”

“Call it jealousy on my part, then,” says Jaqen.

He gives Jaqen a dark glare. “Manipulative god.”

The blood had formed a drop, viscous, it threatens to fall upon the ground.

Daorys bends, his mouth under Jaqen’s arm; his tongue catches the drop as it falls.

*A thousand stars dying with each breath of light they exhale a thousand times a thousand every moment every drop of water in the sea dying as it evaporates every human breath every mind every thought, dying, forgotten, absorbed into the nothing it comes from every leaf, dying...*

Daorys comes to himself kneeling in the snow, his mouth on Jaqen’s wrist.

No one checks himself for untoward reaction; the body is calm, nothing undignified. Daorys allows himself to feel some small measure of relief.

“Anything?” asks the god.

*Lingered too long.*

No one swipes one last time at the cut to seal it, pulls away. He probes at the holes in his memory, at the *shape* of his body’s control, at the pit of light and chaos waiting for him at the back of his mind that harbors the convulsions.

“Everything,” he says, rubs a hand over his face. He runs his tongue over his teeth—the coppery tang of blood, clean blood, impregnated with the scent of ginger, and cloves, and the sounds of a quiet pool lapping against stone steps. He smiles up at Jaqen. “Everything, but it changes nothing.”
Jaqen’s sighs. “Well, it was worth a try.”

“No, you’re just very possessive.”

Jaqen grins. “That must be it. But we’ve evened the score—perhaps we can raise it?”

Daorys rises, and Jaqen pulls open the bronze-handled door against the wind’s push. Candles flicker, go out at the sudden blast of frigid air as they step into the narrow stairwell leading down.

“Tears of two princesses,” says Daorys, “blood of two gods. What’s next, Jaqen, you’re going to get me to suck off two knights?”

Jaqen snorts. “Need to be virginal knights, old friend, haven’t got any of those around here.”

“Hate virgins,” mutters Daorys. “They have expectations. And no, by the way, to your question. I have no decency, but I do have a limit. No to her blood. She gives too much as it is. Even is enough. No more.”

Jaqen gives him an inscrutable gaze over His shoulder. “As you wish.”

JAQEN

Jaqen leaves Daorys in his chamber, closes the door. And then he wanders the keep, keeping to the halls where he feels no death—no people.

There is a storm in his veins; he wants to bash his head against a wall. Instead he stops in a darkened corridor, leans against the cold stone. He unlaces his breeches, takes himself in hand, works himself with quick motions.

Flesh means nothing. Flesh is an illusion.

But the sensation ...

A mouth on a cut, the sting. Breath ghosting over his skin.

Jaqen’s breath comes is short gasps.

A breeze wraps around him for a moment.

She knows.

The storm should hide, cower, before the wind; instead it surges, gains power: She knows.

His eyes close, he leans his head against the stone; he circles the head of his cock, he knows that the wet pressure on his skin was a taste, that his blood even now courses in another’s veins.

The knowing of the who of it, the mouth on his wrist...

He spends, in his hand, cleans himself, and then forces back the rebellious thoughts that threaten to slip out of his control, ties them down with barbed straps, spikes facing inwards. Closes the jaw of the cage again.

When he returns to their chamber, she’s already there, soaking in a tub of hot water before the hearth. A second tub stands ready beside hers, steaming gently. There are bruises and cuts all over her front.
Jaqen wants to ram his head against a wall again, for an entirely different reason.

“You’re not in any better shape,” she says. Then she points to the second tub.

He undresses, and is gratified to feel her eyes on him, following his form as he lowers himself into the water with a hiss. The water is hot, and yes, it does seem that he came out of their “sparring session” not much better off than her.

She takes in the newly-made cut on his left forearm. “Balancing the score?” she asks.

“There is no balance to it,” he replies.

She points to something behind him. “Pass me the bandolier?”

He reaches behind him, snags the ends of it, passes it on to her. He watches—she retrieves a small vial, dips her fingertip in it. It comes out coated in black powder. She rubs it over her gums, and then he knows what it is.

“You reduced symphatoma?” he asks.

“I wish,” she says. “Can’t ever get the grind right. No, our sister lent me some, in case I wanted to avoid the Blue Pearl.”

He nods. Symphatoma does not have the energetic properties of the Pearl, it will merely keep sleep at bay, not disguise fatigue. But the cost is not quite as high as the Pearl either, and it is only mildly addictive.

He reaches out his hand for the vial: On your side. At your side.

She shakes her head, gentle. “You must keep watch over his dreams while I wake.”

He looks down at himself. “Yes,” he says, sighs.

“I will ask forgiveness,” she says.

He looks up.

You need ask for nothing; you should not even give when I ask.

“On my brother’s behalf,” she says. “He does not know what he costs you.”

“Nothing,” he replies. “He costs me nothing. You are the one paying the price for some residue of my attachments.”

She gives him a very Jaqen-H’ghar smile. “And of course, my attachments cost you nothing either. No price for the god to pay, to become a Stark in all but name.”

“You’re reversing roles, beloved,” he says. “I’m the sarcastic one.”

“What am I, then?” she asks, arch.

He smiles. “The prophetic one,” he says.

“I’ll accept that,” she replies. She leans back in the tub, her arms resting on the sides. Her breasts bob, in the water.
“Very distracting.”

“Suppose we can both be coherent,” she mutters.

“Oh, coherence rises at your command,” he says.

She raises her head, gives him a very knowing look.

“The breath in my lungs,” he says, grins.

She smiles back, slow, very intentional: I know.

Peace arrives in tandem with the thought.

The water laps around his chest.

She raises a leg, his eyes follow the lines of it, he watches droplets of water merge into little rivulets, down her leg, the inside of her thigh. She hooks it over the side of the tub. She is open, and he can see her. She trails her hand down her breasts, her stomach. Lower. She opens herself further to his gaze with her fingers.

“Please,” he says.

A finger circles her opening, then higher, circles her nub. She touches herself for him, her clit is swollen under her ministrations; she circles it, again and again.

“Inside,” he says. “Put your fingers inside.”

She dips lower, her hand curves, and she slides one delicate fingertip into her entrance.

A groan escapes his mouth. More.

She buries her finger up to the second knuckle inside herself, her head rolls back. His own hand is under the water, stroking himself in long, slow strokes. She adds another finger, she’s working it in and out of her womanhood.

His hand moves faster.

She arches, and the muscles of her stomach, her legs, they contract in a spasm, then another.

Her turn to watch.

“Circle the ridge,” she says.

He does.

“Harder.”

He lies back, his manhood outthrust towards her, he grips himself harder. One by one he releases the restraints around himself. His mouth, first.

“Arya.”

His breath—the wind surges in him, his breath is hers, shallow, hitched.

The mind is the last bastion of his control, it fights back, almost panicked. But she is watching him, rapt, and her eyes upon his hardness, her mouth, parted, the rise and fall of her chest…his mind can
fight himself, it cannot fight her.

“Come for me, Jaqen.”

The sound of his name in her mouth; it is a gale, a wall of wind that crashes upon the cage, turns it to splinters. The storm rises again in his blood, without form, without focus, it breaks through him, and he breaks with it.

It takes him many heartbeats, how many, he does not count, to open his eyes.

She’s watching him, rapt.

“Very obedient, as you see,” he says.

She nods. “You are.”

Pleased her. He can’t quite keep the very smug grin off his face.

The water cools.

The lassitude of his release lets him out of its grasp, by degrees. “Second worst,” he says.

Her eyes rove over his face, observing, assessing. “Order?” she asks.

“Valyria. Last night. Our brother, our sister—that’s tied, I’d say. Asshai. The Wall.”

Her mouth twists. “My brother doesn’t even get a mention?” she asks.

Jaqen’s smile is sardonic. “Rolled up into the thing that is ‘Asshai’.”

She looks at him, an expression he would have called “fond” if she was not no one. “Him, before,” she says gently.

Ah. That. “Sixth-worst,” he says.

She raises an eyebrow.

“Didn’t know anything then. Last night, even in the midst of it, I knew, down to the last shard of me, what I was in the process of losing.”

That earns him a flick of water to his face. “Not even close to driving me away,” she says. “Not even upon the same continent, the same eon as ‘losing me’. You’re an idiot.”

He looks away, exhales. “Felt like the world was ending.”

“While we’re rage-fucking each other? The world should be so lucky.”

She’s drawn a chuckle out of him, he meets her eyes. “I’d say your little North Westerosi world would end if your family ever saw anything even remotely close to yesterday.”

Jon would die of mortification, Sansa would die of panic, and Bran would ask questions, which would take care of any innocent bystanders, like Sandor.

“Valar morghulis,” she says, philosophical.

“Don’t deserve you, he replies.
“Fifth-worst,” she says.

“Order?”

“Asshai.” She sketches out a shape in the air: his death, the wind, Nymeria, their brother. Everything. “Equal—The Twins. Mother, after, again. Father.”

“I think I did hear his voice,” says Jaqen, “when I was in the cells.”

She is no one, but still she leans towards him, hands clutching at the edge of the tub. “You said you weren’t sure.”

Jaqen shakes his head, frustrated. “I keep trying to recall. A murmur only, someone speaking to Varys.” His mouth twists. “If I hadn’t botched the job with the boar, Robert Baratheon would have died before he was returned to King’s Landing.” No chance for the Hand to warn Cersei of what he knew.

“You were betrayed,” she says. “Might as well blame our brother for his own muting at Euron’s hand.”

He sighs. “There’s a reason kings are expensive.” Kings and renegades—tied, in terms of the damage they do to the order.

“Led me to you,” she offers.

Another lover’s game they play, the “if only” game—all the paths they could have taken to find each other.

He grins. “I am not in the cells. The former First Sword of Braavos, teaching a girl-child? Nobody in Westeros takes note; I do, since I haven’t been imprisoned.”

Her eyes brighten. “You are in the cells,” she says, “I sneak in to see Father. You ask for water. We all escape together.”

It is a painful game, more for her than him. He considers his bride. “Your father takes my head within the first week on the road to Winterfell.”

A new twist.

“Eleven, beloved,” she says, flutters her eyelashes at him. “You don’t look twice at me.”

He snorts. “I plan to kidnap you, deposit you at the order’s doorstep, then return for you when you are thirty. Fathers have this sense—he sees it, takes my head before I make the first move.”

She disagrees. “Father doesn’t worry overmuch—sees you as an honorable man, and me badgering you for swordplay lessons. He’s too busy handling Sansa’s thwarted hopes. We make it to Winterfell—much better for you as Lord Stark’s trusted man, the thieving. You linger. I turn ten-and-four. We run away together. Back to Braavos, if it pleases you, deposit me where you will.”

“Make it ten-and-seven,” he counters, “and we marry each other in front of the Weirwood on the way out.”

“Consummate in a barrow?” she asks.

“Six years teaching you the blade has cured me of patience,” he says. “Consummate in Cerwyn. Heard they have a very nice inn. I’ll be declared renegade, of course, confuse the fuck out of the
"Lorathi."

She giggles.

"Ah, my heart," he says. "If one could change the past. Bran tried, did you know—right there, in the cells, screaming at me to help him. I heard nothing."

"Imprisonment has a way of closing the mind," she says.

There is some twisted sorrow to her, to this game, that is new. He narrows it down. He rises, from the water, swiftly towels himself off, holds the towel for her as she rises, wraps it around her small frame.

It is only when they are dressed—armored—that he asks.

"What did they do to him in Asshai?"

She closes her eyes, and tells him. It matches what Daorys reported, in shape. The details, however, Daorys has omitted many of them. Not relevant, to the blood-work, the magic. But relevant to no one’s person.

"Shall we have that discussion now," he says bitterly, once she is done, "about the powerlessness of gods?"

She doesn’t allow him to sink into himself. "He sleeps?"

"Soon."

"Then watch over him," she instructs. "I’m off to prepare another set of samples. Will need both you and him mid-afternoon."

Jaqen nods, then lays himself down on the bed.

Darkness rises.

**NO ONE**

The scent is all around him, in his nostrils, his skin. No nightmares, but the price for that... he wakes up with his hand fisted around his manhood. He knows exactly what name he’s going to whisper if he lets this go any further.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck. Don’t start this again.*

He tries to smother himself again with a pillow over his face.

*I am no one.*

The lust dribbles out of him. As it leaves, the desire to jump off one of the towers returns, as intense as his arousal had been but a moment ago. It makes sense. The procreative urge is life. Life counters death.

*Don’t want to counter death, want to--*

*Fuck.*

The pillow returns to his face.
I am no one.

No one rises from the bed. It is dark outside, the true dark. Second-watch, nearabouts. The smell of horse-dung, the chill of mold and mildew upon stone assails his nostrils. Winter in Westeros is not his idea of a good mission, but, well, valar dohaeris.

He raises his hands to his face, lays a brother’s name upon his own. A Braavosi brother, but born in Westeros.

**JORAH**

Jerome Snow, he who is known as Jorah Mormont, kneels upon the tile, and weeps.

“Hush, hush my love,” says Shiera, running a hand through his hair.

“I cannot—” He chokes, tries again. “Each time they feed me I lose myself.”

“Blood makes you stronger,” she says, her voice hard. “See? The shadows grow.”

And they do—the shadows writhing about Jorah, they are deeper, darker.

Deeper, darker, in my head as well.

“The blood of a god, Jorah, R’hllor’s power in your veins. Shadowbinders are never granted access to such power—I have never fed upon the fish, or I would take this burden from you. You must be my hand, my vengeance. Feed, and you will be a match for her.” Her mouth twists, as it always does when she speaks of R’hllor’s Consort.

*The Woman in the Mask.*

“Power means nothing,” he says, “if I don’t remember enough of myself to know she is my enemy.”

“Cast them,” she says. “Cast the shadows outside of you, cast them out of your head. You are still learning. You don’t need to conserve them yet.” And she shrugs, smiles. “Eventually you’ll learn to live with the holes in your memory—all shadowbinders do.”

**JON**

Ghost wants to eat the cat, Jon’s quite sure of it. His direwolf sits patiently in a corner of the room, and licks his chops.

“Jaqen says Arya did a cat,” mutters Bran.

Jon sighs, and stares at the makeshift cage with one of Winterfell’s ratters in it. “Maybe it’s a woman thing?” he asks dubiously. “Sansa should try.”

“She already did,” says Bran. “Can’t relax her mind enough, she’s always thinking.”

Jon takes a deep breath, tries again.

And again his concentration snaps to Ghost.
Something is wrong. He doesn’t remember these corridors. The secret passages, they shouldn’t be made of gray stone, the Red Keep is named the Red Keep because it’s red. It’s almost entirely dark, except for slivers of light that leak in through gaps in the stonework, torchlight. And yet there are shadows all around him.

He sneers at them.

Death is the enemy of fear.

JAQEN

It’s sixth-watch, and Sandor’s doing his rounds, Jaqen beside him.

“How well do you know these men?” asks Jaqen.

Sandor purses his lips. “A few moons,” he says.

A raven has come from the Crossroads, far slower than it should have—the wind, the storm, it keeps the birds from flying true. But it bears a message—the smith is coming. Along with a lady knight.

Brienne of Tarth.

Sandor will take careful handing on the matter—Jaqen softens the impact, first with the news of the smith (Sansa’s going to be thrilled) and then with the news that a score of the Brotherhood Without Banners wish to avail themselves of Lady Arya Stark’s offer of service under the Stark banner.

Running feet, light. Jaqen turns, sees Beron the page rushing towards them, skidding upon the icy flagstones.

“Sers!” Beron calls, trying to bow and speak at the same time. “Sers, Princess Sansa calls—”

The words are barely out of his mouth before both Jaqen and Sandor are off, racing towards the western wing. Sansa just went in there a few moments ago. Sandor’s limp is more pronounced this morning—the cold and humidity combine to worsen the injury.

He will not like the rest of this missive.

They find Sansa standing in a corridor, staring pensively at the wall.

“Sansa?”

“Someone’s in the walls,” she says. “I swear I saw someone open one of the passages we’d sealed, he looked out, saw me, ducked back in.”

“What did he look like?” asks Sandor.

Sansa wrings her hands. “Small,” she says, “stooped, thinning hair. Riverlander, perhaps, but Westerosi. Green eyes, beady. His left hand—there was something strange about his hand.” She turns, consternation on her face. “He wasn’t wearing furs,” she says.

Jaqen closes his eyes. “Sandy hair?” he asks quietly.
“Yes.”

Sandor glares at him. “Assassin?” asks the big man. “Cerwyn again?”

Jaqen opens his eyes. “I’ll deal with it.”

**CHEESE**

He’s run into another sealed passage. He can’t make his way out to the keep, he doesn’t know what part of the tunnels he’s trapped in. Old, though. *Everything* hurts, he can’t remember half the things he’s supposed to remember. Which means he’s been poisoned.

*Blood the Butcher.*

This is what comes from working with amateurs. *Why* Mysaria bought a Faceless Man and then sicced her own “hand-picked” assassin on him, Cheese didn’t understand it until it was too late. That little “game” they had to play—there was cruelty in it, making the mother *choose*.

*Would have gone for the heir--clean, simple.*

But Blood the Butcher would have gone for all the others, had Cheese not been there to restrain him. *We were paid for one, one’s all we take.* The amateur’s gone now, somehow, so he’s not Cheese’s problem anymore, except that the *amateur* seems to have poisoned Cheese. And the Butcher’s gone and trapped Cheese in a part of the Keep he doesn’t know about, and he can’t make his way back.

*How did I fall for it? What did he do to me?*

It doesn’t make any *sense*.

*Where did the redhead come from?*

Something about her nags at him. Something familiar.

A footfall behind him.

He whirls, dagger at the ready—sees a shape in the shadows. He *knows* that face, the eyes gleaming at him in the faint torchlight.

*Jaqen? What is going on?* Jaqen’s not even supposed to be on this *continent*, let alone the same place Cheese is trapped in. *Is Jaqen trapped?*

Jaqen walks towards him, hands raised. “Brother,” he says, “are you lost?”

Cheese hunches, looks up. “Believe I am, sirrah.” He ducks his head—he isn’t wearing a cap, he can’t doff it. “Name’s Cheese. His Majesty’s own rat-catcher.”


*Jaqen’s breaking all sorts of protocol. Why?*

But *Jaqen’s* asked him a question, how can he not answer?

Cheese grins toothily. “Heard there was a killing in the Keep,” he says, shakes his head. “Poor, poor Queen. Lost Prince Jaehaerys, or so the rumor goes.”
“Good,” says Jaqen. “Cheese is dead.”

More strangeness.

Cheese shrugs, straightens.

But so be it.

And he allows his brother’s face to slip back into the nothing.

I am no one.

NO ONE

Daorys looks up at Jaqen, eyes wide.

“What…”

What was I doing?

“Reliving the Dance of Dragons,” says Jaqen softly. “You’re in the secret passages of the northern wing of Winterfell.”

Daorys sags against the wall.

“It’s worsened,” he says, hoarse. “Jaqen, you need to give me mercy.”

“Tell me how bad it is,” says Jaqen quietly. “Even the things you hide from Arya. Everything, Daorys.”

Jaqen’s asked him a question; how can he not answer?

No one speaks.

ARYA

Something is wrong. She abandons her philtre where it sits, reducing over a small candleflame, and seeks out the source of her disquiet. Her feet lead her to her own chamber.

Jaqen is standing just over the threshold, as if he is unsure he wants to go further inside or leave.

“Love?” she whispers. He turns to her and instinctively she wraps her arms around his neck, leads him away deeper into the room.

She sits at the edge of the bed, expects him to sit beside her, but he kneels and he buries his face in her lap.

“He has lost his mind,” Jaqen whispers.

And, brokenly, the god tells her of Daorys’s true condition.

She feels moisture upon her thigh, through the cloth. Jaqen’s shoulders shake as silent sobs wrack his frame. Her own tears fall, like rain, like the memory of rain (for winter has come and all the water in the sky has frozen), and they stain the rest of the velvet, his head, her hand that strokes his hair. She comes to the end of her tears, eventually.
He does not, for Him of the Many Faces does not weep. He howls in desolation, all sound muffled by the velvet cloth covering her legs.

*The wind is a cruel thing,* she thinks. *Better now, before it evaporates.*

“Jaqen,” she says, “let go of me.”

He looks up at her, swollen, red-rimmed eyes, mouth contorted.

*I am no one.*

She pushes him aside and he overbalances, sways on his knees. He is confused, and in his confusion he reaches for her again.

*Forgive,* she thinks at him, *that I push you away in your hour of need.*

Swiftly, she strips her pants, finds another set to wear.

His anger clears as he sees her intention.

Arya’s tears did not work, neither did Arya and Sansa’s together. Perhaps because Sansa did not truly know their brother; she wept, but not for him.

Arya grabs the damp green velvet trousers and races out the door, crosses the hall into Daorys’s room.

*Zural* is there. Him and the one who is no one are talking quietly, somberly, with one another. They look up as she enters.

“Arya? What do you do?” asks no one.

She doesn’t answer, she simply marches up to him.

Arya Stark does not know the meaning of “losing a battle”. She will fight, tooth and claw, until the last breath passes through her brother’s lips.

Roughly, she rubs the dampness of the velvet cloth over his face, his head, his arms.

She waits.

*Almost instantaneous, for Jon.*

“The holes,” she asks. “Are they still there?”

He nods, cautious.

Arya Stark does not know the meaning of “despair”. Without another word, she rises to her feet and marches to the stillroom. A watch for ten trials, she has seventy-eight more samples to test—which means eight watches.

*Eliminate all the ones that are similar to the ones that showed no potential at all. That means the sugars, the metallic compounds, the vapors.*

Calculations draw her in--time, and heartbeat, and the steady measuring of reagents into dishes.

**NO ONE**
He looks after Arya Stark’s retreating form in some confusion, his face still damp and stinging from the scouring she’s given it.

“Did…” Zural pauses, as if he is trying to formulate the question in a manner that makes sense to him, “Did Arya Stark just rub her trousers all over your face?”

His hand rises, feels the moisture on his upper lip. His tongue snakes out, tastes it. Salt. He knows the taste of tears. How could he not? Not hers, no, her eyes are reddened, but not enough.

Jaqen weeps.

The story of Jon Snow’s healing was a source of great hope for Arya Stark, until it wasn’t. He would have told her to save her tears, hers and Lady Sansa’s.

Needs a blood connection--even a cousin you call “brother” is more blood to you than I am.

The brotherhood of the order is a connection built of death, not the womb. And yet she tries again. Opportunistic.

Jaqen weeps.

The one who is no one lies back down upon the covers, fully clothed, and waits.

Chapter End Notes

So...some random thoughts.
Firstly, the chapter and wordcount is going up because as I start to flesh out the detailed outline, small notes like:

ship captain's union (change tide), D & J trying to rationalize god, switch-over to Arya problem-solving segue, humor level +2 sine +4 for blood-drop -3>

becomes an entire scene with made-up card games. Sorry about that. Starks are really a lot of fun to write, and expand, can't help but give them excessive screen-time *grin*.

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Another thought--I was having a discussion about MBTI personality types, and thought I'd pen some thoughts here. Firstly, obviously even a fictional character (mine, at least) have had deeply personality-affecting things happen to them. The base personality each person gravitates to/grows warps under huge pressures and stresses from a thousand sources. So obviously there's traits (like Arya's outspokenness) that are not simply a product of her 'inclination' but experience. What the personality does is create a perception and expression filter for the person she is, for the people others are.

FM personality types:
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Arya: INTJ
Jaqen: INFJ
Daorys: INTJ
Zural: ISFJ
Missandei: INFP
Waif: ISTP

... others to come.

Obviously you can disagree with the above, perception is everything, but that's the framework of the character I designed then warped with the huge life-changing things that happened to each. Braavosi tend to be sensor types and Lorathi intuitive types. FM are generally introverts, given their monk-like (in terms of isolation, long missions, no deep human contact except other FM) lives. FMs are predominantly "J"s as well, though you'll see a couple of "P" types showing up, ones that take forever and keep taking in data before doing something. Great patience, in these guys, very suited to long-term missions. The "J" types are not the "keep watch for years and years" ones unless there's a problem that requires endurance *and* there is something to be learned there.

Should also mention that the "mirroring" and the empathy--i mean, each FM has many, many other people's first-person point-of-view memories, perspectives--make a *huge* impact on the introverted/extroverted fi/fe (feeling) functions. Developing empathy, an actor's empathy, a priest's empathy is a cornerstone of becoming FM. Can't play the game of faces otherwise--this is why it takes "T" types a lot of work, one of the reasons Arya was placed with Izembaro's troupe (I'm imagining) to learn to empathize a role instead of forcing her own judgement onto it.
The Perfect Servant

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JAQEN

How can I kill that which I love, and eat it from the inside, and love it more?

He stands upon the balcony of their chambers, looking out. The towers of Winterfell are black shapes, they edge against the black sky. The dangerous hours have passed; Daorys sleeps without dreams.

A shape moves across the courtyard. It glances up towards him--a reflexive glance, towards where it knows Jaqen must be. But Jaqen is shadowed by the recess of the balcony, the drapes behind him drawn. No Braavosi will see him, and Zural will no longer sense Jaqen unless Jaqen wills it to be so.

The bond between them, between Zural and Jaqen, snapped but a watch ago. The stretching, tearing pain of it is what drew Jaqen from sleep, to stand upon the balcony, and wait.

Zural heads to the ravensloft.

A stirring, behind him in the room. She has returned for her pre-dawn dose of the Blue Pearl. She senses him on the balcony, comes closer. But if she draws the drapes Zural will see the flicker of light from the hearth.

Jaqen relaxes into that part of him that is in her, shades it darker still: wait.

She pauses.

He doesn’t strain back into himself until Zural is well gone, and then she draws the drape aside, comes out to stand behind him.

There is a glow of torchlight in the ravensloft.

“Zural,” he says.

She comes closer, winds her arm around his waist. “I would speak, beloved, but I would not have you listen. It is a hard thing. I am managing it--you do not need to know.”

He chuckles then, bitter. “Too late, Arya, it cannot be managed anymore. If it ever could have been.”

There is an inevitability about certain things.

“Then I would speak,” she says. “Your compromise, the Starks, it was disapproved of until Zural confirmed the truth of Jon’s resurrection, the truth of the Wall--from Bran. Bran trusts your people, he speaks. Compassion, for the dying and the dead, even against impossible odds--it is the Jaqen H’ghar the House knows. Every single brother receives mercy by your hand, you serve them even as they serve you.”

“How very nice for me,” says Jaqen.
“The problem,” she says, “began with Daenerys Targaryen’s letter to me and Sansa.”

Zural learned of Jon’s parentage.

“We’d all kept our mouths shut,” she says. “But Zural asked: did Jaqen know? And I made a mistake, I said ‘yes’.”

“Your teacher,” he says. “No truth is punished.”

Her mouth twists.

“I wasn’t punished,” she says. “But then he started asking questions. About the alliance with Daenerys Targaryen. About the dragon’s egg that sits in the otherwise empty treasure-room. Your bonding with Jon, how Jon calls you ‘brother’ and the quality of way he speaks that word, from my memories of Jon in childhood, is a thing of brother-by-blood as with Robb, not brother-by-marriage or brother-by-custom as it was for Theon.”

“Jon and I are about as related as Sansa and the charwoman screaming yonder,” says Jaqen.

“This is the thing with nobles,” says Arya, wry, “they know to the exact degree how unrelated they are.” She turns her head, kisses his shoulder. He raises an arm, drapes it over her shoulder, draws her closer to him.

“Everything is falling apart,” he whispers.

Darkness, and chaos, and biting wind that drives all thoughts before it off a cliff.

“The House of Black and White hates Valyrians,” she says. “A shift of perspective—very Lorath-like, but the Braavosi don’t recognize it for a simple shift, they name it ‘truth’. The Valyrian has finally escaped the controls Jaqen H’ghar put around him, the Valyrian has answered the call of his blood. He allies with the Targaryen King and the Targaryen Queen, he has a dragon-egg and three dragons at his disposal.”

The Valyrian is awake. He looks out through my eyes, beloved, and sees nothing but ash.

“And the Valyrian is a man that gained unfathomable power,” she continues, “and called himself a god. Now he gives commands to his brothers, as if he sets himself above them. And even for Valyria, for Gogossos, there was a due process to vengeance. Vengeance always begins with calling a vote, then all available Faceless Men talk and determine what is the best way to proceed. No vote was called. No discussion was allowed. R’hillor and Asshai were dictated to be the enemies of the House of Black and White.”

“True,” says Jaqen. “All true.”

His brothers have turned their face from the god.

She nods. “And so I listened, with an open mind. They seized upon one of your own threads—that the bride can take your place. Asked me questions.”

“You answered them?”

She smiles, a bit. “Truthfully. That I can take you in ranged combat, not in melee. That you have taught me many things, but the thing that must be learned to be the Many-Faced God—the compassion required, to make new Faceless Men—this is far outside of the Wind’s domain.”
He must turn to her. “Compassion?” he asks. “Beloved, you are entirely too biased towards me.” His mouth twists. “It is not compassion, it is blood-magic and death-magic, and I am a man that made himself into a god.”

_They served me, each and every one of them, and I only thought I served them. We delivered each others’ vengeance, wore each other’s faces, I thought, but all it was was an exchange, a price paid for my hunger for power._

_Who betrays whom?_

She opens her mouth to speak. He silences her with a kiss.

He extends himself into her, into the vessel of her, the darkness, pulled in the from the air and the ground and the sea, rising through him, twisting, into her mouth, her eyes. His hands stroke lower, he undoes the ties to her britches, slips them inside, his fingers seek her cunt, her ass, and he pours everything into her.

A wind rises within him; the _flowing_ of the darkness generates a wind in its wake, vortices curled through with power.

The more death he pulls out of himself, the more nothingness there seems to be. He struggles to _let go_ , to empty, and in the vortex draw of the darkness, his face slips from him and the mouth under his changes.

_To what?_

Death opens his eyes, and sees before him the Wind, clothed in his skin. Death furrows his brow. And then the face of Jaqen H’ghar slips off as the Wind reaches out, draws Arya Stark off of Death and onto herself.

Silence all around them, mere heartbeats, and Jaqen admits to finding himself...confused.

She presses herself against him, amused. “Mmm. _That_ felt good,” she says. “We’ve never taken it that far before. We exchanged _eyes_ , love.”

He realizes both his hands are still in her clothes, his fingers buried to the knuckle in her.

“Told you,” she smirks, “I answered _truthfully_. One doesn’t need to drink the entire ocean dry to know that salt-water is not to one’s taste.”

He closes his eyes, rests his forehead on hers. She clenches around his invading digits, she is moist, and needy.

“Take me to bed,” she whispers.

_So you can spread your legs for me again, placate my mind with small truths: that surely as long as you can bear me, there must be something worth bearing in me?_ Tempting.

He withdraws his fingers from her, ignores the narrow-eyed look she gives him.

_What would happen if the Many-Faced God were to...not be so anymore?_

If he withdraws his “favor” from each and every Faceless Man, they will not die. They will become men, free to choose to do what they will, even retain the guild, the death-masks, retain the
principles that Jaqen pretended to espouse.

But he has not the reach to do it, he is bound within the Valyrian’s flesh.

The wind will have to withdraw herself from Him if he is to withdraw from all Faceless Men. A small lie: *I would like to try again without you in me, beloved, see if you can bear this burden from me for a time, for I am weary beyond my limit.*

She has no taste for the power of death—who would, except a Valyrian? But once he has taken it back from the faceless, and from her, Jaqen can pour it onto the ground, into the earth, into the nothingness from whence it came in the first place.

And then she would have the chance to live the life she should have lived. Marry the Sealord in truth, perhaps, or one of a half-dozen others. No killing anymore. A knight, a commander of armies, a spymistress, a half-dozen other things.

*Not* eaten from the inside-out, *not* turned into Daorys, the perfectly servile, perfectly loyal creature it seems Jaqen has turned him into.

The nature of the universe pivots on small things. The breaking of a god’s word doesn’t require action, doesn’t require a death to come to pass before it resolves. The word is broken by *speaking* a word.

A name.

All he has to do is go to Jon, and speak: “Euron Greyjoy”.

**AERON**

He groans; *that* dream comes again. He cannot escape it, not with the blue staining his lips and the gorge rising in him as he hears the wailing of the mutilated priest to his right.

*...“Never. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair!”*

*“Why would I want that hard black rock? Brother, look again and see where I am seated.”*

Aeron Damphair looked. The mound of skulls was gone. Now it was metal underneath Euron: a great, tall, twisted seat of razor sharp iron, barbs and blades and broken swords, all dripping blood.

*Impaled upon the longer spikes were the bodies of the gods. The Maiden was there and the Stranger, entwined in a grotesque parody of love-play. They hung side by side with all manner of queer foreign gods: the Hooded Wayfarer and the Black Goat, the Weeping Woman and the Pale Child Bakkalon, and the serpent god of Naath.*

*And there, swollen and green, half-devoured by crabs, the Drowned God festered with the rest, seawater still dripping from his hair...*

**THE DUSKY WOMAN**

She studies the band of gold-chased jewels clasped around her left wrist.
Salt wife to Victarion Greyjoy.

She extrapolates the path this choice of his will cut through history, and concludes with “nothing”. Nothing to lose here, nothing to gain. The path of her choice, however, is uncertain. Two messages, smuggled onboard by the usual route, the vinterer that supplies her “husband” his wine.

One comes from the House of Black and White: recommend maintain position; maintain cover. A recommendation means no gift is to be given. This is merely spy-work.

The other missive comes from a hand unknown to her except from a brief memory, a new face, overlaid upon her own in haste while Victarion lay, snoring beside her, after a particularly brutal fucking: I know your name. Your hand, that will deliver a gift to Euron the Unbeliever. My word. Tell Victarion: Euron Kinslayer: Harlon, Robin. Then come home.

Where is home? she wonders.

And she realizes she doesn’t care. Wherever it is, it is not in Victarion's bed, not if there is no gift to be given. And the lure of vengeance —maimed, for the rest of eternity, to play the game of faces without a voice—the offer of vengeance is enough to make her long for something other than a ship stinking of Greyjoy.

She finds Victarion upon deck, sitting at a table the cabin-boy’s dragged up for him, supping upon the largesse of Meereen. There’s enough people that speak Qohorik here that her words will be translated soon enough, and provide plausible reason as to why she has not “spoken” before.

A parchment, a quill.

Victarion is looking at her in utter puzzlement.

She points to her tongue, smiles: do you know why he cut this out?

He’s too dense to pull meaning from her. She shakes her head, then kneels beside his table on the deck. Holding the quill in her fist, she writes in large, broken letters of Qohorik, the sorts of letters a slave could be taught to make.


She underlines Balon thrice. Then she rises, and removes the jeweled cuff from around her wrist, weighs down the parchment with it. And she walks, calm, to the edge of the deck, climbs up upon the rail and jumps.

———

A woman surfaces near the half-burned docks of the east side of Meereen. Light hair, light skin, she looks almost child-like. Someone has cut out her tongue. She begs for food at the mouth of the harbor, eats what she can find.

Very soon, Victarion Greyjoy’s armada pulls out of the mouth of Slaver’s Bay. Rumor on the docks is, he’s racing to Pyke, to challenge his brother’s right to the throne.

She who is no one, she smiles.

Mereen is a nice city. She’ll let both House and Arya Stark know she’s here. No point trudging all the way back to Braavos—a contract around the middle of Essos always comes by, sooner or later.
She wonders where Jaqen is, at the moment. She’s had time to think on it, time free of the sway of a deck and the stink of seaweed-and-piss. Vengeance is **nice**, no doubt, but it will not change anything.

If something about the world cannot be changed, a Lorathi’s *perspective* must change to accomodate the world. And so she’s written a message for Jaqen as well, sent through the House. It must be worded carefully, Jaqen hasn’t come to terms with being the god yet, as far as she knows.

The missive is short: **Will you wear the face of Ableyn Mael, brother, once, and sing a song she used to know?**

Because, of course, as long as the god remembers the sound of her voice, silence means nothing at all to a Faceless Man.

**JON**

Jon enters the King’s Tower and finds Jaqen there, alone; it seems both of them have been granted a sliver of time, between one concern and the next.

“We haven’t spoken much in the last two days,” says Jaqen.

*Something is wrong.*

The brittleness to Jaqen that’s been growing over the past moon, it’s on the forefront now. If it had been a man under his command at Castle Black, Jon would have pulled him off the Wall, sent him to Mole’s Town for a drink.

“Jaqen?” Jon comes forward, closer, and the god’s features resolve under the dim light. “What’s wrong?”

Jaqen gives him a twisted half-smile. “Other than the usual? Undead, politics, poison?”

Jon realizes Jaqen’s eyes are black-in-black as they focus upon the map on the table. The god’s fingers trace the line, north to south, that marks the edges of where wights have been found, lone, and in groups of two and three.

Jon waits.

Jaqen turns to a side. **“Everything is wrong,”** he says.

“What is left to the rest of us, Jaqen, if you despair?” asks Jon.

Jaqen turns, crosses the chamber. He looks out of the window, due north, at the distant, jagged peaks, black-and-gray against the green curtains of fire that stream across the heavens.

The Borealis is vivid this morning, the moon entirely absent.

“When your brothers in the order broke oath and you walked away from them,” says Jaqen, “How did you reconcile yourself to the walking away?”

Jon doesn’t need to think—*this* question he answered **before** he gave over Castle Black to Edd.

“I’ve got no wisdom to offer,” says Jon. “Only what I did, and didn’t.”

Jaqen’s turn, to wait.
“Didn’t walk away, Jaqen,” he says. “Betrayal was their doing, not mine. Was the easy way, to justify their actions to walk away and abandon duty, however tattered. But my doing is my own, not contingent upon theirs. I kept oath, until death released me. But even after. Didn’t walk away from the Night’s Watch. Walked towards.”

“Towards Winterfell, the Kingship?” asks Jaqen.

Jon smiles then, grim. “No. Towards Ramsay Bolton.”

Jaqen exhales. “Because he’d taken your brother. And your sister.”

Jon nods. “Winterfell wasn’t mine. They were.”

“And if Sansa could have been turned against you?” asks Jaqen.

Another question Jon doesn’t need to think to answer—it was close, in those early days, with Petyr Baelish hovering over her. “Mine is to do with my loyalty to my sister. Not hers towards me. No one else’s standard will do, when all you have to sup on morning and night is despair and ash, brother, you plant your standard and then you defend it.”

Jaqen smiles at him, sorrow and mockery both warring for his features. “That simple, Jon?”

“Seemed to me at the time,” says Jon.

What’s going on?

Faceless Men betraying Jaqen is what’s going on.


“Not that kind of fight.”

The other kind, then?

“Wargs?” Jon asks. “Bran’s training up six of them, two have familiars.”

“Not that kind either,” says Jaqen.

So what can I do?

“Mine to do,” says Jaqen. “Whatever the doing of it turns out to be.”

Jaqen doesn’t question Jon on Jon’s handling of his soldiers. Not a time for Jon to turn around and ask Jaqen, not when it’s got the power to make Jaqen brittle. Instead he walks forward, stands beside the god, looks out to the north.

“No horn, no dragons,” he says. “We can’t walk towards the Wall yet.”

“Other enemies,” says the god. “Far closer to home. They’ll do.”

One thing, Jon will ask. “Did they betray you because of me, of us?” The Starks, Winterfell, everything?

“No,” says Jaqen. “Because of me. Men like having a god, as long’s the god’s not real.”

Jon thinks about it. “Need new men, then,” he says. “Because the only other way I see is making
“Maybe better that way,” says Jaqen. “A real god’s a horrific thing, a monstrosity of lies.”

“All families have monstrosities dangling off the tree somewhere,” offers Jon.

“Little monstrosities,” counters Jaqen. “Like Tyrion Lannister, and it seems he’s not half the monster he’s made out to be.”

Jon gives a half-smile. “A Lannister still, though. And Lannisters march on whim, it feels like,” he says. “Not so easy to drag a Stark into war. Someone moves against family, though, that’ll do it. Every time.” He smiles a little. “War elephant’s no good in the snow, leastwise.”

“Starks don’t let a man take the easy way, do they?” asks Jaqen.

“My brother once stood beside me on a wall,” says Jon. “And he paid a heavy price—heavier than I can imagine, truth be told, turned aside the voices of thousands pleading for mercy—just because I asked. Couldn’t take the easy way, not after that.”

The god’s expression is unreadable.

“Ask, Jaqen,” says Jon quietly.

“Am I worth the price of my existence?”

Another question Jon has asked of himself, many times before.

He stopped asking it upon the Wall.

Only one answer he can give. “No,” he says. “No one is. Not me, not you, not anyone—we cannot ever pay the price for ourselves. Grace, Jaqen, beyond all imagining that someone else paid the price for us, over and over again. Lyanna, Rhaegar, Elia, they paid for me. Then father paid, for years, alongside Catelyn. Then Jeor Mormont, then Ygritte, then every brother I sentenced to die by my own hand. You paid for me. Thousands will pay, in the wars to come. No one is worth that.”

“My brothers have paid the price for me,” says Jaqen softly. “Dead, all of them.” The god’s mouth twists. “Cannot take the easy way, I suppose,” he says. “Not after that.”

“No.”

Jaqen seems to have come to some decision. “I need out of the keep,” he says.

To go back to Braavos?

“Squad can be ready in a half-watch. Take Tormund.”

“No squad,” says Jaqen.

“It’s not safe,” says Jon.

That earns him a very wry look. “Won’t be safe here, maybe,” says Jaqen.

He’s going to take Arya with him. Ser Zural? He seems the loyal sort, Sansa likes him.

Jon nods. “Sam will see to Daorys.” The assassin took a turn for the worse the day before. That could have triggered the despair—two hundred years of service, and you get to see him die before
your eyes day by day? “Arya’s going to be alright leaving him behind?”

“He comes with us,” says Jaqen. “One way or another.” His jaw clenches. “Maybe Zural will stay back.”

Jon shakes his head. “Your people can’t hover over us forever. You bought Sandor time to train his people. They’re ready now. Bran will get a half-squad, a full one on Sansa. I’m always hemmed in by at least four riders. We’ll be fine.”

The god nods, strides briskly to the arch leading out to the courtyard. He glances over his shoulder. “We’ll be back soon.”

Jon gives the god an informal half-salute—two fingers on the forehead; it’s the thing they do, him and Jaqen, riders are picking it up. No bows, no formalities. Just an acknowledgment: I see you; good luck.

ZURAL

It is rare that a Braavosi wishes he was a Lorathi. Zural does, in the moment, because then he’d have some control over himself.

“Say your farewells, Zural,” says Jaqen. “It won’t be long now.”

And Zurla Mobhai bows his head before this renegade of a god, and pleads.

“…just a fit, Jaqen, his body improves day by day.”

Jaqen is impassive. “You did not see him in the passages. He has not told you the entirety of it.”

Jaqen sits in the high-backed chair before the embassy’s hearth, his hands on the armrest. The god’s eyes are black—no whites to them at all. With effort, Zural suppresses his shudder.


“You ask me to withhold mercy?” asks Jaqen softly.

He knows. He knows something, has she told him?

Zural places a hand on his heart. “My loyalty to my brothers is beyond question.” He searches for a truth he can give the god. “Even you—especially you. Do you think I do not see how you are tearing yourself apart?”

“All friends are we?” asks the god, a sneer on his face.

Zural swallows.

She’s told him everything.

“If Daorys asks me,” says Jaqen, “I will take him.”

Zural drags his mind back from the implications of Arya’s betrayal, drags himself back to the needs of the moment. “One more day,” he says. “Arya says she needs just one more day, and she will have found something to counteract the poison.”
Jaqen’s jaw clenches. “No,” he says. “No, you do not get to ask me for that, not without paying a commensurate price.”

So it comes to this.

Zural is ready. To sacrifice his life for his brother’s.

“A death for a life,” he answers steadily.

And Jaqen laughs, low, mocking. “What would I do with your death?” asks the god. “No, deaths are for men that are in control of themselves. You and I, Zural, we’re desperate men now, and desperation does not lend itself to control.”

Cold fear grips Zural.

He will ask me to turn against my brothers in Braavos?

“What do you want?” Zural asks.

“Move the embassy to White Harbor,” says the god. “And stay away from Sansa.”

Zural closes his eyes, exhales.

An almost incomprehensibly small price. Born of desperation.

“So once again we share common cause,” says Zural, and he cannot keep the bitterness from his voice. “You don’t want to take him.”

“But I will.”

A new fear, then.

“You must make sure he asks,” says Zural. “He has explained the paradox to me.”

The god raises a brow, sardonic. “What, that I can annihilate the entire order simply by breaking my word to one of you?” Jaqen grins.

Zural shudders now, he knows not what to do, what to say; too much has passed.

“Take the embassy to White Harbor,” says the god. “And I will give you my word—Arya will have her day. More, if it can be managed, I do not want to take him, as you say. My word, also, that when I take him it will be by his own will.” Jaqen steeples his fingers. “Is that all you wanted?”

A day.

Zural bows again, bitter and sorrowing and not knowing what for.

Would know, if I was a Lorathi, I suppose.

“Look after her,” he whispers. “She’s all that I’ll have left.”

He doesn’t look up when the god rises, comes closer. And then he feels a light touch, glancing over his head.

“Farewell, old friend,” says Jaqen, and in that moment Zural knows the god mirrors Zural’s sorrow.

The god leaves; Zural does not follow his passage.
Arya sits in a chair beside the bed.

“Is Jaqen back from Widow’s Watch?” he asks. Then he shakes his head. *No, Jaqen already came back from there. Some days ago.* “Where is the god?” he asks.

“On his way,” she says gently.

Arya has infinite patience; by the burning down of the candle to stub, even he can tell watches pass sometimes between questions.

Gaps in time, gaps in his memory, gaps everywhere.

“The sweats and chills are gone,” she comments.

He nods. The fevers have passed.

“Did our sister…?” he asks.

Arya smiles, slightly. “We’ve been exchanging ravens, two, three a day. Thank you, by the way, we didn’t have nearly enough of them.”

*A cage*, he remembers. There was a cage full of squawking birds on the ship that brought the Faceless Men to White Harbor. It must have arrived in Winterfell sometime…recently.

Daorys snorts. “Thank our brother, they’re supposed to be for his diplomatic work.”

She has moved, she is sitting beside him, her hand stroking his brow. “But the tremors are still there,” she says.

Eventually she has the answers she needs, it seems, because she stops asking, just doses him with something that is a little too sweet to be…he smiles.

“Saltwater?” he asks. The name of this particular poison is a jest.

She smiles back. “Some modifications.”

Once, he might have been interested. “What modifications?” he asks; habit.

She strokes his hair. “The stingers—removed them, made the base cupric instead. Look down.”

Instead, he raises his hands into his field of vision. A blue stain spreads over the back of his hands, faint, but visible even by candlelight.

“It fades by halves every watch,” she says. “Harmless, except for the coloring. Six watches till the last seeps out, and I’ll give you another dose at the seventh.”

Tears sting at his eyes.

*Time. She gives me a measure of time.*

“I’ll be pissing blue,” he says.

She shrugs.
His breath flutters in his lungs. “Arya,” he whispers, “my horizons are shrinking.”

“I would understand,” she offers.

“Inverse,” he says.

*The inverse of a recovery. My horizons were the horizons of the world, and then they shrunk to where I could walk without losing my way, and then they shrunk to this keep. This room.*

“Soon the limit of me will be the edges of this bed.”

She is silent for some time. Or perhaps he sleeps as the wind plays with his hair.

“Shall I be Braavosi at you, brother?” she asks.

“Be what you will,” he replies.

The next thing he knows there is a servant in the room.

He is a Faceless Man; his body works just fine, even without a command. He dresses by himself.

“Two turns around the battlements,” she says. “And then Jaqen will be here.”

He’s gratified that she doesn’t come with him. She still trusts in his word.

He doesn’t, of course.

*No need to tell her that.*

**JORAH**

The shadows twist at the ground, but they shatter like glass when he commands them to climb the walls. And so the Lady in the Mask sends him back to his rooms.

He’s a slow learner, Jorah Mormont.

He grins, and it seems the good mood is infectious—Shiera waits for him upon the bed, her ivory skin glowing under the moonlight. Her face is masked.

A brazier burns beside the bed, it sends a smoky-sweet fragrance into the air.

“A little of your blood, love,” she says.

“Will it help?” he asks, reluctant. *Don’t want her touching what’s in my veins. “Will the assassin die?”*

“He will,” she says. “No man’s will can stand against both our god *and* his own.”

He bleeds for her then, into a cup, and she pours his blood upon the coals of the brazier; a smoky-sweet smell rises, cloying, along with the smoke of the sacrifice.

**NO ONE**
He thinks about what his word really means as he stands on the balcony, looking down. The woman with the stars set upon her brow stands beside him.


*Defy.*

He steps up to the balcony, leans over it.

“I know that look,” says a voice. He turns, and finds the King in the North behind him.

*Why did I not hear his tread?*

“Of course you do,” he says, shrugs. A new plan suggests itself: placate Arya’s brother with a lie or two, then go find a high tower he can entice the wind to. He wants her to watch. “Too much work to do.”

The king’s lips pull to one side, a brief, humorless smile.

“There’s always work,” says Jon Stark.

No one nods, turns to leave.

“There’s a tower on the eastern side,” says Jon Stark. “The roof has crumbled, the approach is broken, if you fall *into* it nobody will find you for a few days, and by then the snow will have covered you.”

*How very interesting.*

He sees why Jaqen likes this king. No one pauses, grins. “I was thinking *that* one,” he says, points to a tall, flat-roofed structure on the north-eastern side.

“Kings don’t have much power,” says Jon. “I have less than most. So the only thing I can do is beg.”

No one raises an eyebrow.

“Don’t let Arya see you,” the king says. He’s looking away, in the direction of the broken tower. “Please don’t let Arya see you.”

No one shrugs. “She can handle it.”

“You know her so well, do you?” asks Jon Stark, bitter.

*Better than you, King in the North.*

“Tell me, Daorys of the Faceless Men,” says the king, “who will Arya Stark blame when she sees you fallen?”

*Sees me fall, the wind beneath me, above me.* He shakes off the fantasy, tries to concentrate on the king’s words.

*Who will she blame?*

*Not me. Not Jaqen. Herself? If she does, Jaqen will disabuse her of that notion swiftly enough.*
Who will she turn on?

The answer is obvious: Arya Stark will turn against those that made Daorys who he is. She will turn her eyes east, and the first thing she will see will be the House of Black and White.

And when she’s done with them she will range east.

“We won’t harm her,” says the woman. “We don’t want her.”

He groans, then looks up.

Jon Stark is looking at him with some consternation, his eyes all scrunched up, as if he’s mid-wince. From the stiffness in his joints, no one realizes he’s been crouching like this for a while.

He creaks to his feet, sighs.

“How did you stop thinking like that?” he asks, gestures to the balcony.


“That’s a long time.”

Jon shrugs. “Set it to a year, then.”

“A year at least,” says the woman.

No one exhales. “A day,” he says.

What is wrong with me, that I cannot balance Arya Stark against myself for more than a single fucking day?

He smiles at the king. “Thank you, Jon. Owe you one.”

“Well you’re going to be around much longer to pay me back,” says Jon Stark.

No one snorts. “I have brothers to discharge my debts.”

“Lucky you,” says Jon, glum now, looking out over the balcony.

No one is a bit taken aback at the statement. “But you have brothers too,” he says. “Arya Stark, Sansa Stark, Brandon Stark, Jaqen H’ghar. They will discharge your debts, surely?”

Jon turns back, raises an eyebrow. “Arya and Sansa are brothers?”

“Well, we share Arya,” says no one. “And Jaqen.”

Jon chuckles at that. “You are insane.”

“Says the Stark,” mutters no one as he waves a hand in farewell, and goes to find a justification for the length of a day when the sun never rises.

He finds Jaqen in front of the library, talking with the Maester.

The god’s lips, they form a question.

A day more.
“Yes,” he says instead.

NO!

“Arya,” he says.

The Maester’s gone somewhere, Daorys never noticed the man’s departure. Jaqen stands beside him in front of a roaring hearth.

“I do not wish to disappoint her,” no one whispers.

“She is not the focus of my concern at the moment.” Jaqen looks at him. “I would say something, and it should not sway you.”

He grins. “She’s out of excuses.”

Jaqen smirks in reply. “It’s the one thing she will not use to persuade you.”

“Whyever not?”

“God told her not to.” Jaqen’s smile is bitter. “But no one does not care.”

Me, or you, Jaqen? Both. Neither of us care; truth is truth, regardless of motivation. You already know it won’t sway me; you know, oh you can see my longing.

Though, to be fair, there is a significant amount of longing Jaqen misreads. But how is a poor, monogamous god supposed to distinguish between desire for Death and desire for death?

No one grins. “I would hear.”

“God-touched,” says Jaqen, looking into the hearth. “This rift in the order--Braavosi and Lorathi and the unaffiliated--it began when he was killed. The order was not diminished, but we changed.”

How will it change when I am gone?

He doesn’t remember what it was he brought to the Faceless Men, doesn’t remember who he was, or had been. All of that belongs to a life before “no one”—a mild problem in that he was not “no one” for some time after he became faceless. He’d had a name.

Daorys looks to the god; Jaqen’s face is still, calm like the black water of the pool. “Should I ask for my name back?”

“ That ,” says Jaqen, “is one thing you should not ask for.”

No one’s mouth twists. “The god is being merciful?”

“No yet.” Jaqen sighs. “The ones that do not train, that stay in Braavos and administrate—it started when she died. Again, not a diminishing of the order .”

The emphasis catches at Daorys. “A diminishing of you ?” he asks, grabbing Jaqen by the shoulder, wrenching him around so he can look the god in the eyes. “It diminishes you?”

Jaqen’s mouth is a thin line. “I do not know,” he says. “When they came back to me...holes--” he makes an aborted gesture with his hand towards his head, awkward, graceless.

No one’s breath stills. He knows that gesture, oh he knows it.
Holes, in my head, in my memories.

“ I have forgotten their names,” says Jaqen.

Arya knows my name. Will she forget as well?

“I take it back,” says Daorys. “The request for mercy. I will stay. For as long as it is necessary.”

I don’t know what the holes swallowed in me; what will they swallow of you?

“Told you it should not sway you,” says Jaqen. “I must take you now.” Jaqen lays a hand over no one’s head.

No one leans into the touch. “Too late,” he whispers. “No one, Jaqen, not a stone. Swayed, my lord, swayed, stay your grace.”

Not going to give tattered things to Jaqen.

Without another word, the god turns his back on the one who is no one and walks away.

No one sighs, and returns to his sickbed.

The woman sits, her legs gracefully drawn up beside her, upon the casement of Theon’s window.

“I don’t think you should use that knife for it,” she says.

“Gave my word to her,” Daorys reassures her. “That means something to Faceless Men.”

It means the world.

World’s got to end sometime.

JAQEN

He finds her packing up the last of her work in the stillroom. “How is he?” he asks.

She lays her notes on the table. “I bled him again, and he did not wake, didn’t even twitch,” she says. “He hasn’t woken since the first dose of the Saltwater--he wills himself asleep, Jaqen, keeps himself there, I know not why.”

The pain, the confusion, the helplessness--take your pick.

“Did the last trials yield anything?” he asks gently.

She shakes her head. “That first one from yesterday is still the best bet,” she says, “with the stilbite and sulfur and curdled milk, of all things--it does bind the poison. Not enough of it.” She sighs. “If we had years…”

Jaqen’s smile is bleak. “We do, normally.”

The body is nothing in this war; the mind is everything.

“Memory,” she whispers. “There’s no spell, beloved, nothing but your blood—how could that have triggered anything bad?”
“Trauma?” he asks. “The taste of blood, perhaps.”

He was hesitant; shouldn’t have pushed it.

She sighs, perches upon the side of the table. “The Waif thinks the same—that he’s doing it to himself. Like he did with his name.” She grimaces. “Stupid, stupid, how can we tell what is missing because of fucking magic and what is missing because of that fucking thing our brother did to him?”

A dangerous line of questioning.

“He begged it of him,” says Jaqen. “Your ‘Kindly Man’ did it for his own reasons, but not until it was asked of him.”

“Why?” she asks. “We keep coming back to the why --he doesn’t know, doesn’t want to speculate. Why would he—” she looks at Jaqen with narrowed eyes. “When did he ask to be made nameless?”

“I do not know, exactly,” says Jaqen. “I was near Qarth, at the time.”

“So you didn’t fuck something up,” she mutters.

“What would I fuck up?”

She looks at him as if he is an idiot.

“Beloved,” he says, “I have no idea.”

“Was he in love with you?”

“There...” he hesitates. “There were some indications.”

“What indications?” She’s tapping her foot impatiently now.

“Was he in love with you?”

“Beloved,” he says, “I have no idea.”

“Was he in love with you?”

“Beloved,” he says, “I have no idea.”

“He didn’t want me. He wanted Jaqen H’ghar. Not that fractured whatever-it-was that I was.”

He saw the truth of me, beloved. You know what his mind’s like, how could he not have? Took him some time to see it, but what is seen cannot be unseen.

He is no one; he allows himself some irritation with his bride. And they are each the mirrors of the other—inevitable, that when arouses, the other is aroused, when one irritates, the other is irritated.

She takes a deep breath. “What did he say to Jaqen H’ghar?”

“A proposition was made.” He does not say who propositioned whom.

“And he fled,” she murmurs. “He was in love with Jaqen H’ghar, and he still fled.”

His speciality is will, not courage like yours.

His turn to breathe. “Two years after he became faceless, I came back from an assignment—Lorath, as it happens—we spoke. And then...” Jaqen shrugs. “I have no idea what happened--I thought he avoided me, I left for Quarth. And by the time I returned, he had been taught to be no one.”

“It cannot be taught,” she says, “or I’d have been no one long ago. No, he was not taught. He was made —by stripping away everything that was him. Who he was. And when there was nothing
left...he defaulted to being no one.”

“He is one of the best we have in the order.”

“Fuck the order.”

Jaqen smiles at her, sad. “I love you.”

She returns his smile. *She sorrows as well.* “I should have told you of Zural’s plots earlier.”

He reaches for her wrist, pulls her to him. “Nothing I could have done, beloved,” he says. “Save not be who I am.” He rubs his thumbs over the inside of her wrists. “I keep a thing from you as well,” he says.

She grins. “You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t. Keep what you will. Use me as you will. Carte blanche.”

He stills. “Where did you learn that?” *Not from Zural.*

“Guess,” she says.

He closes his eyes, leans his forehead against her chest.

*Forgive me, my heart; I know not how I can save him. Not from R’hllor, not from himself. Not even from me, at the end.*

“So,” she says, “how desperate are we?”

He looks up, raises an eyebrow.

“Think you he is still in love with you?” she asks.

*Not sure he ever was.* “Those days are come and gone,” he says. “He believes in the god now. Why, did you think I could seduce him into a better frame of mind?”

She gives him an arch look. “Would you, if you could?” She wraps her arms around his neck. “No, perhaps that is the wrong question,” she murmurs. “Think you you are still in love with him?”

He chuckles. “Aohon,” he reminds her. *Yours.*

“Not an answer, beloved,” she reminds him in turn.

*And sex is not a solution, beloved, it is a palliative.*

She shakes her head. “You’re over-thinking this. Again. Lust is a tool; it builds a bridge to the mind. We want to hold the mind to us long enough for something, anything, to heal, even if time is the only philtre that can be applied.”

He thinks about it. “Is it only desperation for you?” he asks.

She narrows her eyes at him.

He traces a line upon the side of her neck, bites down, gentle. “You like to watch,” he murmurs against her skin, “But you don’t like being watched. Only do it when I ask. So who else was watching that night, in your mind’s eye, that you offered?”
He can feel her pulse stutter under his tongue before she controls it.

“Think you,” he says, “that I do not know when my bride desires another?”

“She does not,” she snaps.

He pulls away from sucking at her neck, raises an eyebrow at her.

“A little?” she says, her eyes searching his face. “Does it distress you?”

He grins. “Bad Arya. Look I distressed?”

She bites her lower lip. “For a little while I thought that’s why you raged at me,” she says in a small voice.

He snorts. “Even my hypocrisy has limits.”

At that, she smirks a little. “So it seems I have exceptional taste.”

Now how is a man supposed to counter such a statement?

His arms tighten around her. “If he is to be seduced into a better frame of mind,” he says, “the Stark half of this partnership may have better luck than the H’ghar.”

She studies him. “He keeps no secrets from me,” she says. She hesitates. “I have kept some of his from his god.”

Ah.

“So the Stark half does not need luck,” he observes, wry.

By the slight furrowing of her brow, she disagrees. “He has suffered an interminable length of torment for your sake. He will not lie with your bride without you.”

Jaqen cannot counter that.

A devout servant, he who is no one, he thinks bitterly.

“We know he doesn’t want me,” he says.


His turn, to search her face. “A little. Does it distress you?”

She lays a not-quite-chaste kiss upon his lips. “Look I distressed?”

He shakes his head. “No. But, my heart, heartbreak is inevitable if we walk down that road with him. I would not have that for you.”

She shrugs. “Then we pine together, you and I.”

“I am not sure I want to see the poetry that comes out of that,” he mutters.

She gives him an amused look. “Let’s deal with the suicidal depression and magical fish poison before we start hunting for things that rhyme with ‘Daorys’, shall we?”
Not jest-worthy, beloved, you and I don’t understand the meaning of restraint.

She sighs. “So heartbreak follows,” she says. “Almost as inevitable as death—Jon, Daenerys. Petyr fucking Baelish—heartbreak does not judge, either, the righteousness of a soul or its cause.”

My words, he thinks, twisted.

“You know it will kill him, the both of us,” he says, “poor confused lamb that he is.”

“It may not even work,” she says. “He may need the gift, despite it.”

Even if it does work...

He looks into her eyes. “That carte blanche of yours will be abused either way,” he says, as the magnitude of this thing they both contemplate dawns upon him. “My heart,” he pleads then, “take it back.”

“No.”

He closes his eyes.

“If he is lost to us,” she says softly, “we will mourn no matter what road we take. But if we take the road that points to heartbreak, it will a pure mourning—no self-recrimination in it, that we could have done more, and didn’t. That we could have claimed something of him, but for a breath, and didn’t at the last chance we had.”

So be it.

“The dreaming,” he says. “If it was the blood that triggered the decline, there is no guarantee that sex won’t.”

The spells of Asshai make use of all things of the body.

“The dreaming,” she agrees. “Just a dream in the morning, if he doesn’t take to it.”

“Vanishingly small probability of heartbreak,” he murmurs. “Nothing to flee from—we—I—preferable to R’hllor’s nightmares, at the very least.”

NO ONE

The star-eyed woman leaves out the door; she seems to be in a bit of a hurry. The pit outside the casement window dissolves into the ground, and the air turns from ash-choked to sweet.

He finds himself on a vast plane, a black sky meeting the horizon in a line of silver fire.

This is new.

He wonders if it will be a nightmare or not. He shrugs and sits down, cross-legged, upon the ground. If it is a nightmare, it will find him. If it is a dream, it’s already around him, no point chasing it down.

The ground is a meadow, he realizes, and the blades of grass are made of silk like the carpets in the courts of Yi-Ti.
Promising. Perhaps I will walk after all.

He goes to rise and finds that he lies upon his back, looking up into the sky, and a soft, warm weight is nestled in the crook of his arm.

He stiffens. There are some nightmares that begin so.

“Not going to eat you,” says a voice. A voice he knows. He looks down in surprise, and finds Arya pressed against his side.

“Oh oh,” he says, realizes he has said it aloud.

Not supposed to dream about her.

Jaqen can read the one who is no one, through and through, unless he expends especial care, care such as he has been expending in the past few days. Desire is certainly not an undesirable thing, but desire for her, it edges too close to disloyalty.

Dreaming about her, naked, in his arms upon a silken carpet, that is crossing the line.

He gently disengages himself from her, pulls his arms to himself, realizes he is in a state of undress as well.

Excellent. Suicide by dream—all it needs is for Jaqen to be watching.

Desire surges in his veins.

Panicked now, he tries to back away, but silent, sensuous, the image of Arya Stark follows, and she raises herself upon one arm, leans over him so her face hovers above his. Her hair, a jagged dark waterfall, tickles the edges of his jaw.

“My subconscious is an idiot,” he mutters.

“I know the shape of your dreams, Daorys,” says the image of Arya Stark. She gives “Daorys” a strange inflection; that is all it takes, for “no one” to become almost, almost a name. “I know where to find them.”

Pine. Wintergreen.

Fuck.

“Um. What are…”

“What do you think?”

He grits his teeth. “Arya, I am no one, but I am not a stone. You need to leave now. Wake me up, as you go.”

“And as I’ve told Jaqen many times in this place—I demand a kiss for such services.”

He groans, closes his eyes.

She chuckles against him. “Who rules the dreaming?”

He who is the Weirwood of Shadows, the Heart Tree of the Last Sleep.
He twists, swivels to a side. “Jaqen?” he calls.

_Ginger. Cloves._

And suddenly, he understands. “The gift,” he says, and he cannot stop the wild, wild grin on his face. “This is _the gift._”

He slides a leg under her, flips her onto her back, supports his weight on one arm even as another reaches for her breast. He is hard, harder than he can almost ever imagine being, pressed up against her, the scent of her clean skin seeping into his pores. But when he speaks, he looks out towards the horizon, into the darkness. “You two had better not let word of this get out—they’ll be lining up to buy their own contracts.”

Footsteps, and a shape solidifies, emerges from within the horizon. His heart beats faster in his chest, and the grin slips from his face.

“Jaqen.”

“Once, and never again,” says Jaqen and his voice is a dark, dark caress around no one’s head. He closes his eyes, bows his head, and finds Arya looking up at him, an expectant grin on her face.

“May I disappoint you, for but a moment?” he asks.

She nods. She _sees_ him—recognizes the intent in his eyes. Slowly, carefully, he gets up off her, rises to his knees, then his feet.

A step forward, then another, and he stands almost skin to skin with Jaqen. Jaqen is still, calm. Watching.

No one smiles, and his arm snakes around Jaqen’s waist and his mouth meets Jaqen’s; Daorys allows no quarter; his mouth is hungry, insistent.

Jaqen _doesn’t_ pull back.

The one who is no one takes it as an invitation; his other hand grasps the nape of Jaqen’s neck, he pulls him forward, deeper into the kiss.

_And all the world was washed away._

“Forgive me,” he says, and his voice cracks; whispers spill out through the cracks. He tries a grin, cocky. “Couldn’t sleep the long sleep without doing that, once.”

Jaqen moves. Closer.

The one who is no one looks down, between them.

“Is that for _me_?” Daorys asks, gleeful.

“So help me,” says Jaqen, casting an almost exasperated, half-embarrassed look over no one’s shoulder, at Arya, “I think it is.”

A very wicked smile blooms over no one’s face.

_Two sins for the price of one, and absolutely nothing to lose._

He kneels.
“What are you doing?” Jaqen is alarmed.

Blasphemy.

And he takes Jaqen in his mouth, wraps his lips around him, swallows him deep.


Lust.

Jaqen’s hardness stretches his mouth, strains his jaw as he closes his lips around Jaqen’s shaft, sucks, a seal with tongue and cockhead trapped, his tongue circles the ridge, he licks, hard, over and over and over again at the underside of Jaqen’s cock, broad strokes even as his lips slide up and down the shaft and his throat swallows in counterpoint to his tongue.

He is rewarded with a trembling in Jaqen’s legs.

A movement, forwards and back, from Jaqen’s hips.

No one can feel Arya draw closer to him, she kneels behind him, wraps her arms around his torso as his mouth works on Jaqen, and the back of his throat feels the panic, the pressure of thrusts that are too hard, too rough, just out of synchronicity with no one’s movements.

A break, in Jaqen’s control.

“Enough,” Jaqen says in a strangled voice. “Stop.”

“He doesn’t mean it,” Arya whispers in no one’s ear.

A dream, he thinks to himself, and I will never wake from it. An eternity in the darkness after, no thought, no memory. But this, this is the last thing he will ever do.

He reaches around, his hands close around the globes of Jaqen’s buttocks, he pulls him closer, deeper into his throat.

Jaqen makes a strangled sound; his muscles clench, and the one who is no one finds his mouth, his throat flooded with a sharp, bitter taste.

He swallows.

Slowly, slowly he backs up off Jaqen’s cock, his tongue swirling around the head to gather up every last drop of cream.

He looks up, meets Jaqen’s eyes.

Jaqen looks like he’s been hit with something heavy. A cavalry charge, perhaps.

Daorys smirks, and is rewarded with a look—half glare, half incredulity: what did you just do to me?

And then no one turns his attention to the woman who is rubbing her tits over his back, driving him a little more mad than he already is.

Dreams have a strange logic and as he thinks it so it is: Arya lies under him, soft, Jaqen sits knees folded under Him on the ground behind her, her back is half on His thighs and He holds her forearms, pinning them to each side of her.
It’s quite possibly the best last thing anyone’s ever done.

He knows Arya; as familiar to him as Jaqen is an enigma. The flesh is not nothing, it is the vessel of her, this one who is separated from his soul by a breath, the mirror of him that no flesh can conceal from his gaze.

He looks deep into her eyes, smiles.

“Hey, you,” he says.

“You, yourself,” she replies, grinning up at him, wanton mischief writ over her face.

A bad idea, beautiful one, I’ll be gone and you’ll be left.

She wraps her legs around him. “The best idea,” she says.

“Not allowed to weep for me then,” he says. “Ever again.”

“Would you have?” she asks, arch.

Till all land drowned and the Sea took everything into Himself and there were none left to tell the difference between saltwater and weeping.

“Dishonours the memory,” he says.

“Then I won’t. Wanted you.”

He closes his eyes against the one expression he has never dared read in her before.

Lust.

Drowning is not a matter of tears alone. He leans in, his mouth over hers. Tentative at first, he kisses her lips; there are tensions in him, whipcord bands of will that puppet his tendons and muscles. They let go; will is not enough, to hold him apart from her in this moment.

“Wanted you,” he murmurs to her. He looks up to Jaqen. “Would ask forgiveness but I know it’ll earn me naught but a glare. Wanted you, Jaqen, longer than I know.”

A part of him still doesn’t believe this is happening, mercy notwithstanding.

Jaqen’s turn, to close the distance between them, the god lays his forehead upon no one’s. “Wanted you,” He whispers. “For longer than you know.”

Oh.

Need, want, it is inseparable from him, it wraps around him.

She shifts, raises her hips, insistent. “Please.” A breathy whimper. Her legs wrap tighter around Daorys’s hips, and he moves over her, in her.

The tight heat of her envelopes him and he trembles with the sensation of it, the want, made real. There is no thought to it, naught but the need to move and he moves, rocks backwards and forwards, each time he thrusts into her, he struggles to hold onto his control to concentrate to bend down, trap her lips with his own even as her hips surge up to meet him and he must rise and taste of Jaqen’s mouth, repeat in an endless cycle of everything and nothing; gasps, from her, half-moans that shudder through both his and Jaqen’s bodies, her breasts, ripe for the touching and Jaqen
touches, circles, and the sight of it His hands, his Hands on her, the rose of her nipples trapped between two of Jaqen’s fingers as He kneads her flesh...

He surfaces for air; breath has abandoned him, trapped somewhere between his mouth and his cock.

“Still want to wake up?” asks Jaqen, a twisted smile on his face.

*I’m fucking your wife while you hold her down for me. I think you know very well the answer to your question, brother.*

Jaqen’s eyes are dark, so dark, any more and the darkness will swallow His eyes whole. Perhaps it will spread, till it swallows the land, swallows the lovers, swallows everything, and no one.

“Jaqen,” he says, “I was *so* good.” Arrogance. Truth. Death after death after death, he’d flowed a river of souls to his god.

“The best,” says Jaqen, and His hand leaves Arya’s breast to cup Daorys’s cheek.

*Forgiven*, the god’s touch seems to say.

*Forgiven for what? For my desire? For my arrogance? For not being able to control my mind?* All things that need forgiving, to be sure.

The arrogance has unleashed some part of Daorys that he holds in check; the gentleness, reciprocity in some measure for the grace of her that she yields up to him, the gentleness is now tainted, shaded by the darkness he has borrowed from Jaqen’s eyes, and by the resonance in himself, the rising, the *hunger*, he knows Jaqen leashes within Himself a storm few can withstand.

*Has He shown that to her?*

He grins at the god.

His thrusts are harder, they reach deep, harsh, and she feels the change in him; words spill out of her mouth, pleading, and there is too much instinctive shift in her core, she opens herself wider, arches her spine, and no one knows: *Jaqen takes her like this.*

She moans, and he feels the edges of himself fray; he pulls back on his knees a little, raises her hips against his own, drives in, a new angle, deeper, her body is small, too small to contain the spirit of her, she spills out into the ground, into him, into Jaqen, the scent of wintergreen, a cold, cold breeze that strokes the nape of his neck, sadistic, like a lover, and he circles his hips, ignores the building rising tide at the base of his cock, ignores every muscle that is taught, held at the edge of ecstasy.

He can hold here forever—he wants to hear her moan again.

Again, and again and again, Daorys takes her, his eyes rapt, fixated on their joining, on a lone bead of sweat that makes a trail down her collarbone, slips into the valley between her breasts, her pale skin calling to him, he wants to *mark* her, and he gives in.

He bends down, his mouth closes upon the soft flesh of her upper breast; he bites down.

“*Varro,*” she moans.

Everything freezes.
Jaqen clamps a hand over her mouth.

Too late.

The one who was no one, he blinks, stupefied, buried inside her.

“*Told* her not to do that,” says Jaqen, helpless futility in His voice.

*Varro.*

There is a strange quality to memory. One would think it cascades: it doesn’t, it *waits* to be recalled.

How is one to hide from oneself the pieces of one’s soul? Why, by cutting them up into yet smaller pieces, and cutting those pieces smaller still until memory becomes fragmented into a million incomprehensible shards—a word, a taste. A color. A puzzle to be assembled into something resembling a whole, if only one knew the order each shard should be arrayed in.

A key holds the order of the shards, safe amidst the chaos of their arrangement. The key arrays all chaos into order, draws memory, and thought, and deed and sorrow into their proper place, and the key is a name: *Varro Massag.*

Despair curls in him—he must lean forward. He struggles to control himself; the body has had practice in it, but this is *Jaqen’s* domain—no control here, not for him.

Arya is looking up at him, wide-eyed, wild-eyed, tears forming at the corner of her eyes: *I’m sorry,* *I’m sorry.*

So.

“An error,” he says gently, and finds a smile twitching at the corner of Jaqen’s mouth. “One finds oneself pleased beyond reason that one’s lovemaking has caused her to disobey her god.”

He draws Jaqen’s hand away from her mouth.

“Say it again, Arya Stark,” he says softly. “Say it again,” he whispers, and he looks up, meets Jaqen’s eyes. “It is fitting, at the last.”


For the first time in all his memory, he *lies* to her. “Won’t.” He wishes he had a heart so it could break.

The darkness in Jaqen’s eyes has found a resonance in the landscape around them; it has swallowed the horizon, swallowed the ground, swallowed everything but the three; motion is resumed.

“What do you want to wake up?” asks Jaqen, and His voice is unbearably gentle.

He bows his head; shakes it: *no, please. Not ever again.*

He reaches for them then, the both of them, and Jaqen’s dream accommodates him, and again she is trapped between the both of them; they have reversed roles.

“Dear god,” he whispers.

“Right here,” says Jaqen; it seems he has been rewarded with a smirk. He gives the god a smile of
his own—both of them are on edge, their smiles underlain with something darker, harder than her, the soft, willing flesh they share between them, she sits astride the god’s lap and undulates, even as Varro presses himself into her, his fingers threaded through Jaqen’s hair.

They are suspended, the three, upon a thread of Jaqen’s making, on the blade’s edge between nothingness and the world.

...come away, come away, ‘twas but a mummer’s play...

Again and again he oscillates with them, higher and higher as the world gets darker around them, till the world implodes into her, into him, into a thousand suns giving up their light all at once, and there is nothing left in the wake of it except darkness.

JORAH

Shiera gasps. “He escaped. He escaped, I don’t know how, the spell snapped, Jorah, Jorah, help me please kill me now—”

He scrabbles, frantic, for the ties of the mask, draws the lacquered wood away from her face.

She bleeds from the nose, from the mouth.

And a shadow at the corner of the room resolves.

“So much for your mating of magics, Champion,” mocks the Lady in the Mask. “All this you have orchestrated,” she says, gesturing outside the window, “for nothing.”

Shadows reach for her. Jorah tries to wrest control of them but he’s got nothing left, no reserves—he cast them all out onto the ground before entering his rooms.

He finds himself on the ground, bound face-first to the floor with tendrils of shadow.

He can hear Shiera gasping for breath.

“Are you of any use to me at all now?” asks the Lady in the Mask.

“I am the Champion of Light!” Shiera snarls.

“Light needs no Champion,” says R’hllor’s Consort. “Light is sufficient unto itself.”

Jorah shouts, tries to fight against the bonds, and he sobs; out of the corner of his eye he sees her stripped of her clothes, and manacles placed around her wrists, her ankles.

Slaves come. They drag him away.

He knows the corridors—they lead to the pit.

Jorah is made to watch as she screams, pieces of her flesh flayed from her back, made to watch, not allowed to look away as she is pressed against the monstrosity that is the Lord of Light.

The flesh gurgles, it oozes and flows around her, the priests push her in further, still screaming though no sound issues forth from her lips.

The Lady in the Mask turns to him.
“And now,” she says, “we will do it my way.”

The Holy Consort of R’hllor removes her mask, and his head is dragged upwards by shadows; he cannot look away.

Jorah Mormont does not stop screaming for a very long time.

**ARYA**

Jaqen lies on top of her, between her legs, tracing the vivid mouth-shaped bruise on her breast.

A dream, extruded into the world.

“He broke skin,” he says thoughtfully.

“Not a half of what you did to him,” she says, and a slow smile blooms in her as she stretches, arms above her head. “Not a half of what I did to you.”

He grins. His back is raked bloody, bite marks circle his bicep, his neck.

Not all of that is her handiwork, of course.

A thought strikes. “Bran!” she says, “Beloved, you kept--”

“Closed,” he says and shudders—they both have the same image in their minds, she thinks, of poor, virginal Brandon Stark being subjected to the ravages of three Lorathi appetites through dreams he can’t get away from.

Footsteps, rapid. A strident banging on the door to their chamber.

“Guess he woke up,” says Jaqen, a grin leaking around the lines of his sudden trepidation.

Arya is grinning too, the helpless giddy after-effects of sex and satiation, and she hopes, hopes Varro feels some of it too, or it might all have been for naught.

The banging stops, then starts up again, harder.

“Better open it,” she says, “he’ll have the whole wing up if he continues.”

Even as she speaks she can hear a door on the level below opening, shutting.


Varro Massag flings the door open. He’s dressed; some part of her is disappointed.


Jaqen tilts his head, considers him.

“Why am I not dead?”

“Come inside, or leave,” says Jaqen quietly, “don’t stand in the threshold with the door open so all of us can be the target of servants’ gossip.”

*Is he worse off than before?*
But he comes in, silent now, closes the door behind him. His eyes rake over their forms, dispassionate until his gaze finds, latches onto the bruise on her breast. And then he groans, sinks into one of the high-backed chairs. The one that is farthest away from the bed, she does not fail to notice.

His hand rises to cover his face, his hair (he’s changed faces just before coming to them then) falls in large waves to his shoulders.

“Varro?” asks Jaqen.

No response.

Arya slithers out from other Jaqen, crawls on her fours to the edge of the bed. A part of her knows she’s being very cat-like this morning. She tilts her head to a side. “I think we broke him, Jaqen,” she whispers.

At that Varro’s gaze snaps up. He gives her a look. She almost purrs.

No, he’s all right. Better than before.

“Why am I not dead?” he asks in measured tones.

“Some questions needed answering,” says Jaqen, and he gets out of bed, leans against one of the bedposts. “It didn’t seem quite appropriate to ask in the midst of it.”

And now Arya is drawn to look at Jaqen, all the sculpted lean planes of him, and she must have made some noise because Jaqen glances at her.

“Wicked child,” he says, serious. “Put on some clothes before you divert this conversation.”

In response she rolls on the bed, dragging the blanket with her, rolling herself into a tight cocoon so that almost every inch of skin is covered, and only her head shows as she sits cross-legged on the bed. “Better?”

“Somehow, no,” says Jaqen, wry.

“I thought it was mercy,” Varro says, and there is no inflection in his voice now. “Would never have come between you two if--”

“You didn’t come between us,” snaps Arya. “We seduced you. I seduced the both of you, if we’re being accurate.” She smiles, twists. “You were welcome, in case there was doubt. To come between us.” No special emphasis on that word, “come”.

Varro Massag’s eyes narrow at her: Wicked child.

“I married it, I have to live with it,” says Jaqen in a long-suffering voice as he draws on his own clothes.

“You poor, beleaguered god,” says Varro. “Say the word, I’ll take her off your hands.”

She shivers with delight.

By the crooked smile on both their faces, they know of her reaction, of course, so that’s partly why they do it.

“So,” Varro says and leans forward on his knees. “What are we to do with me?”
We. Oh, she likes that. She’s grinning like a fool. All the battles to be fought yesterday still have to be fought today.

But now we have an army.

“We go find breakfast,” says Jaqen. “Sansa will come looking for us if we’re not down in a half-watch, and the last time…” He glances up at the ceiling—the scorch marks are still there.

Varro has followed her gaze. “Winterfell burned, I heard,” he says.

“Fire didn’t reach here,” says Jaqen, and now he has a sheepish look on his face—feigned. “Think you the dreaming was bad? We set the room on fire last time we played…intensely.”

“That,” says Varro, “I want to see.”

“Something can be arranged,” says Arya and there is a definite purr to her voice now.

“If the both of you behave,” warns Jaqen. “This does not get out.”

“And here I wanted to take you on top of the formal dining table,” says Varro sarcastically. “Have a heart, Jaqen, we know how to keep secrets.”

“From wargs?” asks Jaqen. “Jon’s familiar is a direwolf. Think you he won’t smell sex on us?”

“Luckily for all of us,” says Arya, “at least for today, none of us have had any of that.” She smirks. “Just very vivid dreams. And no creature can smell a dream.”

“If the pattern holds,” Jaqen murmurs darkly, “a Stark will find just such a creature.”

Varro rises. Slowly, he walks up to Jaqen—Jaqen’s holding himself still, very still. Varro steps right up to him; Jaqen looks at Varro, a quizzical half-smile on his face that changes to a sort of wonderment as Varro rubs his face on Jaqen’s neck. Then he comes over to the bed, closer to her, repeats the strange motion.

“I can’t smell you any more,” he says. He sounds puzzled, and sad. “I can’t smell you.”

There was some spell. And dream-sex broke it? No. His name.

He’s staring at the balcony now, as if enthralled by it. “I wanted to kill myself.”

“You don’t want to die now,” says Jaqen.

“Not yet,” says Varro and he turns around, faces them again. His eyes burn, fierce. “Now that I know what I have left undone. Extrapolated, before. All wrong.” He snorts. “Whenever no one gets an extrapolation wrong, it’s because he’s hiding something from himself.” He grins at Arya. “The night we went to the Free Folk camp, and you were annoyed because Jaqen was staring at that woman, Val? I thought it was because you were jealous. But you were just irritated he might be fucking with your brother’s betrothal. I was the one that was jealous.”

“Over me?” asks Jaqen, a bit dismissive.

“Don’t want to play this game anymore, Jaqen,” says Varro. And there is a shift to his tone, the intonation of his words. He sounds weary, but the words are no longer clipped, precise, as if he does not care whether meanings blend into one another.

Not the real Varro; there is no one real Varro, as there is no one real Arya. This is the power of the
Lorathi-- all their faces are as real as any other.

But the shift in his voice signals some shift in him.

“Should have given me mercy,” says Varro.

Jaqen is watching her brother, very intently. “We’re going to have a very long conversation now, Arya,” says Jaqen. “It might be best if you lock the door.”

She hurries to comply, taken aback by the sudden seriousness in Jaqen’s voice.

“She doesn’t need to hear this,” says Varro.

What’s going on?

“Brother?” she asks. He always tells me what’s going on.

But he’s ignoring Arya; his eyes are for Jaqen and Jaqen alone.

“No secrets between the two of you, so I’ve heard,” says Jaqen, mocking.

She tries to read the set of Varro’s shoulders, she cannot see his face.

“A Lorathi hides,” says Varro. “Hide deep enough to hide from yourself, means you’re deep enough to hide from a god.”

“R’hllor couldn’t find you, it’s true,” says Jaqen. “You really did forget everything when you fled yourself.”

“I didn’t flee,” says Varro quietly. “Other renegades flee. And they always get caught. I waited.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey! So I re-did this end-comment with a reply I gave to another reader, who was confused as to what is going on. V

So, a TL;DR again:

The very, very basic overview:

1. Daorys is dying, and Jaqen sees him as an empty shell (over the last few chapters, Jaqen keeps asking Daorys to stop playing, to ask what he wants, and all Daorys responds with is servitude. Daorys and Arya mirror each other, Jaqen thinks Arya is going to end up like Daorys).

1a. Zural and teh HBW has turned on Jaqen, Jaqen feels the betrayal, justifies his brothers in it. He thinks it's better if the MFG "the one that eats and makes people a shell of themselves" dies.

2. He goes to Jon, Jon has a "pep talk" with him. Jaqen decides not to give up.

3. First order of business is to get the betrayer away from Arya's family--Jaqen uses
Daorys as a pretext (we *know* how dedicated Zural is to his teacher, even started speaking like him in the hope that Daorys/Varro would "hear" him, so what would make a Braavosi listen to orders from someone they've turned on? Braavosi has attachments, Jaqen uses it, commands Zural to leave Winterfell in exchange for not killing Daorys, in exchange for allowing Arya more time to look for a cure).

4. Sheira Seastar uses R'hllor's blood (which the Lady in the Mask never gives out, except for Jorah now) drawn from Jorah's veins, to cast the final "mating of magics" to get Daorys to die.

5. Daorys gave his word. He's dreaming, over and over. His entire POV until the end is him dreaming.

6. Arya's discovered a cure to the fish poison. It will take years to leech the radiation from Daorys. They don't have years, he keeps wanting to kill himself. Doesn't know where it is coming from, believes it's *could* be magic, or trauma from the torture in Asshai (she knows the WHOLE story, she threw half the pages of his account into the fire). So, she suggests (since she knows all of Daorys's secrets--she's quite aware of what Daorys wants) they seduce him. Jaqen's first love, after all, and she's aware of Jaqen's attraction as well. They're Lorathi, all three of them, we've been making a point of the Lorathi sexual flexibility for quite a while.

7. In the midst of above, Daorys gets his name back. Remembers who he was.

8. Shiera Seastar's spell was tied to "the man without a name". The moment "no one" i.e. Daorys "dies" and becomes Varro Massag, the spell doesn't have a target. She's poured a god's blood into it, the recoil is awful, and then R'hllor's Consort has the excuse she needs to kill the Champion (You're useless). Feeds Sheira to R'hllor.

8. Daorys was a renegade. The why and how of it is coming.

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I know a lot of time passes between arcs. If you look at the entire work, and do a search for "Varro Massag", it should show who he used to be before he became no one, at least the relevant bits.

"Varro Massag" is the person whose memories and understanding Arya has been using, over and over, to try to get the god to see reason. Jaqen's self-hatred is blinding him to truth, Arya is smart and wise and has all these memories but she's a seventeen year old assassin in a medieval world.

You (readers) don't know the nature of the Many-Faced God yet. You don't know the Valyrian's truth. You don't know what creates a god in the first place. You don't know why R'hllor's awake.

These are complex questions, in the framework of the world I've created. If Arya or Jaqen or Bran go about answering them, it's very deux-ex-machina. Rightfully, it's Arya's place to find the answers, the Consort balances the God, symbolically speaking. But I can't turn her into both a warg and a god and a princess AND a genius AND a renegade all the same time, can't have her defy the God's own understanding of Himself when she's spent all this time reconciling herself with him.

Created Varro as an OC back in Chapter 11--he's the one Arya wears to understand
guild financial politics. A mathematician for the Iron Bank. He's the one that's made the "medieval" version of a PGP cipher for the Faceless Men to use. The river of coin, the patterns behind the world. He's Zural's teacher, the reason Zural sees patterns in people and understands them is because this was taught to him by Varro.

Readers also don't know the reason behind the Braavosi/Lorathi and Student/Teacher split in the order. This needs to be looked at from the context of a renegade, and one of the four god-touched in the order.

Chapter 15, a Month's journey to the crossroads, the romance between the three has already begun, Chapter 16 we see R'hllor's true nature.

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We need the Many-Faced God to come into full power before we meet the Night's King.

Hope this helps! I know I always layer way too much in there, but there *is* always a method behind the madness.
“I didn’t flee,” says Varro quietly. “Other renegades flee. And they always get caught. I waited.”

Jaqen turns to Arya, and His eyes brim with mirth, and it is false, it must be false but she cannot tell.

“If you think it’s about the sex,” says Jaqen gently, “it’s never about the sex.”

Her mind blanks.

The Wind wrests itself out of Arya Stark’s control; intersperses herself between Jaqen and the renegade.

But Jaqen takes her gently by the shoulders, moves her aside.

Varro has risen to his feet. “You knew. All along, you knew.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “How could I not?”

Varro Massag is a renegade.

It is impossible.

The world shifts, it must—if reality cannot be made to suit a perspective, a Lorathi must shift their perspective to suit.

Arya Stark is dead; I am no one.

It comes. The Wind thrashes, but it is reined in—an advantage, to emulating an ideal Lorathi for almost half a moon.

She observes.

“You knew,” says Varro, softly. “And yet you walked into Asshai for me, when you should have left me to rot.”

“Two hundred years,” says Him of the Many Faces, just as calm. “Two hundred years you’ve served me. Renegade or not, I pay my debts.”

“Two hundred years,” mocks Varro. “The Wind’s taught you cruelty in the interim? Was that the game between the two of you? Make him remember before he dies?”
I wasn’t supposed to give you your name.

Varro looks at her, he reads her.

“No,” he says. “She didn’t know.” He looks up at Jaqen. “You used her well.”

Jaqen gives Varro a barbed smile. “I don’t control her,” he says. “No, old friend, the game was a pragmatic one—if you didn’t remember…a tree fell in the forest. I was the only one around to hear it. Two men can keep a secret, if one of them is dead. We saw your attachments growing; thought they’d save your life. Didn’t know she’d give you your name.”

“Good I did,” she says. “Because now we do know. No secrets between us, brother, isn’t that so?”

It’s the “brother” that’s done it. The Wind howls in glee, because the renegade’s eyes are bright, he cannot look at her.

No need to be doing this naked.

Arya rolls out of bed, swiftly draws on a set of old trews and a long, silk shirt. She runs a comb through her hair.

She watches the cold seep back into Varro’s red-rimmed eyes. His expression clears; he has regained control of his face.

“All this time, asking, asking, whether I wanted mercy.” Varro shakes his head. “Compact’s broken, I broke it two centuries ago. You couldn’t kill me in Asshai, their spells deny death. But any time after that, whether I said yea or nay, it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“Offered you your name when you got onto the fishing boat,” says Jaqen quietly. “You could have taken it. Run.”

“Remembered jack shit, no?” Varro asks. “Very loyal, he who was no one.”

“And there was the matter of the trap they’d laid in you,” says Jaqen.

“No trap,” she says. “A ruse, to buy time to save Daorys.”

Varro snorts. “Lie becomes truth in your mouth, honey-lips. There’s thousands of shadowbinders on the street, chain circles around half the river waiting for—”

He stops.

Both her and Jaqen have straightened.

Varro raises his head, exhales, and his eyes are just a little bit wild. “How did I know that? ” he whispers. “How can I see the shadowbinders on the street, the chains, as if they are a memory?”

“Something was in you,” says Jaqen, stepping closer to Varro.

Cold dread snakes up her spine; the hair at the back of her neck rises.

“And you were in it ,” she says.

For a moment it looks like Varro wants to crawl out of his skin; then again the control reasserts itself.
“Was in you yesterday,” he murmurs to her. She refuses to meet his eyes, feels his gaze shifting to Jaqen. “And, well,” he grins. “So it’s all gone. But it wouldn’t have mattered.” He chuckles again. “They didn’t know I was a renegade—they tainted me, thought you’d take me up into yourself when I died. But that doesn’t happen with my kind.”

A renegade’s death-memories do not come back to us; their faces are expunged from us, we forget even their names. Those that knew him may remember there had once been a renegade who hunted others like himself.

“The darkness in me will stay with my corpse,” says Varro, “to be burned and buried and forgotten. No risk for you—they chose to use the one Faceless Man they couldn’t use as bait.”

No one will remember Varro Massag; if we ever come across that name again, written down somewhere, if we ever see someone with a face like his, our eyes will glance over it and dismiss it as “irrelevant.”

It seems even no one has a limit; her eyes well. And the Wind seizes control.

Varro senses it; he spreads his arms, opens them out to the side as if caught between offering an embrace and an opening for a blade.

“He’ll hesitate,” he says, tilting his head at Jaqen, “that’s why He needed a renegade hunter in the first place. You’ll have to do it. Good training for you. Nobody will suspect it of me—Asshai is an excellent excuse for why my death-memories don’t go to everyone. You are inexperienced, but for the first few decades it won’t matter if nobody knows you’re the hunter. They won’t see you coming. Take me out to the field behind the Keep, and do it.”

Jaqen wanted answers, he said. To what? She doesn’t know. “Not until Jaqen’s satisfied,” she says calmly.

Varro smirks. “Thought that was all taken care of last night.”

Jaqen walks forward again—the Wind readies itself: the renegade has two of her knives, unlikely he’s not brought them with him to this “conversation”. But the renegade holds himself still, and Jaqen lays his hand on the renegade’s head: their customary morning ritual, when the god turns to dust the poisoned growths that have accumulated in Varro’s body over the night.

“You are mad, Lord of the Abyss,” Varro murmurs, and the Wind can taste the salt in his eyes. “Don’t understand you.”

SANSA

The bell for the morning meal has rung twice already, but Sansa sits in her bower and stares down at the scrap of parchment in her hand.

This cannot be real.

But it is. Zural, calm, diplomatic Zural is agitated, his posture speaks one thing, this face another, the raw pull of conflicting emotions writ clear on his face. Grief, guilt, determination. And underneath all of it, fear.

Jaqen has been declared renegade.
“But how?” she asks. “What did he do?”

Zural shakes his head. “Every time a renegade is made, it is something different—the killing of a brother, the renunciation of the order, some sell out for coin. What they do is not important—it always comes down at the last to a vote. The god—” He runs his hand through his close-cropped curls. “And then they are hunted down and killed.”

*When one wants justice, one goes to Jon Stark. When one wants solutions, one goes to Sansa Stark.*

There is no justice that can be applied here. But Zural has come proposing a solution.

“We are his family,” she says. “Jaqen has a home here.” She takes a deep breath. “You would defy your order?”

The keenness of Zural’s gaze has dulled, turning warm amusement to sharp-edged, brittle bitterness. He shakes his head. “There is precedent,” he says, “for time. A lifetime’s worth—that is owed. Keep him in Winterfell, Braavos needs the North—many reasons—ask for immunity for him as part of the trade. And I will buy every moment of time I can, for his sake, I—”

“I did not get the impression you favored Jaqen quite so much,” she interrupts.

Zural looks up. “He married my student,” he says. “Bound her, when she was perhaps not thinking clearly. Not him I disapprove of, if she had settled on him after some more time, it would have been no matter. But she had choices, other choices—”

“You?” Sansa asks, her voice entirely devoid of emotion. Zural is older than Jaqen, but not by much.

“Of course not,” snaps Zural. “There is none of that between teacher and student—the are paired because their dispositions prevent any of that from ever being even a remote possibility. The potential to abuse the trust—” his stops. “No. No jealousy between Jaqen and I, ever. I owe him, though the order may say I do not. Sorrow,” he says. “Sorrow, that it came to this. But while a vote changes what he is to a Faceless Man—it does not change the fact that Jaqen is still Jaqen, and he has been my brother for more years than you can know.”

He reaches out, pours a cup of wine. Too early for wine in Winterfell, but he’s brought a bottle of his own to supplement hers. It sits there, sealed. Waiting. She feels the need for a drink herself, a keen urge, to blunt the sharpness of the morning’s news.

*Cersei began the day with wine.*

“I will leave for White Harbor within the hour,” he says. “You must persuade Arya to leave as well, or she will be excised next. She is new, she has not the bonds to the order Jaqen does. Cast her out if you need to—you are the Lady of Winterfell.”

Sansa feels the bitter prick of tears in her eyes. “I am the Lady of Winterfell.”

Zural nods.

“Daorys?” asks Sansa.

Zural lowers his head. “I must take him with me, one way or another. Without Arya’s influence, Jaqen will not fight for Daorys’s life beyond the day.”

“Of course he will,” says Sansa.
Jaqen stood beside us, when Arya and I wept over Daorys, and the hope on Jaqen’s face, the way it turned to despair...

Zural gives her an incredulous look. “Have you been fooled by their friendly banter at the breakfast table?” he asks. “Things are not good between Jaqen and Daorys.”

She blinks. “That...that was not my impression.”

Zural shakes his head. “No Faceless Man is entirely inimical to another, but if there is enmity within the order it is between these two.”

All I saw was devotion, Zural, it was what finally laid my mind to rest when it came to Daorys and Arya.

“Jaqen has a soft heart,” continues Zural. “Sometimes Jaqen says to Daorys ‘let this renegade go, let time pass, he will come to the god either way’. Rarely, Daorys will stay his hand, but most times he will leave for the hunt. Daorys doesn’t care for Jaqen’s sensibilities. Daorys walks into the House, and when he does meddle in politics, it’s always a challenge, thrown into Jaqen’s face.”

How does that fit with ‘my brother bears a thing that will break a thousand men in the carrying of it’?

“Daorys is a Lorathi *that does not pray*,” says Zural. “An apostate. Daorys, he has a dark face he has not worn here yet--the kind of man that can turn and kill one that was once a brother. It angers the other Lorathi. You saw it, the night we played cards, the anger in Jaqen towards Daorys.”

“Jaqen was angry at Arya a few days before,” she says. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Zural’s mouth twists. “A man can only judge what he has seen--I have seen them interact for many years. Jaqen disapproves of Daorys, has, for years, despite the fact that Daorys serves with everything he has. Even here--Jaqen has been avoiding him, have you noticed it is only when Daorys goes looking for him that Jaqen is away on a ride, or meeting with the king, or some other thing? When at last Daorys had need of him, when at last he called for Jaqen, over and over as he lay dying the morning before last, Jaqen did not come. Daorys wasn’t asking for *death*,” says Zural, “he just wanted to say something to Jaqen, tell him something important, I know not what.”

Sansa leans back.

**Zural has never been wrong about anything else. But how does any of that fit what I have seen?**

“The only reason,” says Zural, “that Daorys is here at all, that he is alive, is Arya. The only reason *Jaqen* didn’t give him the gift is Arya--that first morning, when she said a brother must empty themselves and empty further to help another-- *that* warhammer was not aimed at me. It was aimed at Jaqen, to remind him of his duty to a brother.”

Something in the way Zural speaks those names--Daorys, Arya--it makes a suspicion a certainty.

“*Daorys*,” says Sansa. “It is Daorys that was the other choice you wanted Arya to have.” She leans forward, angry now. “You *used* me--you *still* wanted her to choose him, despite her giving oath to Jaqen! When we were children, if I said the sky was blue, she would say it is green. So if I said ‘stay away from Daorys’ enough times, you think she would crawl into his bed.” Sansa grits her teeth. “You used me against Jaqen, too--he heeds what I say. If I said ‘be careful, there is something brewing between them’, he would look, and interpret innocent interaction between a patient and healer as something more than it is.”
Zural looks at her, his eyes bright. “Forgive me,” he whispers. “I had no desire to hurt Jaqen--he is resilient, he has recovered from much worse.”

*A man recovered from drowning, so you pour water all over his hopes and dreams and say ‘but you drowned once, and it was alright’?*

She cannot keep the entirety of her anger off her face.

“You tried to ruin my sister’s *marriage* ,” she says.

He gives her a wry half-smile. “You and I both know the value of this thing called ‘marriage’,” he says. “There is no *sanctity* in it, only ownership.”

*How can something be true and false at the same time?*

Zural presses his lips together, shakes his head. “No, what I tried to do was worse,” he says sadly. “Much worse. I tried to *interfere* with the choices of other Faceless Men.” His shakes his head, at himself, it seems. “Justification in it--I feared for Daorys upon the journey here, listening to him speak, or not speak. A desperate hope--he spoke her name in his sleep. Prayed to the god, but that only once, her name more than that. Daorys keeps secrets. He is a very changed man from what he used to be. But if there was anyone that could bring him back to himself, make him *want* to live... I saw the shape of what it could be, right at the beginning of her training. She took to him. You have seen it--the patterns of their minds, they *fit*. She is not afraid of him. And now he is closer to her than he is to *anyone* else in the order, even his own student.” Zural’s mouth twists. “But it is too late.”

*Oh, Zural, Zural, no miracles are contained in our wants.*

She lays her hand on his. “Forgiven,” she lies. Lie will become truth, if Zural *does* protect Jaqen now.

*All too late.*

*Jaqen is not guildmaster anymore, not even a Faceless Man anymore. And the Starks are at the heart of it.*

*Will she go back to Braavos?*

Love is worth fighting for, in some cases. But look at what that earned Lyanna Stark--another woman that preferred blades to needlework.

*Love is worth fighting for, but not at the cost of her life. And Jaqen will see that. Jaqen is the only one that can persuade her, Zural, not me, not you, not even Jon.*

“You need to speak to Jaqen.”

Zural sighs. “It must be done.”

*Daorys will die, and even if there once could have been someone to hold her, help her heart heal after a forcible separation from Jaqen, there will not be.*

“So what else is to be done?” she asks. “How stands the alliance, if we harbor a fugitive?”

“First, I will try to persuade Arya myself,” says Zural. “And the alliance stands--this has no bearing on the House of Black and White’s interaction with the Starks, once a name is learned it is
learned. The Sealord will marry an ‘Arya Stark’, everything proceeds as normal.”

No, Zural, nothing is ‘normal’.

Everything is falling apart.

VARRO

There is a cacophony of voices in his mind. Memories, half-formed thoughts, images of things over and over overlain with blood, with need.

I am a renegade.

The thought has been crawling up his spine since he woke, since before he woke.

Old man, why did you let me pick something as stupid as a name for the key?

The one who is no one, whom Arya called Daorys and made of it a name in her mouth, he cannot reconcile the truth of Varro Massag’s memories with the shape of the world.

If the shape of the world cannot be reconciled with truth, a Lorathi must change the world until it does fit.

Daorys is dead.

I am a renegade.

Nothing holds him. No constraint, no oath, no bond.

No god.

His discipline of mind is tattered, the self lies sundered in a thousand shards about him. He is of two minds, two voices, each wanting something different.

Blood-crimson tides wash through him, breath by breath.

He leans forward, falls to his knees before Jaqen.

“One last duty,” he says, “owed to you by he who was no one--I discharge it on his behalf, since he is dead.”

When a brother turns renegade, there is precedent for an abeyance. Time, for farewells, or for works left undone. A renegade once waited two years to finish a contract, out of a sense of obligation, before he ran. Jaqen once waited seventy years, for one’s daughter to die, before he told Varro which continent he should head to.

The Many-Faced God folds to his knees before Varro; their heads are level.

“Two hundred years hunting renegades, between other contracts,” says Jaqen quietly. “Why?”

Because I was so compelled.

“Loyal to you, no?” mutters Varro, his gaze focused on the ground. “Kill the renegade. By proxy, since I didn’t remember shit.”
Jaqen sighs. “No precedent for this,” he says.

“There is,” Varro insists, looking up. “You forgave, decades ago, the one who stole one of Yours, before I gave her the gift. Do it again. Forgive Daorys, and the Wind can take me.”

And then Jaqen’s arms are around him; the god clutches Varro to His breast.

The resonance hums along the surface of his skin, like the matched tread of a thousand soldiers crossing a bridge, and the bridge warps and sways, each motion amplified, again and again, until the structure gives way.

*How can you amplify that which you do not resonate with?*

The god has not withdrawn His favor; for two hundred years Jaqen has anchored him.


*The bond is severed; hurts Him as much as me.*

“Not letting you go,” says Jaqen.

*I need to be given the gift.*

But what does principle, or balance, or service mean to a renegade?

Nothing at all.

It can be allowed to ask for what one wants.

“Don’t let me go,” he breathes. “Please don’t let me go.”

“Varro is a very good Lorathi,” she says from behind him.

There is Wind in her voice. Neither the Wind, nor she who is no one have the capacity to accept Varro as what he is.

*Only Arya Stark can do that.*

“And he is quite capable of holding two conflicting ideas in his mind at the same time,” she continues. “The Wind is wondering how long-term his game is.”

“Cannot be any more long-term than mine,” says Jaqen.

*Valar morghulis.*

Jaqen pulls away. Varro watches Jaqen rise to His feet, meets Jaqen’s gaze. And then he knows.

No Lorathi has only one reason for doing a thing.

“Jaqen, I still do not know what the moment of transition is.”

The declaration-by-vote, the withdrawal of the god’s favor, these are the *reactions* to a renegade in the order, not the making of one.

Jaqen leans against the bedpost, eyes closed. “Do you know when? I could not tell until I saw you, just--” He touches His chest.
Jaqen did not acknowledge, did not know he was the god. Whenever someone turned renegade, Jaqen rationalized the pain as grief, ignored it most times. Varro tiptoed around the issue, he used to say, “I feel it too. Must be the god talking.”

*What fools we must have looked, both unaware of our own natures, and aware of the other’s.*

“It is something a renegade does to himself,” says Varro. “The god has no part in it, until the favor is withdrawn.”

*One doubt laid to rest, at least.*

And action does not seem to make a renegade--there was one that killed a brother, he didn’t snap until he realized what he had done, until he ran.

“I cannot pinpoint the moment,” says Varro. “...it is lost, Jaqen, in the fury and all the other pains of that time--sometime between my being made Faceless, and meeting you.”

Jaqen can feel it before it happens, sometimes--a stretching, pulling at the bond, an anguish that does not subside until the bond breaks, leaving behind a dull ache. The ache disappears once the renegade is given the gift. Jaqen cannot triangulate the direction of the pain, and each time the bond breaks and there is naught that can be done.

Over and over and over again they have sat together over the years, arguing, rationalizing, trying to determine what causes it, what is the *one* thing that happens that marks the point of no return.

*Irony? That I did not know I myself was one? Irony for others, perhaps. Cruelty, for Jaqen. I did not know the cost of me. You pay. She paid, and her all unknowing.*

Varro turns to Arya, and again she avoids his gaze.

“Arya Stark,” he begins.

“Arya Stark is dead,” she snaps. She turns on her heel, and walks to the balcony doors. She slips outside; a blast of cold air billows the drapes behind her.

*Arya Stark is dead.*

What would Varro Massag, the renegade, do? He would use the words, worm his way back into her grace: *forgive me, Arya, I did not know, would not have come to Winterfell else.*

What would he who was no one, do? He would use the words and try to get her to act on the Wind’s instinctive distrust of him: *you lay with a renegade, he liked it very much, can we do it again?*

The thing that he *is*, the hunter steeped in two centuries of blood, and the one who was no one, and then the one who was *almost* no one, but was “Daorys” instead, all coexisting with the pattern that was Varro Massag, he rises up off his knees and sits down upon the chair again.

“Arya Stark” is as much a fiction as any other identity. A Lorathi has no *one* true identity--all their faces are as true as the others. Consciousness is not a noumenal; consciousness is an *experience* of a self.

*A tree fell in the forest.*

Continuity of consciousness, of identity, is a fiction--memory gives rise to the *illusion* of a self, a
“core”. The self dies each time there is no consciousness to experience it. Moment by moment, sleep by sleep, the self dies. It is not reborn--a new self emerges. It may choose a different moniker. It may not.

Such is the way of the Lorathi.

Jaqen follows her out the balcony doors.

JORAH

They walk along a long, curved walkway rimmed with night-blooming flowers. This is the private enclave of the High Consort of R’hallor; Jorah has never been allowed here before.

“You are calm this morning, Jorah,” says the Lady in the Mask.

He snorts. “Once the shock of seeing your face wore off.”

_I have changed in the past moons_, he thinks. _Jorah Mormont is dead._ He doesn’t know whether it is Asshai, or Sheira, or the fish hunger that warped and twisted his soul until it...stopped. A god’s blood, perhaps.

_Or that I am now a King._

Every soul in the city, slave or freeman, shadowbinder or sorcerer, they _bow_ to Jorah as he passes.

“She renamed me, you know,” he says. “In case I needed to flee from her.”

“She truly did love you,” observes the Lady in the Mask. She shakes her head. “For your sake I granted her the days I did, Jorah, because you asked it of me.”

He raises a hand to his chest. “It still hurts, Holy One. You didn’t have to make me _watch_.”

Shadows curl around him, inside him, and Joarah is not sure if he is the one controlling them, or if he is the one _being_ controlled.

“A short, sharp end to an infatuation,” says the Lady in the Mask. “It is the cleanest way. You knew she was called to the god.”

He nods, bows his head.

The lady puts a hand under his chin, draws it up to her. “_You_ didn’t love her, Jorah,” she says. “What was it about her that drew you so?”

He shakes his head, doesn’t know how to answer. _Her beauty, her courage, the mystery of her._

A shadow snakes into his mouth, winds around his tongue.

“Why did you want Shiera Seastar?”

The answer is pulled from some depth of him, Jorah doesn’t know from where. “Her look.”

The Lady pulls back, considers him. “Valyrian, then,” she says. “Beautiful, but untrustworthy. You spent some time in Lys when you fled Westeros, did you not?”

He nods. The Lysene women are the last of the pure blood of Valyria; many Targaryens took wives
and concubines from Lys for their looks. He cannot escape the truth of it: Daenerys Targaryen, Shiera Seastar—exquisitely beautiful women in their own right, but it is the eyes, the eyes and the hair.

“Retribution, for the wife that left you for a Lyseni?” she asks.

He shrugs. Perhaps.

They continue onwards. “I, myself, prefer men of the Free Cities,” says the Lady in the Mask. “Valyrians are beautiful, but melodramatic. Every comment is a pronouncement. But a man of the Free Cities is a good conversationalist, once he can be induced to speak.”

Jorah shrugs.

“Come, then, we will get you a few Lyseni slave-girls.”

He shakes his head. “Still far too raw, Holy One. Let it be.”

“As you will,” she says. “Though you do them a disservice—they would please you, and consider themselves blessed for it.”

He nods, absently. The rest of the world has a very warped view of Asshai, the shadowlands. Slavers from outside may come and go and buy and sell misery—it is a necessity, as Jorah’s own stint as a slaver had been. But slaves of R’hllor are pleased to be enslaved, their collars and flame-marks a sign of status amongst the other slaves.

Jorah touches a hand to his collar, the bejewelled, enspelled thing that even now keeps his body from aging.

*Jorah hen Sỳndor. King of Stygai and the Shadowlands. Slave of R’hllor.*

R’hllor enslaves only the faithful. And only those most dear to the Lord of Light are eaten by him. Sheira is one with the god she served. Her visage smiles, sometimes, it is only the strange light of the dragon-pit that makes it look like she grimaces.

“Perhaps in a seven-day,” says Jorah. “I will allow some of the Lyseni to serve me, if it fulfills their need for enlightenment.”

**JAQEN**

He steps out into the dark-enshrouded balcony; she stands at the far end of it, her arms folded upon each other.

It is a strange thing, for one’s plans to be turned utterly on their head. He has always been able to predict he who was no one.

But never Varro Massag.

*Please don’t let me go.*

He walks to her, places his hands on her shoulders.

*Didn’t shake me off. Good sign.*
“You eat that which you love?” she asks. “He seems very uneaten to me.”

“That reassurance was not sought, beloved,” he admonishes gently. *Reassuring me should not be a purpose to anything, let alone something that transgresses this deeply upon his choice to become nameless.*

“Just dark thoughts?” she asks. “Is that all there was to it, that you went to Jon with ‘Euron Greyjoy’ upon your lips?”

“Very dark thoughts,” lies Jaqen. “He was dying, and I couldn’t reach him. I tried, over and over again, I couldn’t *find* him.”

She exhales. Relaxes back into Jaqen’s arms, eyes half-closed. “He was slipping away,” she murmurs. “The deathwish is gone--a trap, a *spell*, and I discounted the possibility. He is *here*, and he is an oathbreaker.” She sighs. “But I am a murderer and a liar.”

“We hunt renegades for a *reason*,” he reminds her.

“Because they are a danger to each and every Faceless Man,” she agrees. “They know all our secrets, know our *faces*.”

Jaqen stills.

*She does not know.*

Rightfully, her teacher’s place to tell her. *Should* have told her. Jaqen wants to swear at Zural, at Zural’s fucking *paternalism*. Hiding the dark truths of their world from a *Faceless Man*?

And now Varro’s life hangs in the balance.

The Wind has already escaped her control.

“Naught but loyalty in *him*,” she mutters, against the Wind’s advice, it seems.

*Gently. Gently.*

“The Wind wants to kill him,” Jaqen points out. “The Wind’s intuition should not be ignored--there is danger here.”

She grits her teeth. “The Wind is a vengeful *child*; she has the emotional maturity of a cat in heat. Daorys was taken away from her. She retaliates.”

*Then rightfully she should be retaliating against me--I was the only one that knew what he was.*

“A renegade kills Faceless Men, sometimes,” he says. “Your safety cannot be compromised.”

“I want to run away,” she whispers.

He knows *that* impulse. “Heartbreak,” he reminds her.

“No righteousness in me,” she says. Her voice hardens. “*We are* leaving today?”

“Within the watch,” he says.

*It is needful.*
“Still need rations,” she says. “I can pack them. Need something useful to do. How many days?”

“Five or so,” he says. “Not sure.”

She nods. “Meet you at breakfast?”

He kisses the top of her head. “Trade me something, before you go,” he says.

“No trades,” she snaps. “That’s his form of stupidity.”

“A turn of phrase,” Jaqen soothes.

She is impatient; she turns and winds her arms around his neck, her lips alight upon his. His mouth parts, he swallows her breath, her name, her voice as she sighs into him.

The Wind drops.

He hears something, cocks his head.

“Zural comes,” he says.

**ARYA**

She steps inside the chamber and finds Varro upon the chair, studying his hands. He looks up.

“Zural comes,” says Varro. “Jaqen?”

“He’ll meet us at breakfast,” she says.

Varro nods, tight. A quick check, all around—both are dressed, composed. It’s dark, no nuance of expression will leak through to one who is not Lorathi.

There is a knock on the door.

“Come in, Zural,” says Arya.

“What’s wrong with you this fine day, Arya Stark, sitting around in the bedchamber?” Zural asks. And then he turns to Varro, opens his mouth.

Zural *stares*. “What’s…you are not—”

Varro grins. “Not a twitching mess of mind-rot anymore?” He smiles. “Still that, Zural, but they cured me of some things while I slept.”

“Was that all the ruckus in the morning the servants are talking about?” Zural asks. “All the howling in the corridors?”

“He did not howl,” she says, playing Daorys’s ‘sister’ as perfectly as she can. “It was a very dignified demand he made. Twice, that’s it.”

“How ‘cured’ is ‘cured’?” asks the Braavosi.

Arya smirks. “Nothing a few years’ worth of my milk-fat-tar-sock-porridge will not sure,” she says.
Varro casts her a sidelong glance.

Yes, “brother”, we have a cure.

“It’s slow,” she says, “will take the better part of two decades to leech all the poison out of him. But what is time to one of the god’s servants?”

She sees the wince forming, sees Varro catch it, almost as fast as thought, smooth out his features.

*He is not in control; he pretends.*

“Asshai’s still missing,” Varro murmurs. His eyes grow dark, hooded. “Need to remember some names, otherwise what am I going to whisper to my knives each night before I put them to bed?”

The Wind pushes Arya to lean towards him. “I *love* you, Varro,” she whispers. A cruelty, and this time he cannot stop the wince.

Zural startles, looks at her with wide eyes.

“Had to give me my name,” Varro explains, a half-smile on his face. “And oh, the *returning* of it. Almost makes me want to give it *back* to Jaqen, so she can use her mouth to remind me again.”

“*Lorathi,*” Zural swears. “Have no idea what they mean, ever.” He waves his hand. “Pah. Magic is not to be for the likes of me in any case.” He’s dashing tears from his eyes.

“Braavosi,” hisses Varro. “What the fuck did I do wrong that you ended up a *Braavosi*?”

She gives Varro a look. A warning.

Zural exhales. Looks up. “There is a thing that I must be discussing with Arya Stark.”

Varro raises an eyebrow. “What *is* it with you, Zural? You’ve grown more afraid of me between yesterday and today? Some renegade-making activity you indulge in?”

“No, brother,” says Zural. “And yes.”

Varro snorts. “Politics. Very well.” He grins at Arya. “Give me a taste of the Wind, sister, and I’ll head on over to Theon’s room.”

The neutral, vaguely friendly expression of the brother she used to know has sharpened to something less friendly, though no less neutral. And she, who has lived inside his skin and beside his mind for what feels like eternity, she cannot read him any more.

She nods.

The Wind purrs and binds shackles of air and ice around Varro’s wrists, his throat. Almost invisible, not much strength to them, but the Wind *bites*. Reddened weals form on his flesh.

No need for chains, he *breathes* those.

Behind her, out on the balcony, Jaqen begins the climb down to the courtyard.

**ZURAL**
Arya Stark has restored Varro Massag.

It should bring him joy; it does not. Fear crawls along his spine. The man who hunts renegades is singularly dedicated to the principles of the House of Black and White. Loyal enough to the House that he defies Jaqen, he disapproves when Jaqen bends the rules.

And now Jaqen is renegade.

*If the hunter finds out I intend to buy Jaqen time, he’ll have me declared renegade within a moon…*

But what will Varro Massag do?

Zural did not know the man--Zural was trained by the Lorathi that was no one. “Varro Massag is dead,” the old man had said, when he handed over the name to Zural. Only the older ones in the order know that name, those that had been there when Varro Massag was made Faceless. Everyone respects the discipline of the Lorathi, no using of names with one who is no one. Choice cannot be transgressed upon.

*His choice, to become nameless*. Or Zural would have spoken the name.

But Arya Stark is a pragmatic creature--if his name was useful, she would have used it and borne what consequences there arise out of it. None so far, it seems.

*Most excellent*, Zural would have said. At any other time, when he did not have a scrap of parchment weighing down his pocket. He reaches in, hands it to her.

Silently, she reads what is written upon it: *Jaqen H’ghar is declared renegade: passes 84 to 6, 23 are excluded.*

Silence lies heavy in the chamber; she just stares at the small numbers.

“Eighty-four,” she says quietly. Infinite regret, in her voice, it goes down and down and Zural doesn’t know what to do with it.

“The vote was unexpected,” he says, “I had thought the questions meant more discussion, deliberation.”

She opens her eyes.

“You knew this was coming?”

Zural shakes his head. “Obvious, in hindsight, the questions they asked.” He looks to her. “We need to leave the keep today,” he says. “With Varro Massag. Keep the news from him,” he says, “till you are both in Braavos. The old man can handle the rest.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Old man’s involved?”

Zural hesitates. “He seemed unhappy, that Daorys still lived. He will be on Jaqen’s side. We owe everything to Jaqen, child, no one will hunt him--as long as you can keep the hunter leashed.”

She considers it. “Are you sure none will turn against Jaqen?” she asks quietly. “All those questions, the ‘obvious in hindsight’ ones. Rephrase them.”

Zural looks at her, eyes wide.
“A renegade is always hunted down and killed,” she says. “The House asked how I matched up against the god in power. Not to determine my suitability, but to determine whether I could kill him.” Her mouth is a thin line, her eyes unreadable. “I answered truthfully, didn’t I? The Wind can take the Many-Faced God if she has the advantage of range. In melee, He is far too strong, asphyxiation takes time; if he is within striking distance of Arya Stark, she will be dead in a handful of heartbeats.”

Zural closes his eyes, swallows. Nods.

“Most convenient,” she says, “having him, the fourth-best swordsman in the order, on hand. He’ll hold Jaqen off long enough for the Wind to do its work. You didn’t tell them Daorys worsened yesterday.”

Zural sighs. “Said he was mostly well, in the last few missives. I had hope.”

Her mouth twists. “If he goes up against Jaqen, Varro will die, of course.”

“There are things I have not told you,” says Zural quietly. “I tried to protect you. But Jaqen is Jaqen. He sacrificed his life for mercy, not vengeance. He will not go sour. Jaqen can keep Winterfell for a lifetime, as long as he surrenders his power as a god to you.”

She snorts. “No, Zural, the order doesn’t want me to replace the Many-Faced God. Ten-and-seven, faceless for a bit more than two years, who would be stupid enough to put the order in my hands? They asked the question in that manner to mislead—they wanted to know whether the bride could or would wrest control of the order from its members, become the Many-Faced God herself—a far worse one than Jaqen; the Wind is not merciful.” She smiles, grin. “There is precedent now, for the ousting of gods—I’ll share Jaqen’s fate, sooner or later.”

Zural grits his teeth.

“Why did you want Varro to step out?” she asks.

“To ask if he was yours,” says Zural. “If you can do anything that will buy Jaqen time, that will make the hunter shirk his duty.”

His teacher’s voice in him asks the question: Where did you get this gem of a plot from, Braavosi, one of Izembaro’s plays? The princess lies with the executioner to buy her husband time to escape?

Zural is not thinking clearly.

His chest aches with sorrow.


No!

She opens the door, swift, a Lorathi’s speed, she crosses the hall, knocks on the door to the room Varro Massag occupies. Zural rushes after her, murmuring vehement protests.

“Come in.”

Varro Massag has changed, and swiftly. His hair is braided tightly at the nape of his neck, the loose fit he used to adopt in his clothing is gone—a belt circles his waist, cinching the shirt. Two blades hang from it.
Zural swallows.

Arya marches up to him, shows him the paper.

And then Varro Massag does something Zural does not expect.

He laughs.

Laughs and laughs and laughs, and then he hands the parchment back to Arya.

“You better add me to the list of renegades, old friend,” he says.

_Loyal to Jaqen, personally? To the point of wanting to turn renegade?_ It makes no sense whatsoever.

Varro looks _amused_.

“When did you stop being loyal to the House?” Zural demands.

The amusement disappears. Varro’s eyes are like sintered steel, cold and hard and unreadable. _Not_ the eyes of Zural’s teacher, not even the eyes of the renegade hunter. Not the eyes of Varro Massag, the man in Zural’s memories. This is something else entirely.

“Time is a strange thing,” says Varro, softly. “It doesn’t happen in a smooth, continuous flow. It stutters.”

“But... _how_?” asks Zural. “He is made renegade.”

“Ah, Braavosi,” says Varro. “You still believe changing the _name_ of a thing changes its nature? That calling _Jaqen_ renegade will work just because you _voted_ upon it?”

If the system cannot be changed with a democratic vote, then the system is not a democracy. Jaqen’s words in the first place.

“You are loyal to _him_ because his wife saved you?” Zural asks. It is the only conclusion.

Varro raises an eyebrow. “ _Saved_? ” he asks. “No, Zural, she _killed_ no one.”

“My brother died,” says Arya quietly.

Varro turns to her. “You weep for him?” he asks.

“Of course not,” she says. “It would dishonor his memory.”

Varro smiles. “Good girl,” he says, and looks again to Zural. “No, old friend, Jaqen has found a different way to bind my loyalty.” The smile changes to something suggestive.

_What did Jaqen offer you?_

Varro’s gaze, entirely too intent, slides to Arya. “Will you spread your legs again?” he asks.

Cold fear grips Zural then—Arya’s nostrils flare. Anger, and hurt, and defiance at those words.

“Do I get to hurt you again?” Varro asks.

She looks _away_.

No, no, no.

Sick fear curls in Zural’s gut. He steps forward, draws his blade. He is going to die, but it will be well-earned.

Arya steps in between him and Varro, and then he sees something, a haze in the air; a mantle, invisible, resting on her shoulders, it plays with her hair.

The Wind.

She bows her head. “Leave us, old teacher,” she says. But her eyes say something different: leave it to me.

The Wind could go head to head against Jaqen H’ghar. So she must have a plan. It galls him, to trust her with something like Varro rearing behind her. But all the other times she’s said “leave it to me”, the results have always been... Jaqen-like. Success, albeit obtained by unorthodox means.


“No,” he says. “Those two may do as they please, but you cannot afford to be declared a renegade.”

Her eyes widen, then narrow: play along, Zural, I'm coming. Her eyes slide left, to the casement window--the courtyard, the embassy beyond that.

Zural grits his teeth. Nods.

Varro turns back to Zural, and a cold smile plays about his lips. “Using her to reach me was a good idea,” he says softly. “It worked well. But for Jaqen, not you. Leave now, old friend, send your ravens, tell them the renegade hunter has turned renegade.” Varro pauses. “And close the door behind you.”

ARYA

Varro’s mouth is on hers the moment the door closes, his arms are wound around her waist, hers around his neck. There is a desperation, a yearning, to his hands, his lips; it resonates with hers.

“Forgive,” he whispers, pulling back, reluctant. “I thought you turned your face from me--didn’t realize it was just the shock, I thought you hated me now. Forgive.”

He has read her, of course--No Wind in her, no animosity towards him. Desire, there is much of. Once more then, her lips seek his. Chaste, almost. He is not dead, he is the same person he was yesterday. He has shifted, changed. Become more than he was, not less.

“Am I still dreaming?” he asks against her mouth, “What the fuck is going on? The House declaring Jaqen renegade? And Zural, looking at me as if--”

“Dressed in travel furs--he was ready to grab me and run,” she says. “And you needled his paternalism with that little ‘will you spread your legs’ game--”

“Well-deserved,” says Varro, “he expected me to turn on Jaqen? But a hint or two from you would have been helpful,” he adds, mildly irritated, “had no idea how to play that. You were almost
Jaqen-like there, no sign of a path to follow.”

She sighs. “He’s on our side, Varro. Told him to wait at the embassy. It will buy us few watches.”

His arms drop away, he steps back. “We need to find the god,” he says.

She doesn’t let Varro go too far. The manacles of wind still chafe at his wrists; she reaches towards them.

“Leave them on,” he says, then considers the reddened weals. “Perhaps with a little less bite?” He raises his eyes to hers. A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Or not. As you please.”

She begs the manacles to dissolve, and they do.

The smile vanishes. “You cannot trust me,” he says. “You cannot trust my word. I am a renegade, Arya.”

“You were trusted,” she points out. “He knew what you were, and still you were trusted. Even before you gave up your name, entered the deep discipline.”

“Jaqen is insane,” Varro mutters. “Wind’s sane, though, and she wants to kill me,” he says.

He pulls her closer to him, she lays her cheek against his chest.

“Arya, listen to me,” he says, “You know breaking oath with a god does things to you. Warps you. I may lash out, some hidden seed of something wrong in me, and you will not be able to predict it.”

In answer she slides her hands along his arms, into the sleeves of his shirt, higher, to his biceps.

“Arya,” he groans, “there are things I kept from you, still keep. Have not the will to push you away. Help me.”

“No.”

She pushes him back; he retreats, till the backs of his knees bump up against the bed. She pushes him again, and he falls backwards, and she climbs up, straddles him.

“If Jaqen is a renegade, so am I,” she says.

At that all lust seems to fall away from him. He raises his head. “No. It will not be permitted, I will cut your throat myself before you are allowed to become what I am.” He sighs, his head falls back. “Taking a vote doesn’t turn you fucking renegade, killing a brother doesn’t make you renegade, selling guild secrets for coin doesn’t make you renegade.”

She holds herself very still.

“So what does?” she asks.

“Turning against Jaqen,” he says. “Not the god. Jaqen. You can be faithful, and still be a fucking renegade, obviously.”

She exhales. “But I--”

“A ripping, tearing pain in your chest,” he says, “as if something’s been cut and not healed properly. Do you feel that?”
She hesitates. “No,” she says.

“Then you are not a renegade.”

She bends down, lays herself upon him. “Cure?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

All it means is that Varro Massag doesn’t know one. Nobody knew the fish-poison had one either.

“Palliative?” she asks.

His arms rise, circle her, crush her to his chest. “Jaqen,” he exhaled. “You, now—but even the weirwood gets confused as to which of you it’s talking about; I’m just a man.” She hears him swallow. “Didn’t remember what it was, all these years, thought it was unrequited longing.” He laughs, at himself, it seems, and then he looks to her, some hesitation in his eyes. “I tried to feed the mind, the body. There is a thing I have not told you.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“I have a reputation,” he says, into the silence.

“Yes.”

He lies very still, eyes half-closed. “So you know.”

“ Heard you were not choosy,” she says. “And something about depraved Lorathi appetites from Zural. Why, is there something to know?”

Varro shrugs. “A man wants what a man wants. Compulsions. Obsessions. It doesn’t mean anything, some men like blonde hair, some like large cocks or small tits.”

“Flesh is an illusion,” she reminds him, gently.

“Truth.” He is staring up at the canopy on the bed. “When I lie with the faceless, I wear whatever face they like, fair exchange. But I don’t choose any that can’t yet hold certain memories. Remember what I told you two? Lie back and think of your god.”

Oh. Oh.

Varro finally, finally meets her eyes, raises an eyebrow.

“Jaqen would be bizarrely flattered,” she says. “Also mildly appalled. But asking for faces—it’s entirely unremarkable, from what I understand, unless someone starts correlating patterns.”

“Flesh is an illusion,” Varro sighs. “It fed nothing. More solace in Him sitting in a tavern drinking beside me, both of us wearing faces chosen at random from the Hall. Forgot the pain when He was near. Didn’t go away—it never goes away. It just becomes irrelevant as long as His eyes are upon me.”

Does one thing blur into another? Not desire for Jaqen but desire for relief from the pain? Not love, not lust, but faith and devotion taken too far?

Is that all there was to it?

She chuckles, a bit.
“What?” snaps Varro.

“You are possibly the worst renegade I’ve ever heard of,” she says.

His eyes narrow. “Remembered enough to focus on Jaqen H’ghar. It was practice. Seduce him, then run a blade through his heart.”

“But you didn’t remember the blade part of it,” she says, not above a little needling.

“Remember it now,” says Varro. “Wind’s a fucking bitch, Arya. Didn’t want to remember I’d turned on Him.”

And so you asked to be made nameless.

Varro’s arms tighten around her. “Should have played my part, said I’ll go after Jaqen,” he mutters. “The more Zural is on Jaqen’s side, the less danger of my student following in my footsteps; I’ll lead him right off a cliff.” He sighs. “A single strand--His favor--it’s the only thing that keeps me from going over the side.” He exhales. “And your grace, that you do not turn your face from me, that you are still you, that I am not just His delusion.”

He swallows.

“He should have told you before you made the choice of me,” he says. “Atthirarido’anni, if the god’s playing a game with us...”

Paranoia, Varro? Maybe I should be getting paranoid too. Keep everyone company.

“Jaqen does not play these types of games,” she says instead.

Varro watches her face. “What were the two of you thinking, taking something like me to bed? Were I not a renegade, it still wouldn’t be worth it.”

“A thing,” she says, “is worth exactly what men are willing to pay for it.”

A Varro Massag quote, unless I’m mistaken.

He glares at her; his hands shift, loosen. His palms stroke down her sides, over the silk shirt. His eyes roam over her face. Fingers, sliding under the hem of the shirt, his hands stroke upwards; both of them groan as his palms touch her bare skin.

Is this real? Or the same thing in him that cannot quite tell the difference between the gods, and so it fixates on both, and defines the fixation as a sexual thing?

A servant’s tread, upon the stairs. They separate, hastily, she smooths her hair, her clothes, then opens the door.

“...and the second dosage--” she begins, halfway out the door, then pauses as she takes in the servant.

“Milady,” the girl--a handful of years older than Arya herself--comes forward, curteys. “Ser Jaqen wants--” the girl pauses, looks behind Arya, the girl’s eyes have widened. “He...um. Says it’s important,” she stammers. Her face has turned bright red.

Arya grins, hides the grin behind a raised hand. One of Varro’s. Jaqen’s are more overtly hostile to Arya. Jon’s are very matter-of-fact, practical, they’re on Arya’s side. The Keeper of the Keys appointed by Sansa for her steadiness is one of Zural’s. Arya does not like some of Bran’s though,
they hover over him, as if he’s incapable of doing simple tasks for himself just because his legs are not working.

Varro steps forward, places his hand at the small of Arya’s back. “Shall we find out what Jaqen...wants?” Varro asks.

Arya nods, smiles graciously at the servant-girl, and leads the way down the stairs. Varro’s hand is still at the small of her back.

“Mr. Jones is going to get me killed,” she mutters as they pass into a deserted corridor. “Two of Jaqen’s are already plotting.”

“Good training for you,” he says. His hand slides a bit lower before he takes it away.

VARRO

It’s a very good thing I’m a renegade, he thinks. Then he examines that thought. He modifies it: can’t change what I am; a renegade’s perspective has a benefit to it.

Bad, even “bad-bad”, to use Arya’s phrasing, to want them. Not the flesh, the faces--wanting that is a thing of the body. Wanting them, not for faith or need. For himself. Not allowed, such a wanting, to the hunter or to no one. Granted to Daorys, as a last grace before he died.

But a renegade doesn’t give a shit for what’s allowed.

Jaqen turns the corner, walks swiftly towards them. Varro blinks.

Why didn’t I feel His tread? Has he withdrawn--

Arya jogs forward, closes the distance between her and the god; Varro watches as His head dips, as she raises her face to his.

Varro yearns; his awareness reaches for them, he does not know if he is welcome, but they call to him and he cannot--

Jaqen pulls away.

“You’ve been kissing another man,” He says.

“Same one you were, last night,” she replies, tart.

And the bodies they wear slide off them.

It’s like no transformation he has seen before. Jaqen, who was Arya, turns to him.

The eyes.

There is a churning in his gut. The fear rises. They’re playing with me. Cat and wolf, games upon games, it’s all a cycle of--

“No,” says Jaqen, he reaches forward. “No.”

Varro realizes he is backed up against a wall. His teeth hurt from how hard he clenches his jaw.
“You exchanged eyes,” he says. The one fucking thing that keeps the game of faces on a consistent footing, that any one Faceless Man knows who the other is, no matter what skin is worn…

No, nobody can change their eyes. I’ve just lost the ability to see. I am no longer a Faceless Man. They’re playing with me. Zural knew this morning, he saw “Arya’s” eyes, knew it was Jaqen playing with me. I can’t tell the difference—Zural came as “Jaqen” left, wasn’t him, was Arya.

Zural’s dead. Jaqen killed him, or he’d have stood for me.

“Her safety needed to be established,” says Jaqen softly; He’s a handsbreath away from Varro. That overrides all other thoughts.

“Yes,” he whispers. A perspective shift. This is a good thing. Tests are a good thing, tests are how you know a thing is good. Jaqen is not stupid. Neither is she. He doesn’t need to keep warning them—they see the dangers.

Jaqen in the room. Wearing her. Thought it was her. Touched…

Talked.

He covers his face with his hand for a moment. Told Him. Told Jaqen. Fuck. Fuck.

Apparently even bloodlust is easier to control than mortification.

Good to know.

“Varro?”

“I talk entirely too openly with her.”

Jaqen has the grace not to say anything at all.

“Bizarrely flattered”.

Take what you can get. Balance it, tell her something cringeworthy about me and her? There are a few thoughts that would mortify almost as much as the faces thing. Almost.

Deal with the mind first. Go with Zural to White Harbor, then take a ship to Braavos. Ask the old man to help me build the discipline again. No need to throw away memories, both of them know--

He sags against the wall, his throat closes.

“Varro…” Jaqen’s hand is on his shoulder.

“I can’t ever go home,” he whispers, looking down at the carpeted stone of the corridor. He looks up to Jaqen. “I can never go back to the House of Black and White.”

“You’ve been going in and out of there for years,” says Jaqen, sounding a little exasperated.

Varro shakes his head.

“Old man knew,” says Jaqen. “Helped you become nameless.”

He never leaves Braavos. I will never see my teacher again. The last chance, it came and went, and I did not even know it--said something stupid, ‘better stockpile fuel, old man, heard winter’s
Varro wipes at his eyes, angry. “Arya murders a brother in front of Zural, he’ll help her cover up the body. Teacher never turns on student.”

Jaqen gives Varro a twisted smile. “Nor on ones he recruits--two advocates, always.”

For everyone except Him.

The ones He recruits... Varro instinctively controls his breath. “They turned, the ones taken in Asshai?”

Is that why we don’t remember their names? But the older faceless, they have the faces, can call them at will.

Jaqen pulls away, and Varro realizes Arya is beside him, taking this in with Wind-hazed eyes.

“They must have,” says Jaqen. “Involuntary, tortured into it, if I had to guess. Every man has a breaking point--Arya gave me your accounts of what they did to you.” The god’s nostrils flare. “Renegacy is the only mechanism I can think of that would allow them to be lost to us. I cannot wear the faces anymore, not since the Night of Ice.”

“Because I killed them,” says Varro, voice hard. “They were still half-alive. All this time, grafted onto R’hllor, they were still there. And if the faces and memories were still in us--however incomplete--it means you had not withdrawn your favor. You were feeding them, holding on to them, as you hold on to me. For centuries.”

Arya has slipped her hand into Jaqen’s, she’s gripping Him with white-knuckled fingers.

“Didn’t understand till you gave me the masks,” says Jaqen. “The nightmares...I did not know what I did,” says the god, and there is so much self-hatred in his voice, Varro wonders why the air doesn’t turn to ash around them. “I kept them alive, suffering, because I didn’t know what I was, because everything I did I did unconscious.”

“No,” says Varro. “All the other faces I cut out of R’hllor were also still alive--what god was keeping them bound? What you did was mercy--what you do when unconscious reverts to your primary imperative. As long as the darkness was in them, they couldn’t be resurrected by R’hllor, to suffer the torment Jon Stark does, and worse, because once they did have a soul.”

“Are you telling me what I want to hear?” asks Jaqen softly.

Varro snorts. “Renegade. Don’t give a shit about what you want to hear, unless it gets me into bed with the two--”

They are playing a game with me. Why didn’t I see it before? Renegade, who would make the god a renegade? Just a piece of parchment.

They’re not going to kill me, they’re going to drive me mad to prove the old man wrong; he will protest. Teacher never turns on student. I didn’t run. I didn’t--

He swallows.

“Paranoia?” asks Jaqen.

“But no compulsion, thankfully,” says Varro, not looking at the god. “Varro Massag and Daorys
keep arguing with each other. The irrational, circular thoughts in the back of the mind--standard renegade patterns. Daorys had them too, didn’t recognize them for what they were. Blood, and knives, all tangled with Asshai--the control had already been hacked to bits in the pit, not much left to keep it at bay.”

“I have not withdrawn my favor from you,” says Jaqen. “I reinforce it every single fucking day.”

Varro nods.

The god places his hand on Varro’s head again.

Darkness rises, denser than it has ever before. He can taste it at the back of his throat, his lungs, underneath his fingernails--

*If it is a game, it’s a good one.*

“Stop, Jaqen, stop!” Varro hears her voice as if from a great distance. “You’re killing him!”

Jaqen pulls away. Varro opens his eyes, sees red filming his vision; his eyes hurt. Varro wipes at the irritant--his fingers come away bloody, though the vision’s clearing.

He looks up.

Arya looks disgusted. Or possibly distressed. Varro cannot tell in the moment. And then he realizes the magnitude of his own assumptions. That she would accept him, all unconditional, once the shock passed. That they would return to their ease, mind-to-mind, and this time there would be no restraint between them.

*Eyes or not, I saw what I wanted to see. Wishful thinking.*

It does not bode well for Varro Massag.

“You care that I live?” he asks. *Wind still wants me dead.*

“I care that Jaqen doesn’t murder you in a public hallway,” she snaps. “*What* renegade patterns?”

“Hallway’s as good a place as any other,” he says, looks to the god. “But that wasn’t murder--you tried to give me your eyes? What…” he sighs. “*What* is going on?”

The gods exchange a glance. “Recent discovery,” says Jaqen. “We’re still figuring how it works. *Had* to deceive you, Varro, needed to know. Won’t do it again. My word.”

*Who knows what He read in me--I was entirely overwhelmed with stimuli, and I’m always open to her. Whatever it was, He thinks I’m safe…*

“Do it,” he says. “As needed.”

He feels Arya drawing a deep breath.

“There is Stark business--Bran is begging to see you--*he* knew who I was. *Very* confused.”

*He knew, but I didn’t?*

“The *warg* senses,” says Varro.

She nods, looking at the far wall.
Not speaking to me unless it’s an insult. But he’ll take what he can get.

Jaqen sighs. “And there is House business.” He passes the parchment with the vote on it to her.

Varro watches the play of emotions across her face. Disbelief, then she skips all the sorrow and regret, goes directly to fury.

“The questions,” she murmurs. “It’s all been leading up to this. They never wanted me to substitute for the Many-Faced God. They wanted to make sure I could never seize power.” Her voice is cold.

“No,” says Varro. “A renegade must be killed. They wanted to make sure you could kill him.”

“She answered them truthfully,” says Jaqen, “she can kill me at range, if she keeps her favor in me, keeps me bound to this body.”

“And I’m there to hold you off,” observes Varro, “until she gets far enough that you can’t reach her before she drops you.”

Arya’s eyes blaze with white fire. “Zural was--”

“Pride,” says Jaqen. “Braavosi pride--his beloved student was being recognized for her talents. He didn’t see through it to the intent. Didn’t work it through to the consequences. Not his fault, the consequences are absurd.”

Varro runs a hand through his hair. “What I want to know,” he says, “is who is drafting this questions in the first place? Who suggested them? Who has enough influence on such things that the questions would be considered?”

Varro doesn’t play politics. Unless Jaqen asks, of course--Jaqen’s been known to influence a vote or two. Varro, or more properly, the one who was no one, walks in, nonchalant. Raises an eyebrow at the correct time. A reputation for cold-hearted brother-slaying is a beautiful thing, in the right hands. But pawn is not player. Varro cannot extrapolate the identities of the players.

“Bran first,” says Jaqen, “it may have bearing on this particular problem.”

Chapter End Notes

tl;dr:

1. Varro is a renegade. Nobody but Jaqen and his teacher knew all along. Varro wiped his own memories. When he did, he became "no one", Daorys, and he was a renegade hunter for 200 years
2. "Renegade" is more than just a vote, it seems - there's something obviously BAD about it, leads to paranoia, bloodlust, compulsive thoughts
3. The HBW seems to have voted to make Jaqen a renegade
4. Jaqen and Arya can do more than just exchange faces--they seem to be able to exchange "eyes" i.e. the windows to the soul--when they "wear" each other, no FM can tell who it is
5. Jaqen uses the above ability to trick Varro into assuming he's Arya. He establishes that Varro is "safe", and Varro tells her (him) that he always requests his faceless lovers to wear Jaqen's face...and when he finds out he told Jaqen himself, he's
mortified.
6. Zural has a plan—he's going to make the HBW give Jaqen amnesty, and take Arya and Daorys back with him to the HBW. Zural seems to think that Daorys/Varro the renegade hunter is loyal to the HBW...Zural's reasoning is not too clear
7. The Wind/Arya is being mean to Varro, he's inciting her.
8. Romance wise, it seems Varro is done with being subservient, wants Jaqen/Arya...but that's all we know.
9. Jorah Mormont likes being king, he's either under sort of spell, or something has changed him.

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Hey all!

Sorry, sorry for the super-long wait, but reward is 4 chapters all at once, ~50k words...in the interests of clarity and timeline (can't have Dany on a boat for years, can we?) I integrated 8 chapters into 4 and it required some heavy rewriting.

completely unedited because I was so far behind, so any mistakes are *my* doing, naught to do with gul

do please comment! love you all!
ARYA

Jaqen’s told them to wait a distance from the heart tree. So they wait, standing, and she tries to appear nonchalant.

“Wonder what they’re discussing,” says Varro, his eyes trained on the figure of the god and His champion, one kneeling, one sitting under the face of the heart tree.

She doesn’t reply. Jaqen doesn’t want Bran’s touching on the past to become known outside those that know now. And even then, the specifics of what Bran does, with Jaqen’s guidance on the events that shape histories, the specifics are not to be known even by Arya.

She asks the question she’s asked before: Does Jaqen enslave the faithful? No slave collar on her, but religion has always been a tool to control others. What choices does the god restrict if He can reach back in time and correct His errors?

Varro’s words: Forgive me, Jaqen, I still do not know the moment of transition. If the moment had been known, would Jaqen even now be correcting the errors of the past?

Lanterns line the path; there’s one on a post now, always lit, at the heart of the godswood--Prince Brandon comes out here at all hours.

“Wind still wants to kill me?” asks Varro.

“What gave it away?”

Varro snorts. “Would it be permitted to close with Bran Stark?”

It is poorly done, to cultivate an asset--an informant, an accessory to a cover-identity, and then just leave without closure. Open contacts search, sometimes; very inconvenient, friends and lovers and servants who think they have deep bonds, searching for a man that doesn’t exist.

Sometimes they find things.

Bran doesn’t need to search. Bran will just see.

Jaqen left Varro to her, it seems; it’s her decision.

Varro won’t hurt Bran. Bran hasn’t hurt him, has given as much as he’s received.

“Of course,” she says.
They watch a while longer. Bran enters a trance. The Wind dances over the bare branches. This is the her landscape, the stark white, the limitless darkness overhead, the glow of the moon that turns every tree and rock into a black shadow upon the ground.

“We have a problem,” says Varro, offhand.

“Really, Varro?”

He grins at her. “God’s head is still twisted on backwards. He is not no one—the discipline escapes Him. Can’t really tell, Jaqen Himself is that controlled, but it shows from time to time.”

“What did you tell Him, Varro, when you thought He was me?” she asks. “Never seen you cringe with embarrassment before.”


Her jaw clenches; the Wind batters her, within and without.

“Everyone He loves wants to kill Jaqen except me,” she says. “His brothers, some of his own students will be amongst that eighty-four. You.”

“So much self-hatred in Him, Arya,” murmurs Varro, as if he hasn’t heard her. “Has it been going on long?”

She shrugs. “It comes and goes. Wish Daorys was the one that got healed, I could have figured it out with him. But he died, so…”

“Daorys knew jack shit about complexity, of minds or motivations,” says Varro. “Daorys was like a bard that knows only the one song, plays it over and over and hopes nobody notices.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And what complexity would Varro see that my brother didn’t?”

He grins at her. “It will cost you,” he says, “only your brother gave you insight for the asking.”

“I’ll only pay what it’s worth,” she says. “Handed over all of me to him without measuring out anything. Can’t make the same mistake twice, thank the god.”

“Fair,” he says. “So. Jaqen’s soul is completely fucked—god woke because of His imperative of mercy, and He’s actively denying it to the poor fucks in the Wall. His mind’s completely fucked—the Valyrian’s patterns of self-hatred are propagating through everything, iterating, twisting. Body’s completely fucked—he’s exhausted, needs at least a week of sleep, who knows what else. Addicted to sex, can’t even fight you without wanting to fuck you, isn’t that what you said?” A sneer twists at Varro’s face.

He woke early that day then; no hope of keeping anything from him, he knows all the tongues we do.

“Did you like listening to us?” she asks, and her voice is sickly-sweet. What else did you hear, Varro?

He furrows his brow. “Not really, sugarplum, ‘please, Jaqen, please’ starts getting on the nerves the second time around.” He pauses. “Or the first, truth be told.”

So he didn’t wake early just that day.
She turns to him with a smile, places a hand on her right breast, right over the mouth-shaped bruise he left on her.

“Please, Varro, please,” she says, and he knows Arya Stark is not good enough to lie. The Wind is delighted when his eyes widen a bit, darken despite the discipline he holds himself to.

“Be careful, Arya,” he warns.

The Wind pushes at him, reminding him of who actually needs to be careful.

He grins. “So what does hold Jaqen together, pumpkin?” Varro asks. “Why doesn’t he fly apart into a thousand shards—structure shouldn’t hold when body and mind and soul are in disarray.”

Because he has the one thing a dead man shouldn’t—he has a heart, and the heart holds Him to her and she will not let go.

“Killing Jaqen H’ghar is impossible,” says Varro. “If one is direct about it. If it was me doing the killing of him, I’d go for someone else.”

The Wind hisses, vindicated.

“Now put the manacles back on,” he says quietly.

The Wind obliges, delighted, little sharp shards to dig into his wrists.

“I am not a creature that can be intimidated,” she says quietly. “Not by Jaqen, certainly not by you.” She smiles. “But what do I owe you, for this particular insight?”

“You knew it already,” he says, “so I’ll take what you offer.”

“You want sympathy?” she asks, allows sympathy to ooze around her voice. “Poor you, didn’t know, forgot everything, surely something you did centuries ago shouldn’t count against you.”

“Death is not fair,” he says, “can’t un-think a thought any more than you can un-kill a man. Hunted a lover myself, once. Lovers are easier to kill than brothers. Good training for you, as I said.”

“A dream makes you my lover?” she asks with a sneer of her own.

He shrugs. “Does to me.”

“And what do I owe you for this insight?” she asks.

“Lived for you,” he says. “Just a few watches ago you cared for me enough to give me my name.”

“So what do you actually want?”

“Some residue of affection,” he says, rueful. “But want is not need.” When she doesn’t react, he glances at her. “What, speechless?”


“As to what is more cruel?” he asks. “The truth or the lie?”

Jaqen has risen to his feet. Bran raises a hand, waves to them. Both Arya and Varro wave back.
“Wind’s not a liar-god,” she says thoughtfully, “Wind’s honest. She’s choosing which truth hurts more.”

“Hurts you, or me?”

The god starts towards them. All the lines of Him are straight, controlled.

Varro’s wrong—Jaqen’s head is fine today. Maybe it was only the stupid renegade’s death that was weighing on all of us.

“Hurts both,” she says aloud. “an optimization.”

“I’m good at optimization,” Varro offers. “I can help the Wind decide.”

“Well, we have the first truth,” she begins. “A heart conflates ‘trust’ with ‘love’. Trusted you, trusted you more than Him for a few moments.”

“Painful,” he says, appreciatively. “For Him too, that last bit.”

She shakes her head. “Arya Stark is a dead man. She has a heart as well. He trusted you more than me for a moment.”

“Just go with this one,” says Varro. “Or do you have something that equals it?” He raises an eyebrow at her, disbelieving.

“Second truth needs a preamble,” she says. “There are no conditions to that which is between me and Him. Learned the word for that from another who gave me such power over him, placed all that he was in my hands. That one had placed himself in Jaqen’s hands too, a very long time ago.”

“Unbalanced things from an unbalanced mind,” Varro observes, neutral.

“Not unbalanced,” she says. “What do you think the dreaming signified? Jaqen knew the difference between Varro and Daorys.”

She sees the edges of control as Varro casually leans against one of the trees, then sinks to the ground. She makes mock of his movements by emulating them. She sits beside him in the snow.

“I fucked up,” she continues. “The one we gave everything to, I gave him a name and it killed him. No residue of affection will bring him back.”

“What will?” Varro asks, almost to himself.

“So here’s the second truth,” she says. “Can’t un-kill a man, but he can be resurrected if one doesn’t wait too long, if he doesn’t spoil. But the moment passed you by and you didn’t even notice it.” She smiles at him, kindly. “Your window of time began when you awoke. It ended the moment you opened your stupid mouth and tried to threaten Him through me, just a few moments ago. You’ve spoiled.”

He nods. “Good one. I see why the Wind has a problem choosing.”

“There’s a third,” she says. “Want to hear?”

“No.”

“The set of options must be complete,” she says.
Jaqen lengthens his stride, and he’s beside them before she can answer. The god kneels as well, finds a place upon the snow to the other side of Varro.

“You two look like you’re having a conversation.”

“We are,” she says. “He’s helping the Wind optimize the truth.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“We’re on the third of three options,” says Arya. “Third truth--Jaqen’s not up to killing you. And the Wind doesn’t want to--it would be too kind. We’ll take you out to a small village somewhere, and He’s going to withdraw His favor from you, and we’re going to glide away on the snow, leaving you behind. Do what you want--become an ice fisherman, a free-company mercenary, turn your face to a wall and wait to die of starvation--we won’t give a shit.”

Varro thinks upon the three options. “Use the first one,” he says. “I truly did not want to come between the two of you. The last, it leaves me with too many options, too many guesses for your motivations--room for hope.” He smiles, slightly. “Middle one, sweet Arya, that would have called for a leap off a broken tower, if it had been true.”

“The first one it is,” she decides.

“Doesn’t need optimization. If you have to choose one, ” he instructs her, “make the tactical choice. Immediate pain. Strategy does not survive first contact with the enemy.”

“You are the enemy,” she agrees. “But you know renegades. How does one un-renegade?”

“Valar morghulis,” he says.

“And you will not run.”

“I don’t run,” says Varro. “I wait.”

Jaqen shifts a bit closer. “A man would like to hear what this ‘middle one’ is.”

“Varro is an excellent tactician,” says Arya. “But I think he’s a poor strategist. Only poor strategists use the line about first contact with the enemy.”

Varro chokes, and then he must laugh. “Not a strategist,” he agrees. “Long term planning seems to be shit.”

She grins. “You want the strategist’s answer to Jaqen’s question?”

“Impress me, Arya Stark,” says Varro.

“Enough,” says Jaqen. “Stop playing that game.” The god’s eyes rake in the both of them.

“Why?” she demands.

“Stop,” Jaqen’s voice is flat. A command, delivered and received. The god rises. “Let’s go.”

“Varro would like to close contact with Bran,” says Arya.

Jaqen turns to Varro. “That is not necessary,” He says.

Varro gives the god a one-sided smile.
Jaqen sighs. “As you will.”

And it’s the god’s turn to lean up against the tree, watch them walk to the center of the godswood.

They are more than halfway there when Varro turns to her.

“Wind doesn’t understand the concept of ‘affection’, does she?” he asks.

Arya shakes her head.

“Cruelty’s the only thing she can give to anyone that’s not Jaqen.”

She nods.

“Well, the insight wasn’t worth quite this much, I think; you overpaid.”

“Give it back, then,” she says.

He smiles. “Not yet.”

They find Bran drinking from an earthenware jar; the mouth steams in the air--tea. There is no trace of the sickly, under-nourished boy that had ridden into Winterfell tied to her saddle; Bran’s cheeks are flushed, his flesh has filled out. His arms have grown tight, whipcord muscle that strains with each movement.

“Bran,” says Varro, and he wears his ‘Daorys’ voice again. He crouches beside the boy. “I have to go. Guild business.”

Truth. Truth.

Bran pauses, looks up, sees Arya watching them intently. Her brother’s eyes drop. “Is it dangerous?” Bran asks.

“Not for me,” he says, grinning.

Lie.

Bran looks up. “Can I help?”

Daorys shakes his head. “You must not. No seeing, no dreaming, no following with ravens and fieldmice. Clear?”

“Will you come back?”

Daorys shrugs. “May be assigned a mission,” he says. “Came to Winterfell because I was ill, Bran, no work for me here. A man must work.”


Bran’s expression clears a little, and Arya knows the thought that runs through Bran’s head: him teaching me was not ‘work’. We were friends.

Bran smiles, then. “We’ll both live a very long time, Daorys,” he says. “One day I’ll plant a weirwood somewhere--come visit, if you are nearby.”

Varro’s breath clenches. No outward sign of it, of course. The Wind reaches out, steadies him with
bonds of air that are gentler than the shackles, warm. The Wind’s *very* pleased at this turn of events—she doesn’t need to inflict herself on his body.

“I’ll visit,” he says. “And we’ll meet in the long sleep anyhow.” He extends his forearm to Bran.

*Lie. Truth.*

There’s a truth missing. But when he rises, and says nothing more, the Wind tugs at Varro, leads him away, gentle still.

**VARRO**

*It’s a race now,* he thinks, between who gets to Varro faster—the Wind, or Jaqen’s blade. It’s all been leading up to this. The god’s mercy, that Varro is allowed this time, grace, to walk out of here under his own power.

*Have to remind the Wind not to do it in Winterfell.*

The only other option doesn’t bear thinking about.

So of course he has to think on it. *A blizzard, and nothing but white all around, the howl of the wind is incoherent; she’s not listening, I call and call...*

They pass through the archway into the keep, moving aside to let a cart trundle through the snow. Arya’s shoulder touches his arm, and he who was no one, he must close his eyes, shred every part of that sensation of touch and store it up within himself, somewhere deep.

“Varro?” asks Jaqen.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t…” the god hesitates. “She’s not taking this well.”

Arya is staring straight ahead, jaw clenched.

Varro snorts. “It would be a little distressing if she was.”

“Stop inviting it,” Jaqen suggests.

Suggestion is not command.

“What?” Varro asks. He is weary beyond measure. “I like the Wind.”

Jaqen sighs.

Varro mirrors the false-sympathy she gave him before. “Is it hard to hear?” he asks.

Jaqen’s turn to snort. “What do you think?”

Varro shifts, leans back. “She knows you’re listening, wind carries sound further than it should. She’s taking it out on you, too.”

“So stop inviting it.”

*The two of you shouldn’t have fucked me. That’s the problem with the hunger—you feed it, it*
doesn’t get sated, it grows.

Jaqen is focused on something up ahead. A light, flickering near the front of the keep.

“Sansa’s supposed to be on her rounds with Sandor,” says Jaqen. “Why is there movement in her bower?”

“Servants?” asks Arya.

Jaqen shakes his head. “Not supposed to be in there this watch--any changes in the timetables get cleared by Sandor, then me. Anyone in her rooms outside the allotted times earns a crossbow quarrel in the shoulder.”

“Then she didn’t go on her rounds,” says Varro. “And Zural didn’t head to the embassy.”

Without a backward glance, Jaqen starts running toward the nearest door to the courtyard.

SANSA

Zural walks in, deceptively nonchalant.

“Jaqen is meeting with Prince Bran,” says Zural. His teeth are clenched, eyes bloodshot. “Daorys is siding with Jaqen. Arya will come with me.”

Sansa blinks, So Zural is not always right, regardless of how certain he sounds. What else was he wrong about?

“She agreed?” Sansa asks.

“Not yet,” he says, walking forward. He seats himself before her, pours yet another cup of wine. The bottle is almost empty. “You may still need to cast her out, worst case.” He sips, swallows.

“Why didn’t you bring her here?”

He studies the tabletop; his mouth is a study in distaste. “She is...busy.”

“Too busy to discuss her husband’s renegacy?”

“She has bought Daorys for Jaqen,” says Zural.

She...what?

The door below them slams open, and between one breath and the next, Jaqen is in the room. His eyes are trained on Zural, his visage dark, all the chiseled lines of his face picking up the shadows from the hearth. He has straightened to his full height.

Sansa’s heartbeat is loud in her ears. This is not Jaqen; this is something sinister, out of one of the tales Septa Mordane had forbidden the girls, tales of murder and betrayal and loves gone lost, their bones turned into harps.

The presence of him fills the room.

Is this the real Jaqen?
“You were supposed to go to White Harbor, old friend,” says Jaqen. His voice is soft, a small smile plays about his mouth.

“I was trying to save you,” says Zural. No fear. No agitation. She turns to him, and finds he, too, stands straight. All the pretense of diplomacy, of affability has drained away. His eyes have gone from the warm brown she knows to hard, glittering agates. The familiar features feel alien to her; she has always known Zural was a dangerous man. He has never looked the part before.

*Storybook assassins crossing blades in my bower.*

Slowly, she rises and backs away from the table. There is fear in her, but nothing like the throat-stopping panic of King’s Landing, the choked despair of feeling Roose and Ramsay Bolton’s eyes on her. There is anxiousness, worry. Prudence.

*Associating with dangerous men I consider ‘harmless’ has inured me to even their darkest visages.*

“Jaqen,” she says, and is a bit surprised at Sansa Stark, deliberately calling attention to herself.

“You have been made renegade. You need to convince Arya to return to Braavos--Winterfell offers you sanctuary. The House of Black and White will have to accept our demand.”

Jaqen goes from dangerous amusement to plain amusement. “I assume you and Ser Zural here came up with this ‘plan’?”

*More Zural than me. I didn’t know what was going on till half a watch ago.*

“You knew what was going to happen,” says Zural to Jaqen, and now she detects bitterness in him. “So you bought Daorys.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “Daorys does not need to be bought, Zural.”

“You made Arya lie with Daorys, convinced him to turn renegade as well.”

“Now that is a lie,” says a new voice. Sansa turns, and finds Daorys, recovered, climbing the steps towards them. His hair is tied back, his clothes look different, though they are the same nondescript trews and shirt of good grey material he always wears. His blue eyes appear grey, the catch the firelight, and shadows dance in them. But he, at least, hasn’t changed; no menace is added to him, nor subtracted, apart from the two blades sheathed at his side.

Sansa almost misses the other presence behind him.

*Arya.*

Her eyes are blank, also trained on Zural. The swagger she’s adopted for the public halls of Winterfell is gone, replaced by a feline grace; she carries the blade at her hip with unconscious assurance. She wears a silk shirt, vermillion, it brushes the top of her knees, tall riding boots underneath.

Zural sports a snarl as he turns to Sansa. “Daorys has been bought with your sister. *My student.*”

“Zural,” Sansa says gently, as gently as she can. “That is not possible. Are you unwell?”

“Jaqen beat her black and blue when she refused the first time,” says Zural.

“Lie,” says Daorys softly. He leans now against a wall, his posture relaxed. But his mouth twists. “This is the problem with Braavosi--they always seek approval. Your eyes stray away when you lie, Zural, they say ‘look at me, look at me, see how good of a liar I am’.”
“You lay with my student last night, you exposed her to your appetites, and in exchange you side with a renegade,” says Zural.

No, Arya slept in her own bed, with Jaqen—the first time in many days. The chambermaids keep very close watch on who sleeps where; her sleeping in her own bed instead of ‘brewing witchy potions’ in the stillroom was the gossip.

And Daorys is recovered. Which means Arya found a ‘witchy potion’ that worked.

“Zural,” says Arya, her voice firm, it betrays nothing. “This is the home of an ally; we wear the faces we were born with. You are poisoning the well we must all drink from.”

I think something is wrong with Zural.

“What the fuck kind of game are you playing?” asks Daorys. It seems a genuine question, though she’s never heard the man swear before. “In what possible universe would I side with a renegade just to get my cock wet?”

Sansa stares at him. It is not the crudity—she’s overheard much worse from Sandor’s trainees. It’s just the source; it would be as if Jaqen started swearing.

“You are vile,” says Zural. “I will not let you kill me that easily, brother. And I will not let you touch her again. I know what you do to those you take to bed—nobody talks after you’re done with them, but the cell is covered in blood by the time you’re done playing.”

Sansa’s breath hitches; there is a tremor in her hands as she looks at Daorys. His expression of cool detachment has slipped. He is staring at Zural with something akin to bewilderment in his eyes. The back of Sansa’s mind is filled with images, images she cannot purge from herself, beds bloody linens, a man with a demented grin, calmly, oh so calmly wielding a sharp blade, she—

Arya steps in front of Daorys.

“That’s an old one, Zural,” she says, mirth dancing in her eyes. “The newest one I heard was that he rips out the still beating heart of his target and eats it before their eyes.”

Jaqen snorts. “It’s evolved--last time he only bathed in their blood.”

Daorys’s face has returned to something she is familiar with. “I’ll accept the entirely ineffective form of bathing, and the blood and the sex,” he says, “but cannibalism is carrying it a bit far, don’t you think?”

It’s the incongruity of the image that gets to Sansa. Arya, dwarfed by the men around her, standing in front of Daorys, shielding him, her face, her voice is amused but her posture is defiant, aggressively defiant, as if she’s going to pull her blade any moment and carve up Zural.

Arya would never champion the man Zural is trying to create with his accusations.

Set them up in a small house by the sea, and keep watch from somewhere far away so nothing gets to them.

A dark reputation.

And he uses it to protect his own. His turn, to need protection this time, barely out of the sickbed. Something is very wrong with Zural, this was the man that but a half-watch ago had gone almost to tears speaking of his desperate hope that Daorys would live.
“Ser Zural,” says Sansa, calm now. “Let us sit at the table, and discuss this. Clearly wild stories do nothing but muddy the waters.”

Nobody reacts to her.

Jaqen speaks. “Two mornings ago, between second and third watch. Right before you went to the ravensloft. What happened, Zural? Some abrupt decision--no warning, not much more than a few breaths of deliberation. You did something. What was it?”

Zural’s eyes widen.

Movement, out of the corner of her eye. She turns--Daorys stands straight now, staring at Zural. Something flickers, deep in his eyes.

_Fear_.

“What did you do?” Daorys asks.

“Cast _him_ out,” says Zural, glaring at Jaqen. “Like a renegade _should_ be cast out. Don’t need the god to do it, it seems.”

Daorys moves. She has never seen a man move that fast, he charges across the room, slams into Zural. A dull boom resounds through the air.

Zural is pinned against the wall, Daorys’s left hand holds Zural by the throat. His right hand has buried itself in the stone, a fingertip away from Zural’s head. Spiderweb cracks radiate outwards from his fist.

**JAQEN**

Sansa stands beside the hearth, torn between wanting to step forward, do _something_, and hiding. Jaqen wishes he could spare the heart to do something for her, shield her from what he has brought into her house. But his attention is fixed upon the dead men he calls his own, and there is naught in his heart but chaos.

“What is wrong _with you_?” Varro screams into Zural’s face, Varro’s visage contorted with fury, with panic.

Zural is gasping for air, and then Arya is across the room, she’s pulling Varro back, screaming at _him_ in High Valyrian.

Sansa’s gaze seeks Jaqen, pleading: _Jaqen will impose sanity_. She has too much faith in him, the great ‘guildmaster’ of the House of Black and White. Cruel, to fail her _now_.

“Enough,” he says. He doesn’t raise his voice. But Arya’s shouting, Varro’s hissing tirade, it stops. Daorys pulls back--Arya’s managed to dislodge Daorys’s hand from around Zural’s throat.

“What did you _do_?” Varro asks again; the cant of Braavos taints his tongue. The question is entirely unnecessary at this point. But Jaqen answers it nonetheless.

“He turned himself into a renegade,” he says sadly. “A _real_ one, not the fictional type of renegade made with a farce of a _vote_.”

Varro has stilled; his face is turned to the ground, and bit by bit he regains what control Asshai has...

Jaqen closes his eyes, exhales. “And so we come to it at last,” he says softly. His eyes open, his mouth twists, bitter. “And what a price we had to pay for it.”

Your student damn yourself, and still you seek to answer my questions, Varro? Shall I turn the whole House renegade then and hope there are more like you?

Jaqen suspects he will find more, should he look.

“He didn’t break any rules!” shouts Arya. “My teacher, Jaqen, he didn’t break any rules!”

Varro peers at her, then to Zural. “What did you tell her a renegade was? Rulebreaking? There are no rules!”

Arya stops, shock-still.

My bride. He wants to hold her in his arms, safe, as she hears what must be heard. She is a Faceless Man. Poor reward for her service, to diminish her strength by coddling her for Jaqen’s own peace of mind.

There is a white sheen to Arya’s eyes, as if she is on the brink of letting the Wind gain ascendancy.

Abide, Jaqen whispers to her, to the Wind, within himself. Abide. Cruelty has no place here, my storm.

Varro’s mouth is a thin line; his eyes are fixed on Arya’s. It seems everything—the flaking stone-dust, the blood on his fist, Zural, everything has faded for him, he is so intent upon Arya. “Arya, Arya,” he says, “remember the Wildling camp, the hungry man?”

She doesn’t respond.

“Mercy is given to those like him out of a sense of empathy,” says Daorys. “Don’t remember what a renegade looked like, no, once the god withdraws His favor. The hungry man could have been one who was once a brother, for all we know. Better to give a gift, put it out of its misery.”

Her eyes brim.

Varro smiles, sadly. “It is broken, Arya. It needs mercy.”

“No,” she says. “No. It is not allowed.”

Zural has risen to his feet. A trickle of blood flows out of the corner of his mouth; he wipes it. What was on his face earlier was not terror, it was merely trepidation. This, this is terror. He’s looking to Varro as well.

“Did you think a vote substitutes for Him of the Many Faces?” asks Varro. “Why did you do it, Zural?”

“A question was asked,” whispers Zural in a choked voice. “A question was asked, and Arya said ‘no, it is not possible’, but I saw she lied. I tried to answer it.”

Arya rushes to the balcony doors, throws them open, falls onto her knees upon the snow-covered ground outside; she is retching.
Should never have come to this.

He never wanted her to know.

Fuck strength, fuck everything else.

Jaqen moves towards her, Varro the same. Zural follows behind them.

Zural’s paranoia makes him draw the drapes, close the door behind them.

Everything is dark, the faint, scattered lights of the rest of the keep illuminate nothing except snow.

Jaqen kneels at one side of her, he touches her head, and she is in his arms. Silent tremors run up and down her frame.

“I almost turned into a renegade,” she whispers. “I almost turned into a renegade.”

“No,” says Varro, and he kneels to Jaqen’s right, his hand smoothing her hair. “It is not possible. You and Him are one, Arya, I touch the heart tree and all I get is ‘Arya, Jaqen, Arya, Jaqen’, there is no making you a renegade, beautiful one.”

Jaqen closes his eyes.

I am tired.

“There is,” he says.

Silence. Zural has sagged against the balustrade, his head in his hands.

Jaqen looks down, takes in the contours of Arya’s upturned face. “The world was ending,” he says to her, gently.

Heartbreak does not judge the purity of a soul or its intent.

She clutches at him, says nothing, she buries her face in his chest. His eyes meet Varro’s.

“You thought it was me causing it,” says Varro.

Jaqen smiles, bitter. “When you said, ‘she mirrors me’. But there was naught in you but loyalty. Naught in you she could mirror that could hurt me, knew that within the next few words. And yet the bond pulled, it twisted.”

Unbearable; just wanted it to stop, even if the stopping of it was the breaking of it.

In hindsight, Jaqen thinks he wasn’t being very rational at the time.

She twists in his arms; her eyes are now fixed on Varro.

“You saved us,” says Jaqen. “Lie back and think of your god. Don’t know what worked, but whatever did, it followed that. The pulling eased, then stopped entirely.”

Varro’s eyes are hooded. “Centuries of me hunting my broken brothers,” he says, a hint of humor in his voice. “And that is what redeems me at the last?”

“If you think it’s about the sex,” says Jaqen, “it’s never about the sex.”

Zural casts a confused look between Jaqen and Varro.
No longer terrified of his teacher, at least. Teacher never turns on student. Now that Zural knows what he is, his fear will find other things to fixate upon. Varro is rearing up to “clarify”, by the look in his eyes--there is a challenge to them. He stops, when Arya reaches out to to him; her hand hovers over his arm, not touching.

“I stopped being hurt,” she says.

“Always a rational name renegades give to the feeling,” says Jaqen. “Always a proximal cause to blame it on. Hurt, fear, anger, grief--but the emotion is a cloak; when it passes, the pain remains. Year after year after year.” He is looking at Zural now; his brother’s cheeks are stained wet with tears, but he says nothing.

Arya sits up; her shoulders firm. “These are our problems. We need to fix the mess inside.”

Oh, my practical one.

Zural straightens, panic again in his posture, he pushes through the doors, almost falls as he tangles in the drapes in his haste.

Jaqen’s on his feet, he’s dragged Arya up with him.

Sansa.

SANSA

She uncorks the wine Zural’s brought with shaking hands, pours herself an entire goblet’s worth.

Assassins sitting on my balcony, being incomprehensible.

She surveys her sitting room. The damage is entirely too minimal--a few cracks in the wall, is all--for what it feels like transpired here. And now she wonders-- how did Daorys do that?

Magic.

Her hand still shakes.

Cersei wasn’t all bad--she had an impeccable sense of style. And an ability to deal with the most unsettling events with aplomb.

The doors to the balcony are pulled open; the drapes billow outwards. Zural falls through the entrance.

She raises the goblet to her lips.

“Don’t drink that!” Zural says, and he lunges forward, knocks the goblet out of her hands. It arcs away, spilling wine in its wake, it shatters upon the ground; wine, red, splatters everywhere. She turns her shocked gaze back to Zural.

Jaqen’s in the room now, Arya clutching at his shirtsleeve.

“Don’t drink the wine,” Zural whispers, he raises his eyes to hers. There is nothing polite between them for a moment. Fear, fear in his eyes, a house-dog escaped into the forest, terrified for the unfamiliar sounds of the deep woods.
Movement, out of the corner of her eyes. Jaqen’s drawn his blade. He says something to Arya. A different language.

“Everyone will speak Westerosi,” Sansa snaps. “This is my bower, my home, my land, you will not circumvent my comprehension again.”

And then she ignores everyone else, focuses solely on Zural.

“Why shouldn’t I drink it?” she asks, false-calm steadying her voice.

He says nothing; his hands tremble.

*Jaqen* answers for him. “Because it’s poisoned,” he says, stepping forward. “What did you use, Zural?”

Zural drops his gaze again. “Heartsbane,” he says.

“Why?” she demands, though it comes out more of a murmur. “Why?”

“Because I poisoned his wife for him when he joined the order,” says Jaqen. He raises his blade. Zural hunches his shoulders, as if he knows what is coming, but he doesn’t turn around.

*This is not real. This is a dream, a nightmare, and I’m just about to wake from it.*


*The brotherhood of the strange.*

Jaqen sheathes his blade, his eyes bright with moisture. “It starts quickly with you, Zural,” he says.

And Zural turns; his face crumples, he hunches over himself, clutching at his midsection. “What do I do, Jaqen?” he asks.

Jaqen walks forward, rests his hand on Zural’s head. Slowly, bit by bit, Zural unfolds, till he is standing. Not tall by any means, but he is upright.

*A benediction that works on an atheist?*

No, just a gesture of forgiveness.

“Ravens, first of all,” says Jaqen, taking his hand away. “That question must be stopped in its tracks. Immediately. The entirety of the truth to the House--how you turned, and why, and what the risk of *acting* upon it is.” Zural looks afraid, but he nods.

Jaqen purses his lips. “Neither I, nor Arya, nor Doarys voted,” he says. “I was the subject of the vote, Doarys was indisposed. But on *what* grounds did you exclude Arya?”

Zural is looking down. “Didn’t exclude her, or him,” he says. “Told them he was well when he wasn’t, and I was thinking she’d tell you. Forged a ‘no’ in her name, a ‘yes’ in his.”

“A *yes*,” hisses Doarys, stepping forward. “You--”

Jaqen holds up his hand, stops Doarys mid-sentence. “And yet again,” says Jaqen, “we are saved by the madness of renegades. You will write to them and explain the fraud. That invalidates the vote against me. *Then* you will ride to White Harbor, set up the embassy and continue with the envoy work until a replacement is cleared and sent. And you will try not to fall in love with any
more women.”

Zural’s gaze flicks to her, then back to the ground; Sansa’s stomach drops.

A nightmare, and I cannot wake up.

“And now I will come with you, and send missives of my own.” He looks to Arya, Daorys, standing side-by-side like dutiful soldiers in parade rest.

“Handle it.”

Both bow their heads.

And finally, finally Jaqen looks to Sansa.

“Sansa,” he says, “forgiv--”

“Send your missives, Jaqen, get your House in order,” she says, forcing her voice past the lump in her throat. “We will speak after.”

He bows to her, and then leads Zural out. Zural looks over his shoulder. Not at her--at Arya and Daorys.

“Discharge my debts, brothers,” he says.

And Daorys laughs, he leans his head against the wall, right against the hole he made with his fist; cracks radiate out from his head like a halo of lightning. “Your debts will be discharged, as best we may,” he says, speaking to the ceiling. “Go.”

Zural turns away.

She watches him leave, watches the anxious uncertainty about his once-confident shoulders, and a rage rises in her, a rage that has no source or target, it just rises until her fingertips vibrate with it.

She turns to Arya. “Now you will explain,” she says.

She realizes Arya is shaking; her teeth chatter. Daorys walks forward, pours another cup of wine from the tainted bottle. “You will receive a balancing, Princess Sansa,” he says over his shoulder. “The order knows your name, twice over. This ,” he says, holding aloft the half-full goblet of wine, “is not permitted. You will receive an explanation of Zural’s actions, an explanation of what transpired here, and a discharging of his debt to you. No more. Fair?”

She nods, tight.

He holds the cupful out to Arya.

“That’s poisoned!” says Sansa, her hand reaches out; unconscious mimicry, she realizes, of Zural’s gesture.

“Heartsbane won’t do anything to her,” he says, thrusts the cup into Arya’s hands. “It may actually help slow the heartbeat.” His face is expressionless now. “She slept the night through for the first time in...how long, Arya?”

“Two moons,” she mumbles.

“And the morning has been eventful. Which means no renewing the dose for six watches, at the
least. What runs through your veins? The Blue Pearl, still? Razorgrass?”

Poisons. Like the poison they took on the ride to the Wall.

“Pearl and symphatoma,” says Arya, avoiding his gaze.

“Was it worth the price?” He asks with a small smile.

Her jaws clench. She raises both her hands, cups them around the bowl of the goblet. No sipping for Arya, she gulps down the wine till it is empty.

“The Wind is missing,” says Daorys. “I do not need to explain to you the dangers, I trust.”

“She is sated,” says Arya. “She doesn’t want any more of what this day has to give her.”

“What does want have to do with need?” asks Daorys. “You owe me a set of questions, Belladonna. I’m calling the debt in now.”

She shakes her head.

“Use it, sugar-tits,” he drawls, “you did pay for it.”

Sugar-tits? The ‘endearment’ would have generated outrage, on any other day.

A trade. Everything is a trade to them, a balance, even amongst themselves. Debts discharged. Give and take.

Footsteps, heavy ones--Sandor runs up the stairs, favoring his injured leg. “Servants said there was shouting, there is--”

“Get out!” Sansa screams at him. She picks up an empty wineglass, throws it at him. It does not reach, the arc is too shallow; it shatters on the floor a few paces from him. He jumps backwards. “Get out!”

He raises his hands, eyes very concerned--sees Arya, tear-streaked, holding the goblet. Slowly, he backs down the stairs till he is gone from sight. She hears the double-doors on the lower level open and close.

Daorys is still studying Arya. “You want me to coddle you, Ver’yalli?” he asks her. “Tell you it’s going to be alright?”

She grimaces. “As much as Lei’anni wants Jaqen’s blade in his heart.”

He smiles, cold. “Want is not need,” he says.

Silently, she holds out her hand to him, palm facing up. “I am the student of Zural Mobhai,” she says. “I am the recruit of Jaqen H’ghar.” She exhales. “I am no one.”

Daorys’s hand rises, ghosts over her palm. “Lie,” he says quietly.

What are they doing?

Arya’s eyes are closed. “May I try again?” she asks.

“A lie will hurt this time,” he warns her.
She swallows, nods. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell,” she whispers. “I am a Faceless Man of Braavos.” Her voice has firmed, her posture has changed somehow. The tremor in her hand has stilled. “I am no one.” And her voice is entirely devoid of emotion, her eyes clear and unwavering as she opens them.

“No lie,” says Daorys, pulls his hand back.

*This is what their training teaches. The sleeping in stone cells, the exhausting physical exercises Zural told me about. How to control the body so you can control the mind.*

Of all the things that she could possibly envy Arya for, this, this *one* thing, this “training”, makes her feel a keen ache in her breast. *They train away their ability to fear, to grieve, to feel.*

Daorys steps away, towards the table. “So. That is one debt of Zural’s discharged,” he says, almost to himself. “The handling of his student.” He turns a false, sunny smile upon Sansa. “And what might you need?”

*Small things, small things, until I don’t want wine.*

“An explanation, for this *drama*,” she says. She points to the cracked stone of her wall. “For *that*.”

His cold eyes do not shift away from her. “You will notice that many that desire vengeance do not desire it *enough*,” he says. “If enough time passes to blunt the shock, to blur the memory, they settle into some sort of life. They *weary* of their rage--rage is an exhausting emotion to sustain for too long.”

*Everything is an exhausting emotion, Daorys.*

“But not Faceless Men,” he says. “Faceless men are intense creatures, Princess, with an intensity of memory that is rarely matched. Intensely *emotional* as well, I should say, though it is not always upon the surface. A life spent dealing death after death after death in payment for a vengeance that has been granted long ago, to sup on the satisfaction of it, and consider the price not yet paid--takes a certain kind of man. But emotion is a distraction--it must be controlled. The training, the discipline, it teaches the control. But there is a limit. *That,*” he says, pointing to the wall, “was you finding out that Arya sold herself to Ramsay Bolton after you escaped him.”

Sansa licks her lips, her hand is upon her throat.

“I apologize that you had to see it,” says Daorys, “and that damage was caused--I have one who will discharge *my* debt to you.”

*Jaqen? Or Arya?*

She tries a smile. She’s not sure it came out right. “A cracked wall,” she says, “all that’s left of a third of Winterfell is cracked walls. It is no matter.”

“Nevertheless.” He cocks his head to a side. “You avoid the question, Princess.”

*No longer.* “What happened to Zural?” she asks.

He nods. “A preamble, first. Arya has shown you a death-mask.”

“Yes.”
“So you know that there is more to Faceless Men than training and a guild.”

“The god Zural is not supposed to believe in?”

Seemed like he believed enough to think the god was not needed anymore, she thinks bitterly.

“Atheism is a valid view,” says Daorys, “differences in perspective are allowed. He told you about the factions--Lorathi believe in the god, Braavosi believe in the magic. What name you call a thing does not change the nature of its effects.”

No, it does not.

“There is a bond that binds us to the source of our fortitude,” Daorys continues. “Magic changes the nature of men, it changes the nature of reality--there is a ritual to the making of a Faceless Man and a bargain is at the heart of it--service, for vengeance, a life for a death. A renegade is one who breaks the bond, breaks the bargain. So now you have already received a thing--vengeance--that you were in the process of paying off, but didn’t.” His eyes focus on something distant for a moment. “The mind breaks,” he says quietly, “trying to balance that which cannot be balanced any more. A renegade is compelled to carry out the broken ritual, again and again and again in substitution for the thing that no longer resides in him.” Daorys touches his breast, almost absent.

“Zural, all unknowing, rejected the bond to the god. The mind broke--the erratic behaviour, the paranoia. Trying to poison you the first chance he got. Jaqen poisoned Zural’s wife for him. Heartsbane, in a half-cup of wine.”

“Good for Zural,” she says. They had spoken, some, of his marriage as well as the two of hers. But he had always been circular about the ending of it--she had not pressed, having circularities of her own.

There is no divorce in Braavos; “The god is merciful”.

“Wish I’d had the resources to call upon your order when I actually had a need of you,” she says. “And what vengeance did you ask for?”

“That is not part of Zural’s debt,” says Daorys.

“But you want me to trust you,” she counters.

“I want nothing,” he says. “What I need is for this conversation to be done, so I can leave Winterfell at the earliest opportunity.”

To go hunt Zural.

“He told me a lot of things,” says Sansa slowly. “He insinuated much.”

Daorys leans back. “Not all women are receptive to flowers,” he says.

She doesn’t rise to the bait. “I want those insinuations clarified.”

“Fair,” he says.

“Magic,” she says. “I would know more of your Many-Faced God.”

“Forgive, me, Princess, but that is most definitely not one of Zural’s debts to discharge.” Daorys pauses, thinks, and then a small smile--almost mischievous--grows on his face. “You may ask Jaqen--he is the ultimate authority on such things.”
Arya stirs.

_Sold herself to Ramsay Bolton...blood covers the cell when you are done playing with them._

“Zural insinuated that you and Arya might…”

Daorys snorts. “What, fornicate? For what _purpose_? I am already as loyal as possible to Jaqen, why would he need me to tup his _wife_ to secure my loyalty?”

“The further you slipped from us, Varro, the more desperate the ploys,” Arya says sadly. “I bled you, like they used to in Old Ghiskarr, wondering if the blood made too much pressure against your skull. Jaqen stood outside your closed door for hours and pretended he couldn’t hear you calling, because he was terrified you would _ask_ and he wouldn’t be able to refuse.”

Daorys blinks, looks away.

_There is no blood here_, Sansa thinks. _Only grief._

“I think Zural was entertaining the notion that perhaps lust could hold you to life,” continues Arya. “Not an _incorrect_ assumption—lust counters death. The notion warped, twisted under the strains when he became a renegade, and he spewed that malformed creature out of his mouth like poison.”

_Zural was “entertaining” that notion for a long time, before he was magicked into instability_. But _that_ particular truth does not need to be aired here, enough damage has been done already.

“He did not mean to hurt,” says Arya softly.

“Quite aware of that, thank you,” replies Daorys, curt. He turns to Sansa. “Anything else?”

“All of this happened because of the Starks, didn’t it?” she asks. “Because Jaqen wore the direwolf—”

“No,” says Daorys. “Who the fuck cares what clothes a Faceless Man wears to meet his objectives? It happened because the fucking _Braavosi_ understand shit about the world. Pride, _empty_ pride, using ‘the principle of equality’ to justify their self-importance. Zural was taught better.” His voice, bitter, seems to have escaped Daorys’s control. “Fuck,” he says, takes a deep breath. “Forgive. Please, continue.”

“What don’t the Braavosi understand about the world?” she asks.

“Ask Jaqen. What more is owed, Sansa Stark?”

_Everything is an exchange with these people._

“He said you Lorathi say one must understand a thing to annihilate it.”

He nods.

“An opportunity for understanding a thing was taken from me this morning,” she says. “I don’t know who was responsible for the taking of it, but it was taken from _me_. ”

“What thing?” asks Arya.

Sansa looks away from her sister, she looks to Daorys. “Zural saw patterns at the heart of people,” she says. “I wanted to ask him what kept me afraid all these years, what keeps me afraid _now_. ” She pauses; they wait for her to find the words. “In a moon, perhaps more, perhaps less, I was
going to ask him to teach me how to stop being afraid.”

She can feel Arya’s gaze on her.

“Fair,” says Daorys. “And that opportunity for understanding is lost to all time.” His mouth twists. “If he ever comes within reach of you, he will try to poison you again. He won’t be able to help himself.”

His gaze shifts away from her, to Arya.

“What would you have, Sansa?” asks Arya, utterly neutral.

“A different understanding, in the place of this one,” says Sansa. “Who did this, and why, and perhaps a further understanding of a question Ramsay Bolton used to ask, but never did get a chance to answer--his test-subjects died far too quickly.”

Arya looks at Sansa again, and she seems amused. “You’ll have to get in line for the last,” she says. “Zural is owed the first cut himself, then Jaqen. Then me and Daorys, together. Then every single Faceless Man in the order. Then you.”

Sansa thinks about this. “Fair,” she says. “And if does not detract from Jon’s interests, I would...contribute resources towards the obtaining of this understanding.”

A smile curls upon Arya’s lips, and Sansa finds herself mirroring the vicious purpose in it--there is no just retribution, no balancing to be had; Sansa’s entire life a cage and when she was ready to stop being a songbird the key was taken away. Arya’s entire life given over to some god for vengeance for one teacher, she’s got nothing left to give for Zural Mobhai. No, no bargains will satisfy now.

Only blood.

“Always the she-wolves,” murmurs Daorys. “Always the she-wolves you have to fear.”

Sansa gives him a cold smile. “You are done, Ser Daorys,” she says. “You may leave.”

He nods, and his gaze drifts to the table; he makes no move to rise. “Too little knowledge is just as dangerous as too much,” he says thoughtfully. “Sansa Stark had Stark enemies. Now Zural and this morning’s work have given her House of Black and White enemies.” He looks up, to Arya. “It is a judgement call, but I don’t think she can straddle the line between involvement and noninvolvement anymore, no matter what Jaqen wants.”

“Jaqen’s call,” says Arya.

Daorys nods. “I’ll push, though.” He turns to Sansa, smiles. “When next you see Jaqen in private, ask him if he is the Many-Faced God.”

MISSANDEI

Daenerys insists on reading the letters herself, now.

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Your Grace,
Armies of walking dead, Euron Greyjoy, Cersei Lannister. That’s military advice, by the way, not politicking over who gets their crown first.

If you go after King’s Landing at the start, my resources will still be tied up at the Wall. If both of us go after Euron, the Mad Queen and the Night’s King move on our flanks. But if we take care of the northernmost threat first, we move south together, sweeping the landscape clean.

The stud-farm... Not an oathbreaker, no matter what you’ve been told. A scenario, perhaps: you choose a candidate, the time. Once. We grow it up, teach it how to read and write, even. See how it turns out.

-Jon

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“Not an oathbreaker,” murmurs Tyrion. “Stannis Baratheon must have released him from his vows. Telling that he didn’t try to take Winterfell even when he had the right to. Waited until it was absolutely necessary.”

“That’s what you get out of this?” demands the Queen, exasperated.

“What is there to get?” asks Tyrion. “The military advice is sound, it’s what I’d suggest, if everything in the North is how they say it is.”

Missandei shares a look with Daenerys: men.

Not true of the Hand, of course, he’s very perceptive. But Tyrion Lannister seems to have found a highly developed sense of propriety when it comes to Daenerys Targaryen. The gentle jesting in the letters between King and Queen, the tentative compromise, what happens between a man and his wife in their marriage bed--Lord Tyrion holds all of that to be Daenerys’s business, no matter how openly spoken of. He will not comment unless he sees something that could hurt her.

“What does he look like?” asks Dany.

Tyrion Lannister waddles over to a chair, hops up on it. “You’ve never asked that before,” he points out, popping a bit of dried fruit in his mouth.

“I don’t care about the looks,” says the Queen. “I just want a picture in my head to match to the words.”

Tyrion raises his brows, presses his lips together in thought. Then he shrugs. “Dark hair, dark eyes, he was barely grown when I saw him. Handsome, I’d say. Good fighter--best the North’s got, as you’ve heard.”

Daenerys glares at him. “What’s the shape of his face? How does he wear his hair? Do his brows arch? Tyrion, give me something.”

Tyrion peers at her. “Um. Hair’s curly and short? Eyebrows are where they’re supposed to be?”

“Tyrion...” growls Daenerys.

“You’ll see him soon, my Queen,” soothes Missandei.

He’s supposed to look like Arya Stark.

That, by itself, says nothing of the looks, Missandei still has no idea what Arya looks like.
Chapter End Notes

tl;dr:

1. Zural (because Varro randomly pissed him off last chapter) is under the impression that Jaqen has made Arya sleep with Varro to "buy" the renegade hunter. Zural doesn't seem to be too rational at the moment.
2. Nobody (incl. Jaqen and renegade hunter) know *exactly* what makes a renegade a renegade - it's nto the vote, it's not the god withdrawing his favor
3. Zural turned himself into a renegade--from him they find what the *actual* even it: excising/cutting out Jaqen H'ghars face from the faces/memories/names you have within you as an FM
4. A renegade is a serial killer
5. Renegade is a serial killer because the bond to the god is broken, he is compelled to keep acting out one side of the "ritual" of the making of an FM--repeating the killing/vengeance that made him an FM in the first place.
6. Zural was very unstable--he was about to poison Sansa in her wine, because Zural originally came to the HBW for venance against his wife, and Jaqen (wearing Zural's face) killed her with a poison, heartsbane.
7. The vote against Jaqen is invalidated: Zural forged Varro and Arya's votes (Zural had already broken the bond, he was getting paranoid, not telling Arya, suspicious of everyone...)

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Reveals...you guys like reveals? and threads coming together? let me know!
ARYA

She and Varro stand upon the battlements of the East Tower. They watch dark shapes against the snow—a sleigh, a rider—get smaller as the distance between them and Winterfell grows.

Zural goes east.

The Heartsbane is doing its work; her heartbeat has slowed, the nausea has retreated. A pleasant lassitude makes her muscles heavy, her bones heavy.

Her heart aches.

_Zural, old teacher, you forgot something, turn back for it, Jaqen’s going to come here any moment because He’ll realize He made a mistake—you are not a renegade, you are not a hungry man, all the strange behaviour was because you fell in love with Sansa. Love makes a man do such strange things! Come back, Zural, I think Jaqen just realized it was a mistake..._

Varro stands to her right.

_We pretended so hard for Sansa that Daorys came back from the dead, for a little while._

“He’s scared now, scared of himself,” says Varro. “It won’t start for a good five years at least, and then he’ll kill maybe one, two a year. Won’t escalate for decades.” His knuckles are white as they grip the guard-rail. “Bad one though, women and poison.”

He exhales, and she sees his lips moving out of the corner of her eye. She turns to him, and by the time she has she realizes there the cold assessment has returned his eyes.

“What is the shape of your ritual?” she asks. She has been thinking on it all day, and she has answer, but she wants to hear it from him.

“Varro Massag was a loyal servant to the Iron Bank,” he says.

She nods. “I wore him a lot.”

She remembers the idealism of him.

Till he discovered things buried under his world of numbers and ledgers. Investments, from speculating on slaves in Slaver’s Bay, bundled into larger financial instruments along with ships, commodities, land, everything—a convolution of categories and risks. Thousands of such ‘instruments’ sold to unknowing—or perhaps uncaring—investors.
The Iron Bank was *profiting* from the slave trade.

There is a twisted fact that Faceless Men learned when Varro Massag’s memories came to them--almost all the gold in the world can be connected to the slave trade by six steps. But then, you could connect most gold in the world to *Basilisk Isles* brandy in *eight* steps if you wanted to.

The Bank’s transgressions were not a matter of “six steps”. They were a matter of two--not owning a slave directly, but speculating on slavery, which fueled an increase in the number of slaves taken, from the Summer Isles, from Westeros, by sixteen percent within three years--*thousands*, taken and collars put around their throats.

The problem with holding institutions responsible for perversion of principle is that it shields the *people* whose hands and mouths brought about the perversion in the first place.

If Varro’s findings were made open to Braavosi justice, the Iron Bank would have fallen. Varro Massag was loyal to the Iron Bank. *He* directed his vengeance against blood and bone--name after name after name, each man responsible, down to the last clerk that knowingly substituted the word “chattel” for “slave”.

Mirrors, Jaqen H’ghar and Varro Massag--neither believe in the fictions men raise as shields before them.

The truce that ended the Purge still holds--the price for Iron Bankers is now prohibitively high, like that of a Stark. In return, the Iron Bank opens all its books to the House of Black and White once every three years.

Varro smiles, grim. “He gave his life for the Purge *because* he was loyal. Once Varro was a Faceless Man, he was loyal to the House of Black and White.”

His grip on the guardrail relaxes a bit as the black dot becomes indistinguishable from other dark shapes in the distance--trees, the ruins of houses.

“No Lorathi ever does anything for a single purpose,” he says. “Have to give it to Him, Jaqen is an *efficient* son-of-a-bitch, no slight to his mother. Use the renegade that is compelled to kill *other* renegades.”

*But you can control it.*

“Sometimes,” he replies. “The same thing that holds most men from putting an ice-pick through their neighbor’s skull--the social compact. Teacher never turns on student. The god actually commands me to let one go. Too many brothers watching.” He glances at her. “The deep-discipline, the namelessness--that was for all the other things that come with it.” His mouth twists. “Having blood on the mind makes one inefficient and one-dimensional.”

She thinks about it. “So why was He worried for *my* safety in the morning?”

“A Lorathi understands a thing to annihilate it,” he says. “With both Varro and Daorys starting to see eye-to-eye, I extrapolate, I haven’t asked--but I think He worried that once the compulsion was understood, that specific form of it might not be...satisfactory. But the bond’s still broken, the mind’s still trying to balance that which cannot *be* balanced. So what shape would the broken ritual take this time?” He turns to look at her. “Women, Arya Stark, it’s most often women.”

The Wind, torn between satiety and greed, has no opinion at this point.

*You’re holding yourself from riding after Zural: I can see the hunger in you.* The compulsion has
not shifted.

Her jaw clenches.

“It’s not worth anything in an of itself,” he says. “And it can no longer serve.”

“Jaqen doesn’t do anything without a thousand contingency plans. There will be one for this,” she says.

His mouth twists. “A contingency plan? You told me--‘The further you slipped from us, the more desperate the ploys’. That was what it was, the dream. Desperation. Mirrors, Arya Stark and Jaqen H’ghar--they want to keep their people. If you had Robb Stark’s body here, mostly unspoiled, you’d lie with him right now to bind breath to a corpse, since it’s the only means to a resurrection you know. I was no different.”

She shrugs. “Wanted to save your life. If it didn’t work, figured you’d like the gift at least. No harm to us--dreams are not real.”


Something in the air has changed.

“But it seems you don’t even need my cock in you to speak the name,” he says.

Her eyes widen. Did I?

“I did. In Sansa’s bower, earlier.”

“Forgive,” she whispers, “I didn’t--”

“Mean to?” he asks. “Of course not.”

“Varro,” she says, “I--”

“And there you go again,” he says ruefully. “Faceless Men don’t throw around a name a Lorathi wants to keep hidden. Is Arya Stark too young to know any better? No, that’s not it. What it is is a reminder--he is not a Lorathi any more, only faceless are Lorathi. He can’t keep up the fiction, now that he knows--no use to him now.” His mouth is a bitter line. “A reminder, that you are not Jaqen--you are not bound by the god’s attachment to useless things.”

Arya’s mouth twists. “Paid a lot for uselessness, if that’s the case; if I’d been watching the politics instead of the Saltwater seeping out, watch by watch, we might not have lost Zural.”

“Truth,” Varro replies. “And if Jaqen hadn’t been avoiding doing his duty, avoiding mercy, because of the broken mirror you dragged in from the rubbish heap, he’d have confronted Zural before yesterday, and you might not have lost him.” He smiles. “Your turn.”


Is this what you want? That I should repeat your name enough times that it becomes meaningless in my mouth?

He has nowhere left to flee, his back is against the wall.
She is too close. *Far* too close to him. The rage sublimates, ice turning to vapor that haloes their breath; her heart is thumping beneath her chest.

“Do I frighten you now, *finally*?” he asks.

She looks into his eyes. Too much, too much truth between them for the lie to stand.

*My heartbeat matches yours.*

“Pity?” he asks. “Is that what this is?”

The Wind is pitiless. If that’s what he wants, he will not get it from her. But then Varro’s words from this morning come back to her: *whenever no one gets an extrapolation wrong, it’s because he’s hiding something from himself.* He has a habit of projecting his own motivations onto her.

*He pities me?*

He smiles slightly. “Take what you can get,” he murmurs.

*I take nothing that is not mine.*

He can choke on his pity till the sun rises again.

She steps back from him. “I’m not used to pitying others, it doesn’t stay long. All gone now. You should go use *that*,” says the Wind, eyes raking down his form till her gaze rests on the very noticeable bulge in his britches, “on someone that doesn’t know your name.”

She turns and starts making her way back to their rooms--some things still need to be packed. He follows, beside her.

They walk in silence.

Two maids pass, carrying trays--stacks of boiled eggs and bread--out to the courtyard. The guards will eat on their feet, it seems, Sandor’s working them harder than usual--she can think of at least one reason for that.

One of the maids looks back over her shoulder; her eyes rake over him.

“*She* definitely doesn’t know my name,” says Varro.

Arya turns, blinks at him; confused.

*Oh.*

*Varro is just a name, a key used to tie him down?*

“So go get your cock wet,” says Arya. “Just don’t murder anyone, Jaqen’ll have to explain it to Jon.”

*The man whose memories I have, he’s gone. Eaten up. Nowhere to be found.*

He holds up his wrist shakes it in her direction: *you’ve got me bound, no murder here.* Then he grabs the sharp threads of air between thumb and forefinger, pulls. The band of air stretches. He lets go. It snaps back against his wrist, and a red welt appears underneath.

Almost, she takes the manacles away.
Then he does it again: a challenge. Blood wells, this time.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Returning the overpayment,” he says.

The door to her chamber is just up ahead, half-ajar. She lengthens her stride, slips in, then slams the door shut behind her.

She exhales, allows the tremors to take her hands, allows herself to feel the numbness of her legs. Swiftly, she searches through the bandolier, then her packs.

*Gone, all gone.*

Jaqen’s removed both the Pearl and the symphatoma. Could have been Varro, he was here in the morning unattended for a few breaths. But he didn’t know about the symphatoma. Unless he did, and was trying to lay blame on Jaqen so…

She sighs.

Then she crawls into the bed and draws the blankets over her head, huddles down in the warm dark. It smells of ginger and cloves.

She wills herself to sleep.

**JON**

He’s looking for Jaqen—Beron, Sansa’s page, brought Jon a hastily-scrawled note saying “Ser Zural is moving the embassy to White Harbor”. Apparently it’s been going on for a day, and nobody thought to tell the King?

The page, all of ten and still in the habit of repeating kitchen gossip to whoever asks, says the ambassador has left Winterfell in a hurry because he was caught drinking wine in Princess Sansa’s bower at an inappropriate hour, and Ser Jaqen and Ser Sandor threw him out on his ear.

*If only the world was that simple.*

It has something to do with Jaqen’s dark mood the other night—betrayal, and Faceless Men that don’t want a god. Perhaps Zural has been dispatched to Braavos. He is a diplomat, perhaps he can make the ones that stray see reason.

Best to go to the one person who will know.

According to the sentries, Jaqen was last seen disappearing out the western doors of the inner keep. *In the godswood, with Bran?* Not to be disturbed, then. Arya has locked and bolted her chamber, doesn’t respond to knocking. Sandor is working the newest batch of recruits into tears.

Sansa.

Jon has to go to Sansa to ask after Zural. He’s been avoiding it.

*Cowardice.*
Murder and war and rape are somehow completely acceptable topics at the breakfast table. Romance is not, it gets a man sneered at by his sisters.

Strange world.

But he’s not blind. Zural spends a bit more time with Sansa than an ambassador should. She allows it. One of Jaqen’s people—safe, trustworthy, lethal. She will come to no harm. And so Jon has not wanted to interfere, one way or another.

He turns a corner and finds Daorys walking into one of the receiving rooms. He’s awake? Walking?

“Daorys!” Jon calls, jogs to the area. The assassin stops in his tracks, turns.

“You are recovered?” asks Jon.

“Mostly,” he replies. He does look the part, two blades at his belt, trews tucked into riding boots, his hair in a fighter’s braid. “Why are you running?”

“Hoping you’d know what was going on.”

“Jaqen didn’t say anything.” The words are flat.

Jon shakes his head slightly.

“Somewhere with fewer maids around, I think,” murmurs Daorys, for Jon’s ears alone. The King nods, gestures.

It’s difficult to find a place not teeming with people these days. A good thing, for Winterfell. A bad thing, for having private conversations about assassins, with assassins.

They end up in the wine-cellar.

Severely depleted, after the Bolton people got at it after Roose Bolton died—Ramsay was not the kind to inspire discipline in his men, only fear and sadism in equal measure.

Daorys gives Jon a precis of what has happened—treason-by-error, the breaking of the bond with the god, Zural’s poisoning of Sansa. He’s halfway to the stairs out of the cellar before Daorys’s words hit him.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” says Daorys. “Told her what we could about what’s actually going on, but without Jaqen telling her who he is…”

She’s going to ask me questions. Questions that are Jaqen’s to answer. Jon winces. The god should have told her before now.

“She’s safe?” says Jon. He answers his own question. “Or Arya wouldn’t have left her alone.”

“Squad standing guard,” says Daorys. “Sandor didn’t come up, she tried to murder him with a wine-glass the first time he did.”

Jon winces again. Then he tests one of the barrels to see if it will hold his weight. It does. He perches on the side of it.

“How are you recovered?” Jon asks Daorys. “I heard the poison was incurable, even for Jaqen.”
“There are some words Arya Stark does not understand the meaning of,” he says. “‘Incurable’ is one of them, apparently. Along with ‘defeat’.”

Jon grins. “Welcome to the brotherhood.”

Daorys raises an eyebrow.

“My death-wounds didn’t heal,” says Jon quietly. “Just got black, with frost and mold and magic. Her and Sansa...heard they tried that with you, it didn’t work.”

Daorys finds his own seat, an empty cask of brandy. The tall assassin has to bend his knees a bit when he’s sitting but he looks comfortable enough.

“I was not a brother. Seems obvious in hindsight,” says Daorys, “magic’s got rules to it—the more powerful it is, the more stringently the rules apply. And the worse the repercussions of rule-breaking.” He looks up at Jon. “Faceless Men turning rogue, declaring the god a renegade? Jaqen is--” the assassin grits his teeth.

Jaqen is blaming himself.

“He said he was leaving the keep yesterday.”

Daorys raises his eyebrows. “Before last night?” he asks.

Jon nods. “We spoke, early yesterday.” He presses his lips together, then decides to say it--Daorys has known Jaqen for a very long time. Maybe something he can do. “He asked, ‘Am I worth the price of my existence’?”

Daorys exhales, slow. His face gives nothing away, but the eyes are wide, storm-tossed, fixated upon Jon.

“How did you reply?” Daorys asks, very quietly.

Jon sighs. “How could I reply? Told him the truth--no. He isn’t. Nobody is. Not me, not you. Grace, that others pay the price for us--the man that begat me, his wife, the woman that birthed me, Father, Catelyn, thousands to die in my name. What the fuck am I to deserve that? Nothing. But the price has been paid; can’t do stupid things with your life if someone else is paying the price for it, can you?”

Daorys considers him for a few moments. “You deserve a cake,” he says finally.

Jon chokes on air. “What?”

“Or some other form of tangible appreciation,” says Daorys. “Because that makes no sense, rationally speaking, but it makes perfect Jaqen sense, I think. A man asks him ‘what do I do, Jaqen?’ Jaqen says, ‘do what you want’, or if he’s feeling particularly inclined towards the man, ‘focus on putting one foot in front of another’ or some such rot. When a man goes rogue, or about to, Jaqen doesn’t act. He sits there, playing the self-blame game over and over again. Today, he told Zural what to do when Zural asked. Even before that, Jaqen picked up a thing he’s been putting off for a very long time and made a fucking decision about it instead of letting it hang forever in an unconscious limbo of forgetfulness.” Daorys straightens. “Jaqen’s going to fight.”

There is a wide grin on Daorys’s face.

Is this why Davos embraced me, the day I called the very first kingsmoot?
“Lyseni sugar-cake for you, I think,” says Daorys. “Suitably expensive.”

Jon ducks his head. “Just words,” he mutters. “Any man could have said them.”

“I wouldn’t have,” says Daorys.

“What _would_ you have said?” Jon asks.

Daorys considers the question. “That a man is worth exactly what others are willing to pay for him, so he must ensure he provides good value. If the price has been paid in advance, it is a loan, and the loan doesn’t come due until a man dies, but the interest of it compounds; each year that passes requires greater service than the one before, or there is no balancing to the books.”

*Is that what the poisoning was about? Going so far that it takes a god to bring you back?*

“If a man keeps giving greater service, eventually he reaches his capacity,” says Jon. “He breaks. Or is the idea not to break?”

Daorys’s mouth twists. “Every man has a breaking point. That’s when he goes bankrupt, and they come and take his house away from him.”

Jon just stares at the assassin, a bit lost for words.

“There is a _reason_ I don’t give speeches, Jon,” says Daorys, dry. “One time out of a thousand it hits its mark, the rest of the time it leaves people baffled.”

“But this has happened before--Faceless Men going rogue,” says Jon.

Daorys nods, a twisted smile on his face.

“What do you normally do?”

“Find Jaqen,” says Daorys, “pour drink down his throat for a third of the night. Then I pick a fight with him--whether he walks away or stays to fight, doesn’t matter, it gets him moving. Then I pour more drink down his throat until he’s just short of maudlin, then I drag him back to the House of Black and White and surround him with optimistic Braavosi.” He pauses. “Then I leave to go hunt down the renegade.”

Jon considers the sequence. “Does it work?”

“Not ideal,” says Daorys. “Would have substituted a brothel for the fight, but this is Jaqen we’re talking about.”

Jon nods. They’ve talked some, Jon and Jaqen, especially when the Daenerys argument happened and Jon threw “Rosey” into Jaqen’s face--the woman Jaqen had been with the night before his wedding, Jon had remembered the name from banquet.

“He said he wanted to leave early.”

Daorys’s expression settles back into neutrality. “Arya’s going to be near-impossible to wake for another watch at least.” He rises to his feet, snags four bottles of wine, one after the other, from the newly replenished racks, without looking at the labels.

“Daorys,” begins Jon, “I--”

“Not my name,” says Daorys, peering into the darkness of the cellar. “Daorys means ‘no one’ in
“So what is your name?” asks Jon.

The assassin turns, tucks two of the bottles under his arm. “Daorys is just as good as any other. Just thought you should know.”

Jon nods. And Daorys turns, starts heading to the stairwell leading out of the cellar.

“Don’t get killed when you pick the fight,” Jon calls out to the assassin’s retreating back. “Arya’s going to be upset.”

Daorys pauses upon the steps. He doesn’t look back, just gives Jon a sort of lazy wave and continues climbing.

**VARRO**

A *different* last duty, the wine. Still.

He takes a winding route to the godswood, gives Jaqen enough time to sense him coming. No Bran Stark out here at this hour, which means less chance for awkwardness, that felt like a very final farewell.

The darkness in him beckons.

He finds Jaqen not in the circle of light around the heart tree but further off, his form lost in the shadows.

“You brought a lot of wine,” observes Jaqen. “I thought we’d decided to limit it to a bottle each after Pentos.”

“Bottle each per renegade,” says Varro. “Never drank for me, did we?”

“Thought that’s what we were doing, all these years,” says Jaqen.

*Unfair, Jaqen, to blame me for what I did not know.*

“I own my part of the blame,” Varro says. “The renegacy. That I chose to serve, after, instead of running.” A number of threads have come together, over the morning, and Jon gave Varro the last confirmation.

No Lorathi does anything for just one purpose, but that purpose is clear.

“You planned to leave the keep before she gave me my name, before I remembered what I was,” he says.

The primary purpose of the planned “excursion” is to get the renegade away from the house before he is executed. Faceless Men have no laws, but there *is* custom, born of the nature of blood-magic, the magic all Faceless Men are bound with.

No renegade is killed within the god’s house.
The god resides in Winterfell at the moment; a weirwood grows within the walls of the castle. His consort holds right to the land by blood and bone; her dead lie sleeping in the crypts below.

Hallowed ground.

Winterfell will absorb the residue of the blood that spills upon it; the slave-pits of Valyria echoed with blood, the ground was wet with souls.

Death is inevitable, the rightful deaths of men in their time and out of it, that is part of nature, it has no power to change nature. Even the death of a king, if not perverted for use of a sorcerer, is a natural thing.

But a Faceless Man is a thing outside nature, outside the stream of time.

Two such have died within the House of Black and White, their deaths voted upon the asking of it, one for a madness of the mind that was identified too late, one for a crippling of the body from which there was no recovery. Their names are known, their faces are part of all that die at the pool.

They left something of themselves. An imprint.

Only the Lorathi speak of this, but the cell where the first was given the gift is the one where no nightmare comes upon those that wear a death-mask. When a brother needs to wear a particularly vicious mask, he is given that cell to sleep in, and his sleep is as undisturbed as any other dead man’s. The Braavosi avoid the topic--apparently the cell has good airflow, according to Zural. Braavosi still ask to sleep there, from time to time.

The second Faceless Man who died was given a gift in the Waif’s infirmary, by her hand. Varro has not seen this--one doesn’t poison the well--but it is said that if the Waif is cut, her skin closes as one watches.

A renegade of the order is a dangerous thing.

A renegade with the blood of two gods in his veins, steeped in the blood of other renegades?

Varro needs to be taken very far from Winterfell before he is killed. Jaqen was already planning for it. Which means Jaqen was planning to give him his name before the dream ever started.

“You should talk to your bride more,” Varro adds. “Between you and Zural…” he shakes his head.

“The plan,” says Jaqen quietly, “was to ask your permission to give you your name. The morning after.”

After Daorys was bound to you by more than the bonds of brotherhood and duty? When he became a sick thing, dangling after that which could never be his?

Varro’s jaws clench.

Do you know me not at all, Jaqen? I chose to serve, in the midst of the fear that crowded out all other thoughts, in the House surrounded by enemies in grey on all sides, I chose to serve. What more binding was needed?

It worked, though. Only now it’s Varro dangling after the thing that he can never have.

All very nice, the “plan”, asking for “permission”. Very Lorathi. On the whole, Varro thinks he prefers the honesty of Arya’s gift-giving.
Wanted me for me, in that moment.

Bitterness is a distraction. Want is a distraction.

Focus.

“Why did you need to give me my name?” he asks. A small hope: Bran dreamed, or Ambraysis dreamed, the nature of the trap--that my name would undo it.

“I need your help,” says Jaqen simply.

The world shifts.

But Jaqen does not speak further.

“I am not Arya Stark,” says Varro. To draw half-formed insight from the air around me and weave the impossible into being. I fucking need information, Jaqen, a hint, a fucking omen cast in bones, give me something.

“I am turning into the Great Other,” says the god. “Or I always was. I don’t know.”

And the world shifts yet again.

Varro lets out a long breath. “Without killing Jon Stark?” he asks.

“The Prince that was Promised is a new thing,” says Jaqen, studying the darkness around Him. “Grafted onto the prophecy after the fall of Valyria. The original prophecy is as old as the last Long Night, perhaps older, Bran cannot see. All that Asshai tries to do is control the timing of it--the killing of Jon Stark, this trap laid in you. They try to choose how quickly things come to a head.”

When fighting an opponent with equal or greater skill than yourself, you can control either the speed at which it ends, or who ends it.

The sorcerers of Asshai are not swordsmen, to know this truth. Blood-priests and blood-mages have to be strategists by nature--they will fail each time they turn their arts to the tactical.

“The Long Night started but a few moons ago, it is nowhere near its end,” says Jaqen. “According to the original prophecy of Azor Ahai, what bits of it Bran has gathered through time for me, my reign is to be a long one, and it has only just begun.”

“A long game,” says Varro softly. “And you get to pick the ending?”

Jaqen shrugs.

“What do you want the end to be?” asks Varro.

“I want to stop playing,” says Jaqen.

The world grows warm and cold by turns; he cannot stop the tremor in his hands. “You didn’t wake just a renegade. You woke an executioner.”

“That was the old plan,” says Jaqen.

“You’re shit at tactics too, aren’t you?” asks Varro. He snorts. “I am entirely redundant--just tell her what you really want and she’ll tear you limb from limb without being asked.”
He can feel Jaqen grinning. “And then resurrect me just so she can do it again.”

Varro exhales. “Half-baked information, Lord of Dreams. You should talk to your wife more.”

“The other side of it,” says Jaqen, ignoring Varro’s very reasonable advice, “was the greater possibility—that Daorys would ask for mercy. Every man has a breaking point—I knew I would not be able to say no. *Can* say no to you, you’re a renegade. Can’t do that to one who believes he is a brother. Daorys would have died without ever knowing your name. If that came to pass, it would have been better for her not to know.”

Yet another thing you would carry in silence?

“The House severing itself from me,” says Jaqen, “there are obvious causes, of course. Stupidity, on all our parts. But I cannot be the Great “Other”, by definition on the outside, the pariah, if I am something to someone—a brother, something on the inside.” His mouth twists. “And so I am cast out—invaliding this particular vote does not invalidate the opinions of the eighty-four.”

Varro’s nostrils flare; cold rage licks at his veins.

*Traitors and ingrates all; slaughter all of them; paint the walls of the House with their blood.*

“I would ask the Wind to help me take the dreaming to Braavos,” continues Jaqen. “I would make my case before my brothers, ask for inclusion again. But I do not know what the case is.”

Varro bows his head. “Let me think on it,” he says. “And talk to your fucking wife, Jaqen, she wouldn’t have been mucking about in the stillroom if she’d known.” He looks up, and he knows the anger shows on his face, but he doesn’t care. “And you didn’t need to dream with me. What the fuck was the purpose in you persuading her to do *that* with a renegade?”

Jaqen studies him. “*She* persuaded *me* ,” he says quietly.

Varro stops breathing.

“Not wise, to counter the instinct of a god,” says Jaqen.

*The Wind caused the dreaming. The Wind only knows how to act through cruelty.*


*Done is done. Let it go.*

And her verse, *Jaqen’s verse, it returns to him. Let there be no want for wish-fulfilment...bit by bit the lie in us withers, for want of wish fulfilment.*

He bows his head.

“You’re going to war,” he says to the god.

“One way or another.”

“Need you a soldier?” he asks. “The bond’s broken, got nothing to give you, no tether of a god’s making to hold me to you. She reminded me I’m no longer a Faceless Man, so word’s not good anymore. But trade will hold.”

A half-smile upon Jaqen’s face. “Give me a verse,” says the god, “and I will allow you to serve.”
Varro gives it serious consideration.

“But you had something else in mind,” says Jaqen.

Take me to your bed again, you and her, a thousand years of unquestioning service for every night you give me.

“Take from me a formal oath,” says Varro. “Armsman’s oath, blood rider’s oath, fucking drown me in the bathtub and call me a priest. So I know what is expected of me, what I can and cannot do. A framework. This uncertainty is madness-making in the works.”

Jaqen looks at him for a while. “People swear to the god,” He says. “They drown themselves, they enter temples—theirs to do with their lives what they want. But I have never taken a subordinate, only brothers.”

Varro nods. There is no precedent—Faceless Men ‘belong’ to the god as a Stark belongs to the North; the god belongs to Faceless Men as the North belongs to the Starks. Jaqen, that of the god that is extruded into the world as a material reality, He’s a Faceless Man as well. His Lich-King is a brother, His Champion is a brother.

“What about her?” he asks. “Her sister took an armsman direct in Sandor.”

“We will have to think on it,” says Jaqen. “In the meantime, let us play a game.”

Varro raises an eyebrow at the god.

“Let us pretend you are a renegade pretending to be a Faceless Man,” says Jaqen. “That has precedent,” He points out gently.

Varro’s eyes prick. He looks down. “And what will it take for me to buy into that game?” he asks.

“Choose an ante,” says Jaqen.

“I have a verse I found,” says Varro. Didn’t know what it meant, why it rang in me the first time I read it. Never wanted to give it to you, just... He lowers his head. “So then send me to Braavos. The vote’s your thing to deal with, yours and hers—I don’t do politics, I do renegades. They don’t know I’m what I am, won’t see me coming. I’ll find which ones actually turned from you—eighty-four is nonsense, it’s a handful at most.”

“You won’t make it past Ragman’s Harbor without dying,” says Jaqen. “The tumors like your heart for some reason.”

Varro sighs. “Fitting,” he says. Then he looks to Jaqen. “Wine will wait—I’ve explained what happened to Jon, but you have to handle Sansa yourself, and quickly.”

Both of Jaqen’s eyebrows rise. “Quickly?”

Varro’s mouth twists. “Not balanced, bringing Samwell Tarly into the game, and leaving her out of it. She wouldn’t have been open to Zural’s half-baked madness if she’d known who you were, she’d have called for you at the first sign of erratic behaviour. Told her exactly what to ask you—didn’t leave you a choice, Many-Faced God.”

“And in what ‘framework’ did you make this decision for me?” Jaqen’s voice has gone carefully soft.
“You commanded me to ‘handle it’. Was still playing Faceless Man for Zural and Sansa.”

Jaqen slumps. “Better go deal with it then.”

“Take Jon along to keep you honest,” says Varro. “Or you’ll leave her with another incarnation of the rapist guildmaster-cannibal cult-leader maybe, or necrophiliac high-septon.”

Jaqen glares at Varro. Not much heat to it.

“ _You’d _better get inside,” says the god. His brow furrows. “Or do you not feel the cold anymore?”

“Feel it,” says Varro, straightening. “Decided not to care.”

**SANSA**

She’s worked her way through the long-stemmed glasses, and is onto the snifters now. Jon and Jaqen, side by side, ask leave to enter her bower.

* Cautious, after they heard the glass breaking from down below.

She calls for them to enter. And then she picks up the snifter and throws it at the stone wall. She’s trying to hit the part Daorys pulverized with his fist.

The snifter hits, a little off-center. One part of it shatters; the rest shatters when it hits the floor.

“Heard you told Sandor to leave,” says Jon.

“Sandor can go fuck himself,” says Sansa.

“Right.”

She looks down at the table. There’s eight more snifters left, then only the small punch-glasses. The glassware her mother had brought from Riverrun, used to entertain Southern guests. The heavy earthenware and stone goblets, the mead-horns of the North, they had not been to Catelyn Tully’s taste.

“We can’t afford this,” she mutters. Then she picks up one of the punch glasses, and throws it. It shatters into a thousand shards. *Most _excellent--she thinks she’s found the perfect throwing glasses.*

She hears Jon and Jaqen turn around and leave.

She doesn’t care.

They return a short while later, just as she’s run out of the punch glasses. They carry a crate apiece, and they put it down on the table.

All the straight tumblers from the upper salon.

“Forgive me,” says Jaqen, “for what I brought into your house.”

She looks up. His eyes are shadowed, dark circles under them like bruises.

“You brought us Arya,” she says. She turns away. “It is us that should ask for forgiveness, for what fuel we may have provided for the razing of your house.”
What does he mean to do about it? Will he fight for his guild? Or stay here, Stark in all but name?

“Sweet sister,” says Jaqen gently, “not even a kernel of it can be laid at your door. Brought it upon myself. Not going to let it stand, of course.” He hesitates. “Zural will keep to the envoy work; he serves the House of Black and White still, just not me.”

Is that a slip? Or an invitation? Zural does not serve the god anymore.

“Are you the Many-Faced God?” she asks.

“I am,” he replies.

She’s had time to think on it, in the half-watch since Daorys and Arya left. First she thought it might be a title--The Holder of the Skeleton Key, the Ratchet, the Watcher Above the Waves, Him of the Many Faces...Braavos guildmasters get all the best titles.

But that doesn’t fit with the Lorathi’s supposed religiosity. The God-Emperor of Yi Ti and God-Empress of Leng--nobody worships them.

The last of the punch glasses hits the wall, dead center on the depression in the stone.

What does fit is the Great Shepherd--the lamb-god of the Lhazareen. The Lhazareen pick a likely candidate as a child when the old one dies, believe the god reincarnated in a new body. The hunt for the child can take a long time, up to seven years, but at the end of it they have a new god.

Religion is a strange creature.

Two straight tumblers, in quick succession. They’re heavier--she has to throw them harder, or they hit the wall near the floor and don’t shatter quite so nicely.

But “Many Faced God” makes perfect sense. Each new child the House of Black and White picks is a new face of their god. Which also explains why Jaqen ascended to leadership so young, fled responsibility, why he places so much importance on men having a choice--he never had one.

There is magic, powerful magic, bound into it.

“You are a man. You had a mother.”

“Yes.”

If they call him a god, though he be but a man, does it make it less of a real thing?

Men are kings because other men make them so. Nothing intrinsic to a king, save the blood, and that’s as much a fiction as Jon’s “Stark”.

But that explains another thing--the House of Black and White did something stupid. They offered immunity to Greyjoy kings, long before Jaqen’s time--he doesn’t like it, though he abides by it. Blame it on the Many-Faced God as the ‘Drowned God’, and you don’t have to explain anything about the working of the guild.

Convenient.

She grins a little. “What’s the name for the sister-by-marriage of a god?” she asks.

Jaqen’s brow furrows a bit, as if he’s trying to figure out what is going on in her head. “Sansa Stark, as far as I’m aware,” he says.
“You knew?” she asks Jon.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the two men exchange a look.

“Yes,” says Jon. “At the Wall.”

A lot happened at the Wall.

“Should have told me,” she says. “It would have reframed my entire interaction with Zural. If Jon knew, obviously Zural thought you had told me, and that I opposed you. It gave him false confidence to move ahead with his plots—if I had known, I wouldn’t have agreed with him so readily whenever he disparaged the Many-Faced God.”

Wouldn’t have sided with Zural, all the anti-Lorathi sentiment, if I’d known that the Lorathi Braavosi divide was between a magic and an anti-magic faction, like in the Citadel.

“I’m not sure Zural truly was disparaging me quite that much,” says Jaqen. “But he would have left his words open to interpretation. The Braavosi believe Jaqen H’ghar is a man that is playing at being a god, and the Lorathi believe that a god is pretending to be Jaqen H’ghar.”

“But for all practical purposes,” she says, finally turning to face him. “You are the Many-Faced God.”

“Practical and impractical,” says Jaqen, a bit of a smirk on his face.

“I thought the death-god was supposed to be a real god,” she says, idly turning glasses this way and that. “Hate real gods. They’re not real.”

“Jaqen’s real,” offers Jon, hesitant.

“Sansa,” says Jaqen quietly. “There is more I would tell you.”

She looks up.

The breath catches in her lungs.

His eyes are black, entirely black, no whites or irises to them at all.

Powerful magic.

“Interesting,” she says.

Jon chokes.

“Bran’s go all white,” she adds, ignoring Jon’s behaviour. “What can you do with the black ones?”

Jaqen looks unsettled. “I don’t do anything with them,” he says, a bit sheepish. “They just are. Um,” he turns to Jon, looking for something, but Jon is doubled over with laughter, slapping his thighs. Jaqen runs a hand through his hair. “I can do other things,” he offers.

Real gods don’t abide mockery--Sparrows tortured people that mocked the gods.

“Real gods don’t care what happens to a girl-child trapped in the middle of an enemy encampment,” she says, and picks up a glass. “Real gods don’t care enough to exact vengeance.” She punctuates each statement with a glass shattering against the wall. “Real gods don’t accept service, they certainly don’t serve anyone else. Real gods are useless.”
“But I’m useful?” asks Jaqen.

“You brought me more glasses,” she points out.

“I’ll take what I can get,” she hears him mutter. He looks up, and it feels like there some lightening of his mien. “You’re right,” he says. “Should have told you awhile back.”

“Take the second crate away, Jon,” she says, “or I’ll break them all.”

Jon’s laughter has subsided to a grin. “Wine never complained if it was drunk out of tin cups,” he says, philosophical. “Why should we?”

She sees Jaqen snag a glass out of the create, start to pour from the bottle.

“It’s poisoned,” she reminds him.

“I’m a god,” he says, very dry. “I’ll manage.”

VARRO

He’s picked the fourth floor of a slender tower in the southwestern part of the keep. Empty, since the Kingsmoot ended; House Mormont was quartered here. The rooms are all still appointed, though dusty.

Another large casement window of a sparse sitting room, no cushion to lean upon. The bottles of wine are stacked beside him, waiting.

Jaqen staggers as he comes in.

“Drunk already?” asks Varro. And then he sees the open bottle Jaqen carries in his hand.

Not wine. Heartsbane.

He reaches for it, and Jaqen quietly hands it over, seats Himself at the casement across from Varro. Varro takes a swig, no more, puts the bottle aside.

Jaqen sighs. “Sansa is not in a listening mood.” He chuckles a bit. “Braavosi, in all but facelessness--Zural’s influence is going to be a lasting one. She takes a single thought and spins it into a tapestry inside her head.”

“It will pass,” says Varro. “Listening, closely and accurately, it’s is a survivor’s habit. It’ll return.”

Jaqen reaches across Varro.

Close. Far too close.

The god picks up one of the bottles Varro’s brought, fiddles in His pocket for a thin-bladed knife. Fiddles with the binding until He can shimmy the knife into the cork and twist it out.

“Couldn’t find glasses,” says Varro.

Jaqen snorts. “It’s going to be tin cups for a while.” He raises the bottle to his lips, takes a swig. Then He passes it to Varro.

Varro looks down at the mouth of the bottle. It glistens, where Jaqen has drunk from it.
They’ve done this before, of course, what assassin carries around wine-glasses? But there is an awareness to it now he cannot escape, it arcs upon his skin.

Varro touches the bottle to his lips, his eyes on Jaqen.

Jaqen’s watching him.

*I’m not the only one the dream lingers for?*

Desire is hard to misinterpret. It’s not what Varro needs, but, well, the god’s price is always “take what you can get.”

He puts down the bottle, his eyes still on Jaqen. “A memory,” he says. “Scattered, like the others, but it reformed itself through the years somehow.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“What’s left undone,” says Varro quietly. He’s closer now, he can taste the wine and the bitter tang of Heartsbane upon Jaqen’s breath.

“As I recall,” says Jaqen, “you turned around and left before it ever got this far.”

“Realized I had a better chance of taking you,” whispers Varro, “with poison on the the knife.” And he closes the distance between them, his lips upon Jaqen’s. He kisses Jaqen’s mouth, familiar, the scrape of stubble against his jaw. *Everything* is real, the heartbeat under his, the shape of the mouth, he takes Jaqen’s upper lip between his, sucks on it, licks at the corner of His mouth; the saliva that coats Jaqen’s lips is *his*.

He opens his eyes, to gauge the reaction.

Jaqen is unreadable; His pupils are dark, there is desire--the body responds. But does *Jaqen*? The eyes Varro’s locked on are only found on one man. A momentary thought: *could be her, not Him.*

Paranoia has its uses. Varro could switch perspectives halfway through, convince himself it *is* her.

*Get the both of them.*

He grins.


Varro pulls away, groping for some retort.

And then Jaqen is upon him, pressing him into the casement wall. Varro’s lips part under the heat of His mouth, and Jaqen’s tongue strokes along his.

Someone groans.

Heat, and light, and the world in his veins; the hunger rises, turns all to blood-ash in its path.

Some change in the air, some shift in Jaqen, the god pulls back, allows Varro to draw breath into his lungs again. His eyes refuse to focus.

*No thinking. Huh. Old man should have just called for Jaqen, made him kiss me instead of all that focus-on-the-pain shit.*
Jaqen’s grinning at him.

Varro wipes the side of his mouth with his thumb, runs his tongue over his teeth.

*You are incredible.*

“Practice,” says Jaqen.

*Arya.*

Varro draws back. Jaqen reaches out, grabs Varro’s elbow, pulls him closer. Jaqen’s left hand closes about Varro’s wrist.

The god sees the wince.

He looks down, pushes up the sleeve of Varro’s shirt. Sees the air, the line of blood underneath.

Jaqen’s nostrils flare. He stands, dragging Varro up with him. “What is she doing?”

“Wind’s playing with me,” he says. “Leave it, Jaqen, between me and her.”

“I get a mantle, you get manacles?” He murmurs. “*That* feels imbalanced.”

Varro presses himself against Jaqen; they are of a height, he can feel Jaqen growing hard against him. His teeth graze the skin at the base of Jaqen’s neck.

“Balance me, then,” he whispers.

Jaqen’s busy opening Varro’s shirt-ties and then His hands slide under it, lift it up off Varro’s head. The shirt tangles in his arms, he draws it off, casts it aside, reaches for Jaqen’s belt. He walks backwards, pulling Jaqen along with him, through the doors. There was a bed in one of these rooms, he saw it; hard to tell in the darkness, with Jaqen’s hands over him, stroking along his shoulders, where the fuck the bed’s supposed to be.

*Oh, look. The bed.*

He sits at the edge of it, then crawls backwards, watching.

Jaqen undoes His belt, lowers his britches, his smallclothes. His hardness springs free of its confines, and Varro’s eyes are locked on it.

Slowly, provocatively, Varro unbuckles his own belt; Jaqen doesn’t wait for Varro to finish his game, the god grabs the legs, pulls the britches off. Balls them up, throws them over to the far side of the bed.

Varro grins.

*Not in the mood to be patient.*

Then again, given the state of his own manhood--Jaqen’s eyes are on it, makes Varro’s cock throb harder, almost unbearably hard, the tip leaking fluid--patience is overrated.

Their mouths meet again and Jaqen’s mouth tastes like tea and the baths in the House, always too warm for comfort until you are immersed in them: gentle, far too gentle for what Jaqen keeps leashed inside Himself.
Varro’s sense of time warps.

Each motion is slow, every breath of air lasts forever and yet the moments between an action and its reaction are split, and he loses the flow of time as he draws Jaqen’s shirt off His shoulders. Varro closes his eyes, his cock begs for attention; he lets it beg, his hands are not sated; they roam over Jaqen’s back, His sides, up again until his fingers are fisted in Jaqen’s hair.

Jaqen’s mouth is licking a trail down Varro’s chest, the heat of His mouth leaving wet, swiftly-cooling skin in its wake and the contrast almost strains Varro’s control. Jaqen reaches his hip, small kisses, circling to the front.

Further. Just a little…

Varro thrusts his hips upwards, straining to make contact with something, anything. Jaqen pulls away.

He opens his eyes; the room is dark. Jaqen’s searching for something in His discarded shirt, he…

Oh. Came prepared, did you?

Jaqen returns, the bed shifts, sinks a bit under His weight, and Varro moves, slides until he lies under Jaqen again, the god’s mouth hot over his.

He hears Jaqen slick Himself.

He shifts, angles his hips, feels something pressing against his entrance. He relaxes, presses down. Groans, as Jaqen slides a finger inside him, slow, torturous.

He pushes himself down further, pulls back, pushes again. Jaqen gets the message, He pulls His finger out of Varro’s ass. Shifts His hips. And then something larger, harder, presses against him.

Varro relaxes entirely, his arms around Jaqen’s neck, drawing the god closer.

Everything.

Jaqen takes what is offered.

His cock feels like it will split Varro in half, but it doesn’t it’s stretching him even as He pushes himself inside, deeper, till Jaqen’s buried to the hilt in him.

Varro’s hardness is trapped between them, it lies against the hard planes of his stomach and Jaqen’s, surrounded by heat.

Jaqen pulls back, not all the way, just far enough to make Varro exert effort not to plead.

Varro’s right hand unwinds itself from around Jaqen’s neck, he reaches out, scrabbling for the things in the pockets of his britches, somewhere at the right of the bed.

Jaqen pushes back in; they find a rhythm between themselves, Varro works his muscles, clenching and releasing by turns, milking Jaqen’s cock as a reward every time the god buries himself inside Varro.

Jaqen is gasping, their breaths out of sync as Varro gains control of the sensations gripping him, cresting through him like waves with every thrust, rising like a tide at the base of his cock, dispersing through him like the blue flame that burns at the leading edge of an oilfire on the surface of the sea.
His hips move with each wave, making Jaqen’s cock saw across the divide, over and over.

“You,” says Jaqen, his voice something between an exhalation and a groan, “are incredible.”

*Practice.*

He knows every response, every impulse, every trigger of Jaqen’s body, in a thousand variations, he knows the map of Jaqen’s veins, his arteries.

His questing fingers find the hilt of a knife; the little vial of ointment is just beyond it. *If you like this, Jaqen, going show you the other side, fuck you into a delirium of…*

Jaqen’s left hand moves, traps Varro’s wrist against the bed.

“You think I don’t follow your movements?” asks Jaqen, his thrusts harder, an edge to them that shatters the illusion of gentleness. “You don’t think I keep appraised of the rumors around you, of what you foment in my House?”

*You follow my movements.*

Varro arches, his cock is weeping, he rubs it against the hard planes of Jaqen’s torso. Slow, deliberate, he impales himself onto Jaqen and then pulls back.

“Nobody ever talks,” says Jaqen, and his cock feels like a bar of iron inside Varro. “Many rumors, nothing concrete, but one thing’s always the same--you always ask for a face.”

Varro’s eyes open.

*Already told you that.*

Jaqen’s left hand reaches out, places the hilt of Varro’s knife square in his palm.

“And the cell is covered in blood by the time you’re done playing,” says Jaqen quietly.

*So He knows all of it.*

Varro grins. “It’s not *necessary*, Jaqen, this…”

*This.*

The feel of it, overwhelming, *Him* and not someone wearing the face, it’s enough, more than enough. Varro raises his head, tries to find the god’s lips again.

Jaqen lifts Varro’s right hand, the hand holding the knife, and He draws it in, between their chests; the steel of the blade is cold, cold against Varro’s skin.

Varro’s eyes are closed, his head thrown back. Every nerve-ending at the tip of his cock, around his stretched entrance, deep inside him, every nerve arcs, floods him with sensation. He hears Jaqen, doesn’t reply. Just *feels*, he lives at tip of those thousands of nerves pulsing with the intensity of it.

Nothing has ever felt this good before.

*Convinced my lord, convinced.*

His hand closes about the knife-hilt of its own accord.
“The broken ritual,” says Jaqen. “Is it renegades? Or did that end when you became a Lorathi? Some loop you must complete, over and over and over again, but you never find quite the right thing to put on the altar, and so you stop short of killing them. Is that the ritual?”

What?

Varro’s eyes fly open. “Jaqen,” he says, “that’s abs--”

“Me,” interrupts Jaqen, “I am the right thing, the only thing you can use to finish it.” Jaqen twists Varro’s wrist, the knife is upright between them now, Varro gripping the handle. The tip rests against Jaqen’s breast-bone. “Finish it,” commands Jaqen.

So that is what this is about?

Varro licks his lips. “The problem with rumors,” he says, and twists his wrist out of Jaqen’s grasp, reverses the blade in the process, “is that they always get the details wrong.”

Truth.

Jaqen stops moving.

No, you don’t get to stop now.

Varro raises his upper body; the tip of the blade presses into him, a trickle of warm blood, familiar, he feels it well out of him and trace a path around the side of his chest. His mouth closes on Jaqen’s.

Blade always points away from you, my lord.

Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow, there is nothing left between them but sorrow, and Varro wraps his legs around Jaqen, pulls him in. Slowly, Jaqen moves in him again.

Varro opens his eyes.

Shadows are twisting, screaming into the air around him and he pulls himself up onto the blade of the knife.

Burning.

He knows from the feel of it he’s sliced through skin and muscle.

I am no one.

Jaqen’s got a very firm grip on Varro’s wrist, he won’t let Varro rotate the knife; the pain is...starting to get on the far side of controllable. Every man has a limit, and the limit to all will is time. Every man can be broken.

The god’s eyes are rapt, focused on him.

Varro smiles, and breaks.

No discipline to this, no control, nothing left but to let the fire consume him, he clenches around the cock in him, this time without intent, and his orgasm sweeps through the drought-stricken field that he is, burning everything in its wake.

He locks his left arm around Jaqen’s neck and Varro pulls himself up further, the knife’s hilt is
trapped against Jaqen’s chest, it’ll leave a bruise.

*Blade always points away from you, Jaqen, and you couldn’t extrapolate that of me? Had nothing but your trust in me to hold me.*

Blade’ll do to sever the tie.

*Finish it.*

The knife slips between Varro’s ribs.

He cannot breathe. Every muscle cramps and he cannot *move*.

Pain is nothing, to the Faceless Man, but breath, breath is everything and he cannot breathe, the shadows are cresting against the roof, his vision dims around the edges; not just darkness in the room, there is a film over his eyes.

He gasps. Air, forced into his lungs.

And Jaqen’s mouth finds his. The knife is torn out of him, and there is blood everywhere, hot, too hot, and Jaqen’s mouth is on him, and the god moves in him still, where the tip of the blade has penetrated there is a wound, an open wound and darkness pours into him through it, darkness seeks and finds every avenue of entrance in him, his mouth, his nose, ears, Jaqen pours into his eyes, into his ass, his cock, into everything.

*Too much.*

**Chapter End Notes**

**tl;dr:**

1. we get Varro's background -- he was an Iron Bank mathematican that gave his life for veneance against traitors of the iron bank that were profiting from slavery
2. Varro is *also* a serial killer, obviously, his victim is *other* serial killers/renegades
3. He's very loyal to Jaqen, he became nameless/locked down his memories to deal with all the bad-head-shit that comes with being a serial killer (paranoia, bloodlust, all the strange, circular thoughts--I'm setting this up as a schzhoid psychopath/borderline personality disorder here)
4. Varro explains stuff to Jon. There's a drinking ritual he does with Jaqen after someone turns renegade--Jaqen goes into a depressive sprial, usually.
5. Arya is suffering withdrawl symptoms from the Blue Pearl
6. Jaqen believes he's turning into the Great Other--that *this* is the overarching reason why the HBW is turning away from him--finding excuses to mistrust Jaqen, etc.
7. Jaqen tells Sansa he's MFG. She doesn't *quite* get it. A discussion in a comment about this, but god will go halfway, he won't go around *proving* himself to people, he doesn't need worshippers. she knows as much as she wants to know. not the god's job to convert an atheist, he gives her the truth and leaves it.
8. Varro and Jaqen have sex. Jaqen apparently knows about Varro's bloodplay fetish, and that Varro asks for Jaqen's face. Jaqen believes it's because Varro is trying to act out his original desire, i.e. "kill jaqen H'ghar". But Jaqen gets the details wrong--the
knife is for cutting Varro, not Jaqen. Jaqen kills Varro.

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muahahah. um. yes.

do let me know what you think :)
ARYA

She wakes to the Wind telling her something.

*Blood*, says the Wind, the part of it that is wound around Varro’s wrists. *That* she knows, she’s been smelling it, citrus and bergamot and copper, since he played his little game.

*Blood*, says the Wind again. The taste of it is in the air, a sharp bite of copper; not enough, she’s too far away, to be able to read what else could be in it with her warg senses.

*Sex*, says the Wind. Heaving breath, slick, skin-on-skin.

She swings her legs around the side of the bed, shoves her feet into short boots and races out the door of her chamber. In her hurry, she almost collides with one of the chambermaids--one of Varro’s.

The woman gives Arya a very smug look.

She saw the fight between the two of them earlier. Read the body-language, since the words were Braavosi. The story will be all around the keep, then.

*Blood and sex*, whispers the Wind.

He had promised retaliation.

*Please, please, please let it be Jaqen, not someone he’s plucked from the kitchens to try to hurt me.*

Her feet have led her to the base of the Southwestern Tower, empty since the last of the lords and their retinues left after the moot.

As she climbs the stairs, the darkness that permeates the air grows more concentrated up above, more concentrated than it is in *her*. And that part of His favor that rests under her breastbone, it undulates, entwines itself with the Wind; it *plays*.

She sags in relief against the wall for a moment.

*Jaqen.*

Sex, apparently.

The stairwell is entirely too warm.
She climbs.

They are behind the closed doors of a bedchamber on the fourth level. Her lips are dry; Jaqen knows she’s here, of course.

She pushes open the door, even as the Wind suddenly starts screaming: blood blood blood

The chamber is entirely dark, cold, and Jaqen’s on the bed, Varro under him; she rushes to the side of the bed--there’s a knife imbedded in Varro’s chest, there’s blood welling around it.

She pours the wind into Varro’s lungs, gives him his breath until he is drowning in it.

Too late.

Jaqen’s pulled the knife out of Varro’s chest, His mouth closing upon the corpse’s. She trembles, then, as she sees Jaqen’s face shift, all the darkness in His eyes rising up from the ground around them, lying in thick coils around the bed, snaking its way into Varro.

Ah.

The darkness, the shadows snarling against the walls have subsided. It is a manifestation of the god’s power she has not seen before, but then, she’s never seen a Faceless Man killed before either. There was something to the shadows...they smelled like Jaqen to her warg senses, crowded out every other smell in the room.

He pulls his spent cock out of Varro, rocks back upon His heels.

“Wind tried to save him,” says the god. “Why?”

“An accident,” she says. “He was trying to say something. Thought I’d give him some breath, so he could actually say it. But it was too late.”

The god sighs. He turns and she sees his chest is covered in blood; He tears a sleeve off a shirt lying on the bed, cleans himself.

Blood is hard to clean off.

She walks forward, runs her fingertips over His collarbone, His shoulders.

“It answers the question, in case you doubted,” he says, grim. “Definitely a renegade--memories didn’t cascade.”

Her jaw clenches. “I had hoped,” she says.

“Is that why you didn’t stop me?” He asks.

“No,” she says, “no,” and she surrounds him in a blanket of air, kisses him. Tastes blood, tastes the scent of Varro, citrus, upon His lips. “No more anger—you gave it all to him. Not allowed to have any for yourself anymore.”

He kisses back, desperate sorrow and hunger. He wears no mask; the face is the face she knows as Jaqen H’ghar.

Flesh is an illusion.
Behind the illusion, she can see it in His eyes, one of the thing she saw in Him when they walked hand-in-hand within the darkness. A pinwheel of a thousand, thousand stars; it spins. And one by one the stars go out as the darkness consumes them.

A dark smile twists at her face; a moment only, when Arya Stark and no one and the Wind are one and the same. Desire, a towering wave held in abeyance above their heads, it crashes over her; her legs tremble.

_This is what I have wedded._

“What do you see, my storm, when you look at me so?” He asks.

She smiles, and says nothing.

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Varro’s not out long; he gasps, and the Wind rushes to support his frame, even as Jaqen kneels beside him. His eyes are wide, burst blood-vessels in each of them, a sclera of blood around his irises. He takes large gulps of air, each ending with something between a sob and a strangled moan.

She kneels at his other side, heedless of the blood on the bed, not touching him.

Jaqen’s hand on his chest seems to calm him. Bit by bit the panic retreats, and he falls back down, breathes normally. His teeth start chattering; even the Wind’s insulation isn’t sufficient to counteract the blood-loss and the chill.

Jaqen helps him sit up, lean against the headboard, even as she finds his clothes. Shaking, Varro draws his shirt, then his trews back on. Then she drapes one of the blankets around his shoulder like a makeshift huddle.

“It didn’t work,” says Jaqen, shock and despair weaving a barbed choke-chain about his voice.

“No,” Varro croaks, then clears his throat. “Of course not.” His voice stabilizes to something level, dismissive. It is costing him, there is a tremor in his hands. The tremor travels upwards, and into his throat, it comes out in stuttered breath. “Sometimes the sex is just about the sex, Jaqen. A stupid _fantasy_, a desire to relive the making of me, not _redo_ it--pain, pleasure, sensation. _Not dying or killing_. Didn’t remember the pool--created a fucking image out of lust and other people’s memories, and you take it for a _bona fide_ blood ritual? I am _not_ a mage, I can’t _think_ like a mage, can’t think like you do to bind impossible things to blood and bone on fucking instinct.” His mouth finally twists, and the bitterness comes out. “And you showed it to her.” Varro’s gaze, cold, angry, finally meets Arya’s. “The one fucking thing I kept from her and you made her watch.”

It is difficult to make the Wind understand the concept of ‘time and place’, but not impossible.

Arya Stark shrugs. “I fucked a Valyrian on my maiden night,” she says. “A dead Valyrian, no less. Did read poetry to him while I did, so there’s that, at least.”

“I thought you _had_ figured something I couldn’t,” says Jaqen. He runs a hand through his Hair, leaves wet upon his forehead, the red lost in the darkness. “Thought the thing _I’d_ been circling--an end to _me_ was a fit to it--that you would kill me, and take me into you as I take Faceless Men. Wind’s favor in me, my body would die, but then I’d come back.”

_The thing I’d been circling._
“Come back as what, Jaqen?” she snarls.

“I’ve been hunting renegades for centuries.” Varro’s turn to show his teeth, cold. “You used it, you knew what I was, and bed-play has nothing to do with it. What chain of reason did you follow, oh great god of assassins, that you thought baring your breast to my blade would do anything other than destroy me?”

Jaqen closes his eyes, leans back against a bedpost. “There is more than one, sometimes,” he says. “If Arya had turned…”

*Three forms to the compulsion, one for each name?* The Wind whispers the names of the might-have-beens to Arya, the Pie-Maker with an apron, the Avenger with a poisoned foil, the Angel of Mercy with a cup of sleep.

“Purge ended when I killed the Holder as I wore your face,” says Jaqen. “Thought the feeding of the primary compulsion was keeping the other, the one for the guildmaster, submerged.”

Varro looks torn, between wanting to strangle Jaqen and wanting to weep. “Blade always points the other way, Jaqen,” he says, weary. “Even in the circling thoughts.”

“Kill the renegade,” she whispers, “by proxy, since you didn’t remember jack shit.”

Varro says nothing.

“I learned something from Ambraysis,” she says. “What small part of him I can hold in my mind.”

Jaqen opens his eyes. “I would understand,” he offers.

“Spells crafted from blood magic are always a distal cause of a thing,” she says. “The blood builds a bridge, a chain of causality, links events together to achieve an aim. The proximate cause is always something material. A sorcerer will burn blood to curse his enemy, and one thing will lead to another, and the enemy’s wife may poison him because she discovers he has a mistress. Blood magic finds the easiest path, the best excuse. They bespelled you in Asshai, Varro, but the deathwish was always yours.”

Varro nods. “Figured that, this morning. Just another form of the ‘primary’. A renegade cannot be unmade, no matter how many times you kill him. No weasel-words like the Night’s Watch, ‘till death release me’.”

“Didn’t… Forgive me,” says Jaqen.

Varro’s mouth twists. “Only desperation again. A dutiful lord’s attempts to restore his servant, no matter what the cost. So nothing was given to me, nothing was taken from me. All balanced. What is there to forgive?”

Jaqen turns to her, eyes a little panicked: *no, no that wasn’t it, fix it Arya.*

Her jaw clenches: *fix it yourself.*

Perfect fucking mirrors, Varro and Jaqen, two fools with a deathwish, each trying to get the other to kill him. While fucking, apparently.

“The one thing all the thousand nightmares of Asshai couldn’t accomplish,” says Varro, his eyes fixed upon the darkness at the far end of the room, “you two did with a single dream. You broke me into pieces and cast the pieces into the wind.” He looks to Jaqen, then her. “I am sick with
longing,” he says, “and that, ” he points to the bloodstain on the bed, “can never sate it.”

“Nothing but a dream,” she snaps. “You are the same creature you were before and after it--you remembered some things, well and good, but nothing was taken from you.”

“Well and good?” he says. “I am in love with you.”

Her chest constricts, a sudden rush of heightened alertness in her limbs, the curve of her spine. Her eyes are wide, locked with his, and he reads her and a twisted smile pulls at one side of his face.

“I am not a thing to be taken to your bed out of pity,” he says. “No one--Daorys -- he would have accepted it, reveled in it like the pathetically grateful creature that he was, a product of that peculiar brainwashing the Lorathi practice on themselves. Varro Massag might have taken it, took it tonight, that Braavosi optimism that thinks it can rename ‘lust’ to ‘love’ if the cock is given enough exercise. But I am me, and you cannot give me what I want, even if you wanted to. The one framework, the one place where a common man, a nothing can demand equality from gods and expect to receive it is the House of Black and White.” He exhales. “And that is the one place I cannot ever return to.”

_I am in love with you._

The bitterness, the anguish, it washes over her; from Jaqen’s breath, she knows he, too, is fixated on those words.

Varro has looked away, he stares at the ceiling. “You think the Wind is a cruel thing?” he asks softly. “The Wind plays at cruelty, the way some adolescents flirt with melancholy and black verse; they don’t know the despair that makes you weigh your pockets down with rocks and walk into the middle of a river.” His eyes meet hers again. “Would you like to know what made me a renegade?” he asks.

Jaqen’s head snaps up--an answer He wants, a question He’s been avoiding asking.

*Yes.*

And Varro reads the ‘yes’ in both of them.

“A thought,” he says quietly. “A single fucking thought. All that came after--the excision of your face, intent to kill, the action towards Lorathi discipline, those were consequences. The _cause_ of it was a single thought: that Jaqen H’ghar is a hypocrite and a liar, I must repudiate him.”

“I _am_ a hypocrite and a liar,” Jaqen whispers.

Varro grins at the god. “Irony,” he says. “I thought you were the wrong kind of hypocrite and liar. And I am desperately in love you, and her, and all the rocks are buried under the snow and the river’s frozen over.”

“This _was_ desperation, Varro,” says Jaqen quietly. “A lover’s attempts to restore his mirror, no matter what the cost.”

The disbelief in Varro’s eyes, it brims over. She cannot, she cannot sit still and take this.

The Wind dies down entirely, and all is still, inside and outside the keep. And when all that is left is Arya Stark, she crawls over to where the two sit, cross-legged, and climbs into Varro’s lap, her back resting against his chest.
And then Varro’s arms are around her, his face breathing her in; he clutches her to him as a drowning man clutches at a floating branch. His breath comes too fast, his face is buried in the back of her neck, and again he takes in great big gulps of air that sound like sobs, but Varro doesn’t sob. Doesn’t even weep.

“Stop that,” she says.

“Trying,” Varro says. “Give me a moment.”

Jaqen’s eyes are entirely too bright.

“The amount of sentiment in the two of you,” she says fiercely. She clutches his arms to her in turn. Not sentiment--he’s lost blood, his hold might slacken. The smell of blood is nothing new to her; overlain, overpowered by the warg-smelled scent of the two of them.

“How can I fit between you?” he asks.

“Varro,” says Jaqen. “Look at me.”

The habit of obedience is a hard one to break. Varro looks, over her shoulder.

“I have loved you,” says Jaqen, “for two hundred years. I knew why you demanded to be made nameless, I left because I couldn’t bear the seeing of it.”

Varro’s hold loosens; her turn to read him, then.

“I am not a balancing, or a substitution,” she says, “I am not His compensation for the loss of you. The House of Black and White is not Winterfell. Jon Snow is not Robb Stark.”

“You cannot bring Robb Stark back,” says Varro.

“No,” she says. “But Winterfell rebuilds; the broken tower will not be broken for much longer.”

“No Braavosi optimism in me,” says Jaqen. “I mourned you until you faded to a memory and a poem. And then you came to this keep and I got to watch you die again, day by day. And this time, she for whom I would turn all life on this world to dust, she fell in love with you too and I knew, down to the last bitter dregs at the bottom of the cup what lay in store for her if she drank that particular poison. There is nothing you can teach me about the nature of cruelty-- you, at least, got to forget that you were a renegade.”

Varro takes a deep breath, then another. And she can feel him drawing upon something, something that steadies his pulse, evens out the tremor in his voice when he speaks.

“So why the uncertainty?” he asks quietly. “Why didn’t you just say you’re keeping me?”

“You are not a thing, to be kept,” says Jaqen. “We didn’t know what you wanted after the dream, I didn’t know what you would be once you woke up.”

“Jaqen did not make me fit, nor I Him,” she says. “We were not ‘born to be with one another’, we were not foreordained. We each, each made our own fits with the other. We two cannot envision the shape of you, because that is your place, the thing that only you can do, to become what it is you want to be to us.”

Varro sighs, leans back a bit.

“What, speechless?” she asks.
“Say it,” he says; a curious tone, both pleading and command all at once.

She looks to Jaqen: I have to say it? Why me?

Jaqen gives her a narrow-eyed look.

“Jaqen wins,” she says. “I’ve only been in love with you for a sevenday.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow at her.

“Maybe longer,” she mumbles. “You still win, Jaqen, why drag me through it?”

Varro’s arms tighten around her. “Don’t drag her through it,” he murmurs into her shoulder. “Call it a handful of heartbeats, Atthriado’anni, or not, as you please.”

Jaqen rolls his eyes.

She moves off of Varro, realizes now she’s got blood on her. And sex. The thought flashes through her, she feels it in her core, her lower stomach.

Later.

Varro clutches at her. She doesn’t go far, just tugs him down, makes him lie flat, then curls into one side of him. Jaqen joins her on his other side.

She looks to Jaqen. “You sex-murdered my lover.”

One side of Jaqen’s mouth twitches. “As jealous husbands are wont to do.”

“Should have asked me first,” she says, glaring at Him. “I knew which way the knife pointed, Daorys told me the nature of his ‘fits’, neither of us knew what they were.” She rises up on an elbow. “Why did you turn renegade, Varro?” she asks. She wants to know, but done is done; she may have to put a stop to it if it feeds the Valyrian too much.

Varro looks up at the canopy again. “Don’t know where to start,” he offers, rueful. “What did you extrapolate?” he asks the god.

Jaqen sighs. “My hypotheses have changed over the years. Couldn’t tell the exact moment when it happened, the grief had been growing, hadn’t known what it was until you and I figured it out with the next one, ‘the god is speaking’.”

“I became a renegade,” says Varro, his voice quiet, “one day after I became a Faceless Man.”

She blinks.

How is that even possible?

Jaqen’s gaze, unwavering, stays on Varro.

“I asked the old man,” he continues, “I asked him ‘who was the one I tracked down and demanded a coin from?’ and the old man said, ‘that brother wore a face. The face he was born with is Jaqen H’ghar.’” He looks at Jaqen, smiles. “Assimilated your memories. The god, my god, was a man. A magical construct. So I excised you, cast you out of me. Took two years to finally meet you. Attraction, despite everything, to the mind that came up with all of it. Used the attraction, led you on. Until I realized no Braavosi will ever be good enough to take you.”
“You became a Lorathi so you could kill me?” asks Jaqen.

“Want to Kill Jaqen H’ghar” warped to “Want Jaqen H’ghar”?

“Braavosi, no, they really don’t get that symbolic things are real. Fell in love with you after I became Lorathi. Figured out what I had become. Couldn’t bear to run. Begged the old man to find me a way to serve, to control the mind.”

“That feels entirely backwards,” says Jaqen. “You turned on Jaqen H’ghar because you preferred the Many-Faced God?”

“The mechanism of You,” breathes Varro, eyes half-closed; he speaks as if he watches something within himself. “The balance of You, the nature of Your existence, it staggered me—all of reality, the material and the symbolic, balanced upon the fulcrum of You.”

She cannot help but hear the changing timbre of Varro’s voice, the rising heat of his body. She exchanges a glance with the god, who looks incredulous.

“You thought,” says the god, “you thought the Many-Faced God was desirable?”

Varro closes his eyes. “The vision of perfection,” he says. “The thing that I wanted more than anything else, the only thing that meant anything at all in the world—I had it just for one day, held it for but the space of a day before I wore your face and asked question after question and came to believe it was just another one of Jaqen H’ghar’s lies.” He exhales, a ragged breath. “Bought into your ‘just a man’ story, Jaqen. You convinced me.”

“You were…,” Jaqen begins, looks at her again, then at Varro, “you were attracted—sexually attracted—”

Varro reaches for the god’s hand, guides Jaqen’s hand, down over his body, to the front of his britches.

“Then,” says Varro. “Still. Repudiated you because I believed the god was a lie.”

The god is staring down at his hand, resting on Varro’s very obvious erection.

She has worn Varro’s face often, more often than Zural says he did. The structure of Varro’s memories, the deluge of pattern and number and balance he contains within himself—the fact that Varro Massag wouldn’t give a fuck about the flesh, but get a raging erection for the idea makes perfect sense to her. Took the making of Daorys for him to start caring about the body.

“When did you see Him,” she asks, “He hid from Himself back then.”

Varro sighs. “The moment I died,” he says. “Nowhere to hide in the darkness, not from me.”

Well, she thinks, pleased beyond measure, that’s going to confuse the fuck out of the Valyrian; he thought Varro turned on the god because he wanted the man.

Varro shifts his shoulders; his eyes half-close. “I think I’ve earned a nap,” he murmurs.

She smooths his hair back from his face. “Our watch,” she says.

**VARRO**
He drifts at the edge of sleep, warmth on either side of him, quiet murmurs, rising and falling like quiet waves. His limbs are lax, no compulsion in him at the moment—no desire to live, no desire to die, nothing at all.

*Very comfortable, this renegading business.*


“Suppose it’s nice,” says Jaqen, “not to have to work quite so hard to earn an endearment from someone.”

“Not an endearment, beloved,” she says and her tone is dry. “He doesn’t do endearments. It’s a definition.”

“Take what I can get,” mutters the god.

*Need to sort some more things out.* Reluctantly, Varro opens his eyes, pulls himself half-upright. The shift their positions to suit.

“You bought into Jaqen H’ghar’s lies too, the both of you,” Varro says. “He’s a very good liar.”

Jaqen raises his eye.

“Think, Jaqen,” says Varro.

Jaqen just peers at him.

“Didn’t put it together until you fed me your blood, kept calling to try to explain it to you but you never came. And then I forgot it till you sex-murdered me and I saw it again. Black blood in you, Lord of the Abyss, the symbolic made material. And the darkness in us is not nothing, it is the *blood of a god*, the material made symbolic. I *drew* on it in Asshai, used it to cast a blood-ritual as I’d seen the priests do with the red blood they drew from their slaves’ veins.”

*The material and the symbolic, and the bridge between them.* There’s a thought there, a thread that leads to something else.

Varro ignores it for the moment.

“Faceless Men that have slept the final sleep,” he says, “they *live* despite it, their names and faces are imprinted onto us. That is not a ‘substitute’ for a soul, that is not an ‘approximation’ of a soul, it is, by definition, a fucking soul.”

There is no expression at all on Jaqen’s face. “I *want* to believe you,” He says quietly, “but the hypothesis does not pass the test of application—I cannot give it to Jon. My favor finds no ground in him.”

And Varro’s mouth twists. “He has my sympathies. And you have my exasperation, I’m talking and talking and you *still* don’t get it.”

“Valyrian blood and brain,” murmurs Jaqen, his eyes intent on Varro. “Not a particularly intelligent people.”

Arya grins, suddenly: *I get it!*

“Of course you do,” says Varro, looking at her.
“Do I get a reward?” she asks.

“What do you want?” Varro asks. Many, many things he could think of that she--

“For you not to strangle the ‘vision of perfection,’” she says. “Keep talking.”

Varro mock-glares at her. Then he sighs. “The Many-Faced god does not eat, you deranged Lorathi, He mirrors.”

He hears the breath in her lungs, in Jaqen’s, synchronized, fall out of rhythm.

“If He ate,” he continues, “and then ‘portioned out the feeding’ to the rest of us, everything would be different. The Lorathi breakdown of the self into mind and body is a symbolic truth. The Braavosi concept of nothing but blood and bone is material truth. If it was ‘feeding’ like R’hllo’s, we wouldn’t wear a brother’s skin, we would mutate, bones would break and re-align, our flesh would warp to fill the mold. Arya doesn’t gain your physical strength when she wears your face, nobody is as fast as the old man, not even you. The body we have is the one we die with. Immortal. Unchanging. Blood and bone—everthing else is illusion. Lie becomes truth—an illusion so perfect it fools the illusionists. Faceless Men mirror one another, Jaqen, they mirror you.

He turns back to Jaqen. “My lord,” he says, “this equality you offer me now, the two of you, it is a charity. Had I not been a renegade, it would have been fact. The Valyrian—that man you were that you despise so bitterly because you think, since he became a god he must have wanted to be one—he is the only reason we have the Many-Faced God. The Valyrian is a liar, because the truth of Him is such an impossible ideal that it needs to be protected, as your heart needs to be protected even from herself. Especially from herself.”

ARYA

“... as your heart needs to be protected even from herself. Especially from herself”

I am a Faceless Man. I don’t need fucking protection.

Her eyes narrow as Varro levers himself further upright, draws his legs under himself to sit cross-legged upon the bed.

Let it go, it’s not Zural’s stupid type of protectiveness, it’s Varro’s stupid type of protectiveness. Zural had to have gotten it from somewhere. Jaqen’s the only one that gets it right, it seems.

“The Many-Faced God is not the syncretic entity of all the aspects of death,” Varro says, “He is but one aspect of death, the face death wears in Braavos.” Varro pauses, and smiles. “My god is the god of lies, Jaqen—everyone thinks His aspects are the others Jaqen H’ghar assumed—the Goat, the Wayfarer, the Weeping Woman. But the Many-Faced God is a collective entity—a swarm of assassins, a hive-like creature of a hundred bodies and minds. Everyone focuses on the statues and all the while His actual aspects are going around, quietly assassinating people. The faces Faceless Men were born with are the faces of the Many-Faced God. Aspects within aspects, a recursion of assassins.”

Varro reaches out a hand, brushes it over Jaqen’s face; the tenderness of the gesture makes her vision blur. “You do not eat, Jaqen, you pour your blood into the men you bring into the hive—that is your speciality, needs a god for the doing of it. Faceless Men serve themselves, they enact their own vengeance, as all free men must. You are just one one-hundredth a portion of the Many-Faced God. It just so happens that you are also a god that encompasses all the aspects of death,
including the Many-Faced God; very recursive. Wouldn’t work otherwise.

Varro pulls his hand back. “Each assassin within the swarm mirrors the god--the entirety of the Many-Faced God, the swarm, is imaged in each of its members. But the problem with mirrors is that there must be a source for them to reflect. You, that contains the multitudes within. A mirror that rejects the source can only do so by cracking into pieces, and falling to the floor. That is how one makes oneself a renegade. And as the renegade falls, he is also lost to the sight of the other mirrors--my death-memories didn’t cascade, did they? Because nobody can see me anymore. A single thought, a repudiation of Jaqen H’ghar--not a repudiation of the Many-Faced God, a repudiation of you. You you. A repudiation of the source. Doesn’t matter if I’d spent years on my knees praying and masturabating by turns, the moment I rejected you, I cracked. You hold the shards of me within the frame, the framework, by sheer fortitude. And I clutch at you, have been clutching at you like a drowning man for two centuries. And when even your will and mine was not enough, after Asshai, Arya Stark held me to you--she was my last line of defence.”

Arya is divided, she doesn’t know what she wants to do more, wrap herself around Varro or around Jaqen, each for a different reason. Varro solves the problem for her--he turns, and lays his head in her lap, his blood-stained hair tangling around him as he looks into her eyes.

The two of them, her and Jaqen, would be poor gods if they did not recognize truth, the most fundamental of truths, when it is spoken to them.

Varro turns, kisses her wrist before lying back down. “You know the ‘pool speech’ those trained as priests give to the ones that seek it?” he asks. “I gave a variant to Bran Stark--Lorathi always believed it to be a pretty lie, solace to the dying and the dead, because the god said it was a lie. ‘Life is not equitable, though the living can create some measure of equality in a controlled environment.’ God of liars--lie becomes truth. The Valyrian had no power over any environment except his own mind, Jaqen, you could not impose anything upon the aspects of death others had prayed into being. But the Valyrian died, and assumed death, and in his dying he created an aspect of death whose foundation was equality. All men are gods. All men are equal--in the controlled environment that is the House of Black and White, this is a statement of fact, not belief, not principle. Because the Valyrian made it so. Even the choice to stop being a god is intrinsic to the mechanism of you--all choices have consequences, all magic has consequences, the warping of a renegade’s mind is a consequence of his choice, not a punishment from you. The only one you’ve chained to the fate is the Valyrian himself; if he falls, the Many-Faced God, the hive, it is no more. The Many-Faced God only ‘eats and grows’ insofar as He adds another member to the guild that is Him.”

Jaqen bites his lip, and the Wind tastes the salt in the air; the god sorrows, and He sorrows for a thousand things, and some part of Him, she knows, sorrows also for the Valyrian, so harshly misjudged by Him for so long.

“God’s a fucking idiot,” mutters Varro, looks up at her. “Why do you listen to him? ‘Braavosi are just Lorathi waiting to be eaten’? There’s other ones that make the circles around the House. ‘Braavosi are just Lorathi waiting to lose their virginity’, ‘Lorathi are just Braavosi in need of a strong drink’--a dark joke is all His self-examination boils down to in the end.”

She can’t help it. She giggles. Not at what Varro’s saying, that makes sense. She giggles at the look on Jaqen’s face, half part frustrated outrage at having His torment so callously dismissed, half part embarrassment.
He’s getting sleepy again.

Definitely earned a nap.

“Renegade,” says the god, “how do I bring you back to Me?”

“I don’t know,” murmurs Varro.

“I’ll think on it,” she promises. “Is there more?”

“Don’t know,” he mumbles.

“Jaqen,” she says, “it’s almost noon. We need to leave.”

“How do you know it is noon if the sun doesn’t rise?” Varro murmurs. “Call it midnight, and we can sleep.”

He feels Arya running her fingers through his hair.

“Too much chaos here,” says Jaqen slowly. “Our chaos. We need to contain it before we go.”

“But I want to run away,” says Arya sadly.

“From what?” asks Jaqen. “He’s coming with us, obviously.”

She shifts. “Good, I want him to,” she says, “and I want to run away from Sansa, I think.”

“Um.” Varro looks to Jaqen, then up at her. “Taking me along wasn’t the plan?” he asks. Jaqen’s giving her a strange look as well.

“No,” she says, “Jaqen has Stark work for me to do, how would you have helped?”

Jaqen, you fucking need to talk to your wife more.

Jaqen’s wearing a half-smile now, looking at her, amused as all fuck.

But then he thinks, the three “truths” the Wind gave me...truth, truth, lie? “Not truth, lie, truth?” he asks her.

She smacks his arm, lightly. “Are you insane? Did you really think we were going to abandon you in some village somewhere to become an ice fisherman?”

Varro starts chuckling, helplessly against her. “I did,” he wheezes between the laughter. “Imagined some field, snowstorm, don’t know which way is where, and Jaqen withdraws His favor so I can’t find Him ever again, and I wander about, trying to find a warm place to die. Fucking hate the cold. Know it’s your land, just saying.”

And with that, all the of will in him drains. He closes his eyes again, only for her to caress his arm.

“Come, Varro, love,” she says, “we need to go back to our chambers.”

That sounds nice. Not the “go back to chamber” thing. The other thing.

He shakes his head. Even that costs a lot of effort.

“That’s the blood-loss talking,” says Arya.
“He didn’t lose that much,” says Jaqen, “I know how to angle a knife, for fuck’s sake.” The god sighs. “We’re filthy, Varro,” says Jaqen, “you want to get clean.”

I used to be fastidious, didn’t I? Remove scent markers. Nothing but scent-markers right now. But he feels unambitious; the urge for the customary after-sex scouring is missing entirely.

He nestles his head more comfortably in her lap, stretches. He feels the slick wetness inside him. “I’m good,” he says, a little smile on his face.

Jaqen leans down. “I’ll put more in you,” He whispers, “but you need to cooperate.”

It’s almost, almost enough to get Varro to roll over onto his side.

“You can watch me bathe,” she says.

“Alright,” says Varro, and sits up, then swings his legs off the side of the bed. He’s gathered the mostly full bottles of wine, and standing by the door within a few heartbeats. “I’m up, let’s go,” he says.

“Wait,” says Jaqen. He lights a taper.

Jaqen’s good, he has to admit. Pierced the heart, but there’s still less blood than what Varro’s surface-cuts yield, normally.

Swiftly, Jaqen and Arya strip the bed of its coverings, use a knife to cut out the part of the mattress that’s red.

A sudden chill gathers around him. He glares at Jaqen’s back. “You took a very large risk with this,” says Varro. “If I’d died… ”

Jaqen doesn’t turn around. “I know you,” says the god.

Varro grits his teeth.

THE CHARWOMAN

She’s lost in a gloom of her husband’s making.

The feckless fool won’t even step out of their house.

Afraid of the dark.

She’s at the end of her wits, and she feels pity for him, but when she gets to their little stone-walled cottage, just inside the leeward wall of Winterfell, she’s had a day of cleaning out the grates and the fireplaces, she smells of soot and ash, and he hasn’t gone to draw the water from the well, nor any of the thousand other things he’s supposed to do. He hovers, hovers at the window, wringing his hands and waiting for her to come home. Makes her take a lantern and a torch when she walks to the keep.

She sighs.

“Leave him, Mari, leave him,” says the cook—a thin, hawk-nosed man going grey around the temples.
The undercook snorts, even as her knife is busy chopping tubers for the luncheon soup. “Men,” she says. “You think it’s that easy to just leave? He doesn’t beat her, he doesn’t drink.”

“He doesn’t pull his own weight,” counters the cook.

“And her screaming at him at night keeps everyone up,” mutters one of the maids.

Suppose it does, at that. Never used to be a nagging wife.

One of the upper-floor chambermaids, dressed in smart livery, thinking a bit too much of her station in the undercook’s opinion, she rushes in.

“You won’t believe it,” she says.

“What?”

“Prince Daorys just came back from somewhere, I don’t know where, Princess and the Sealord with him, blood on all of them. They’ve asked for baths.”

Babble breaks out in the kitchen.

“Enough,” shouts the cook, thumping a large tuber on the cutting-board for emphasis. “Gel, what have we been told, hmm? Ser Daorys. He’s not a prince.”

He doesn’t counter the “Sealord” though. It’s known the Princess Arya is affianced to the Sealord of Braavos, but here she is, sleeping openly with another man? A man that rides at the King’s right hand, gets smiles from the Hounds’ Mistress? The general consensus has shifted, bit by bit. It seems the Lightskirt Princess is no such thing, she married him when she was still fostered in Braavos. But Starks were hunted back then, weren’t they, Boltons and Lannisters howling for Direwolf hides. Not a good match for a man as canny as the Sealord, youngest daughter of a fallen house. Only now, with her brother a King, it’s a good match, and the Sealord came to mend fences, ask for the permission he should have before he married her. Why they’re still here, nobody knows, but there’s as many speculations to that as there are people in the keep—the Charwoman thinks it has to do with the wights, the undead. That’ll make a man, a good man, through his weight behind the Starks.

Ambassador jumps, leastwise, when “Ser Jaqen” calls, naught else but the Sealord could manage that, not with a man as self-assured as Ser Zural.

The only ones that still hold onto what was told to them are four of “Ser Jaqen”’s faction, all angling for the Sealord. They’d like to believe the “Lightskirt Princess” will leave for Braavos any day now, to marry the real Sealord, and Ser Jaqen will stay behind, of course.

Told us he was no titled lord, but when has nobility ever told the truth?

“Prince” Daorys is another matter. Noble-born, but he’s Princess Arya’s sick foster-brother. That’s divided opinions, too. It’s good to see a gel so dedicated to helping someone, but Starks haven’t had much luck with their fostern. The Charwoman still remembers young Lord Theon, and Ser Daorys is sleeping in Theon’s rooms. Bad omen, that.

“He is a prince,” says the maid, tossing back her braid. “Calls the King, the Crown-Prince by name, doesn’t he?”

“Foster brother to a Stark, he’s treated as family, of course he does,” says the undercook. “Heard Theon Greyjoy did the same.”
More noise; dark mutterings this time.

The Charwoman raises her head. “How come they’re covered in blood?” she asks, into one of the natural lulls in the chaos of the kitchen.

Silence.

“Something to do with the ambassador fleeing first thing, if I had my guess,” says the maid. “Lightskirt wanted someone to pay back the insult Ser Zural offered to her sister. Sealord won’t challenge one of his own servants over a matter of honor, will he? Prince Daorys had to do it, ride out after Ser Zural, strike him down. Lightskirt made Prince Daorys do it. He collapsed from the strain after.”

“Stop, stop!” says the cook. “This is not to be repeated ever again, you hear? Forget you ever heard it!”

The undercook nods, then directs a stern glare around the room. “Hounds’ Mistress is in a temper--never seen her in a temper like that. Keep your heads down, if you don’t want to lose them. She has ears everywhere, knows what a man’s saying in Bear Island before the words are out of his mouth. Say nothing of ambassadors or fleeing or challenges.”

Nods, all around. Industriousness returns to all hands.

“Well, I’m going to see if Ser Daorys needs aught--towels or soap or washcloths,” says the maid.

The cook rolls his eyes, even as the undercook shakes a knife at the maid. “You be careful of such doings, gel, he won’t be the first pretty face that’s gotten a chambermaid with child and then ridden off to greener pastures. Giggling and gossip is all well and good, but no mischief will be tolerated, you hear?”

The maid’s mouth pulls to a side, almost a sneer. “Lightskirt doesn’t leave him alone long enough for anyone to ask him if he wants wine or victuals, let alone mischief.”

“He’s alive, isn’t he?” asks the cook. “She brought him back from the brink of death, says Beron.”

The maid snorts. “Beron? You’re going to trust a ten-year-old to know the difference between common sickness and the brink of death?” she shakes her head. “You ask me, Lightskirt was keeping him sick.”

And with that, the maid flounces out.

The idea is considered, then dismissed. Maester Samwell gave Princess Arya the recipes for her witchy potions, didn’t he? He’d know the difference between healing and sickness-making.

The Charwoman stores away all the strands of conversations in her memory. Not much else to put in there these days. She’ll sort through them, when she has some time, then write them all down. Not much advantage to being a Maester’s bastard, leastwise not a girl-bastard that couldn’t be sent to the Citadel, but she learned to read and write. Her father-- “Maester Luwin”, never “father”, saw to it.

Maester Samwell’s bastard will have a better time of it, it looks like, he eats at the table with the King when his mother lets him loose. There will be patronage for him, a spot at the Citadel for certain.

As for the Charwoman, her stack of copper and silver is growing. When she takes this day’s news
to the Hounds’ Mistress, Princess Sansa, especially the part about the blood, and the maid’s accusations about Princess Arya, it’s going to be another half-pence added to the hoard.

She’ll have enough, in another year or so, for the long passage down to White Harbor, then a boat to Essos. She’ll have to drug her husband, keep him on Milk of the Poppy the entire way. But she will go, one way or another.

To the temple of the Lord of Light, R’hllor.

*The Night is Dark and Full of Terrors.*

Those are the terrors her husband fears, the ones that keep him locked in the house, and her exhausted and screaming at him.

The Red Priestess had preached, once, to the last remnants of Winterfell’s staff. That’s where the Charwoman got the idea, but the Priestess left before she could be asked if there was aught the Lord of Light could do.

*But he’s the Lord of Light.*

He will banish her husband’s fear, and everything will be the way it once used to be.

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**ARYA**

She’s helping him pack when there’s a knock at the door. Varro raises an eyebrow, then walks to it, unlatches it.

The chambermaid—the one he had been looking at earlier—she’s there, obsequious smile on her face. She holds a stack of grey towels, bars of soap nestled on top.

“Oh,” she says, “Pr—Ser Daorys, you’re already bathed!”

Arya hides her smile.

“Yes, I believe I am,” says Varro, dry. “Arya, do we need towels?”

“You’re going to need them to mop up even more of your blood,” she says to Varro, “because I’m going to knife you if you try to prove you’re still in fighting form.”

Varro sighs. “I’m going to be coddled, like a child.”

“Only children try to twirl around two blades when they still can’t keep a good grip on a mug of tea, Daorys,” she says. She goes up to the maid, gives her a vaguely friendly smile. “Thank you,” says Arya, takes the stack from her.

The soap is *scented*. Lavender, apparently.

“Maybe Jaqen’s still in the bath,” she mutters, smiles again at the girl, then crosses the floor to her own chamber.

Lorathi illusions are useful. She unfurls, tugs Varro’s attention, and he follows her into her chambers, travel-pack slung over one shoulder.

Both of them slip inside her room, then bolt the door.
Jaqen’s already bathed and dressed, of course. Licentiousness has a time and a place, the middle of
the day is not yet.

“Varro’s favourite chambermaid is trying to seduce him away from you,” says Arya.

Jaqen glances at the towels, the soap, sighs. “As long as it doesn’t cross the line into assassination
plots, it’s Sansa’s problem.”

Varro sways a bit, puts his hand out to the wall to steady himself.

Jaqen’s mouth is a thin line.

“Get in bed,” says Jaqen. “We can’t afford to lose the time if you collapse on the way out
tomorrow.”

“I’m fine,” says Varro. “Just need to eat something.”

Jaqen snorts. “If I had been your compulsion, there is no way you could have killed me, the shape
you’re in.”

“That’s why I didn’t,” says Varro. “Clearly still waiting.” He saunters to the door.

“Where are you going?” asks Arya.

He half-turns, brow furrowed. “Um. God gave me an order. You countermanding it?”

Jaqen sighs.

Varro blinks. “Your bed.”

Arya climbs up on top, crawls underneath the covers. “Tell Sansa I’m sleeping off the
Heartsbane.”

Jaqen nods, leaves. Closes the door behind Him.

“Bolt it,” she says.

Bemused, Varro complies. And then he comes over, stands at the side. “Arya,” he says, “I--”

“Get in,” she says.

He climbs in beside her, fully dressed, watching her face the entire time.

“Sleep,” she says. “My watch.”

They lie, side-by-side, staring at the scorch-marks on the ceiling.

“Assigned myself a penance the day before yesterday,” he says after a while. He sighs. “Thought
wanting you was the absolute pinnacle of disloyalty I was capable of.”

“What was the penance?”

“Something I thought you’d like—live another day.”

“Varro,” she says, giving voice to the distress she hasn’t allowed Him to see, “I saw something
else in Him, something other than what you did, I helped convince Him that He ate. Why didn’t I
see Him of the Many Faces?”
“He is…” Varro pauses. “Complex. What did you see?”

“Stars,” she says, “going out, one by one, the darkness consumes them from the inside out and I just want Him in me while I watch.”

“Didn’t see that one,” says Varro. “I got lost in the maze of mirrors. Also wanted to fuck it, couldn’t figure out how.” He sounds frustrated.

She giggles.

“I’ve stopped playing,” he says thoughtfully.

“You poor thing,” she says in a tone of mock-sympathy. “You must be exhausted. We never stop playing.”

“Exhausted,” he says. “Clearly.”

She rises on one elbow, looks at him. Jaqen’s approach is impossible for her to emulate, whatever it may have been. And seduction is not her strong suit. How many faceless lovers has Varro had? More than two, less than a hundred. No, no tactic will work here.

So let’s try truth.

“You didn’t get to see me bathe,” she says.

“You didn’t get to see me bathe,” he says.

“Too many people,” he replies.

She bends down, touches her lips to his. “There was a reason I suggested it,” she whispers. “The night He had your mouth at His wrist, He came back to this chamber; I was in the bath. And He told me where and how to touch myself, made me pleasure myself until I came while He watched. And He knew He was not the only one I wanted to show.”

Varro’s breathing has remained steady.

Alright, truth doesn’t work.

“You had me at the kiss,” he says, and his voice is entirely too uneven.

Frantic motions, as both of them work, at cross-purposes sometimes, to take off their clothes. And then they lie, skin-to-skin, and his mouth is fastened to her breast, and she throws a leg over him.

“Arya,” he breathes, “forgive me.”

“For what?”

“For who I was.”

She shifts her hips, draws him towards her, his hardness nudges her core. He turns then, draws her closer, slowly, inch by inch he enters her.

“Not forgiven,” she says. “It implies there is something to forgive.”

He groans, and pushes deeper, sheathes himself in her.

Familiar, from the dreaming. And yet not. There is a quality to dreams, they slide along the skin; Varro slides inside her skin now.
She wraps her legs around him, and he rocks against her. Slow, and his hands stroke her sides, her legs, even as her hands fist in his hair, draw his mouth down to hers, she feels every groan he utters against her mouth, ever caress, a hunger in it that is entirely unlike Jaqen’s—Jaqen knows, Jaqen claims, and serves, in equal measure. Varro is certain of nothing, he gives as an offering, he begs alms before the steps of the temple.

“Climb,” she whispers, “climb.”

He is obedient, as obedient as Jaqen; the pace of his thrusts changes, and as he climbs she climbs with him, her arms have risen, stretched out behind her, braced against the headboard, she arches, and he lifts her hips, his mouth suckling on her neck as he drives her higher, between yesterday and today he’s learned the rhythms of her body, he matches his own to hers.

She crests a gentle hill, falls.

He slows; she opens her eyes. He is watching her, and the awe on his face, it has no purpose—unfeigned.

She moves her hips, demanding. He kisses the hollow of her throat, moves again, and this time his thrusts are just slightly faster, slightly more frantic, and then his hand is between them, between her legs, rubbing at her nub, insistent strokes, his fingertip grazing over her again and again, he draws a moan from her mouth, despite herself, then another until she spasms again; it banishes the silence around them, and the sounds come alive, the the creaking of the bed, the meeting of their flesh; their breaths, harsh.

She tries to wrap her legs around his waist, draw him in deeper.

He refuses to move, refuses to change the gentle pace.

Her eyes snap open, but she has not the ability to glare at him, not the way he is looking at her. Instead, she submits, relaxes her hold, opens herself to him further.

He thrusts, once, twice. He gasps, and then crushes her to his chest, his hips moving erratically as he spends himself within her.

Jaqen finds them sweat-soaked, wrapped around each other, drowsing.

“Thought we’d bolted the door,” she murmurs.

“I have my ways,” says the god, amused. “You were supposed to rest, Varro.”

“Resting,” he murmurs.

“Beloved,” she says.

“Hmm?”

She says nothing.

“You make a very good point,” says Jaqen. And He climbs in behind her. She nestles back into His chest, and sleeps.

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She starts awake, sudden, surrounded by darkness and warmth. A leg, thrown over her, a hand loosely cupping her breast.

They come awake immediately, transitioning from sleep to the alertness trained into them.

“How do you manipulate a Faceless Man?” she asks. “How did I manipulate the both of you, for days?”

“Sex, and blood,” says Varro.

She stares into the darkness. “I just saw the amount of sex and blood you two are capable of,” she says. “Suggestive comments and a little bit of skin, allusions to assassinations, that’s going to throw you off?”

“Consider the source,” says Jaqen.

She shakes her head. “Consider the time Jaqen and I came to see you, Varro, and He tested whether you fought His blade or not. Then He left, and I had to manipulate you all by my lonesome.”

Varro chuckles a bit.

“First step--distract with contradictory intention. Am I talking blood, or sex? Both are true. You pick one. I let you see that the other was true. You are thrown into confusion, guessing, second-guessing your reason. Second step, part and parcel of the first--offer two equally distasteful things. The god’s bride wants me. I am a trap for the god. You want to not be disloyal, you want both of them to be false. You are already second-guessing your reason. A relief, when I decided for you. Gave you a way out. A simple action. Something you can do instead of being trapped in your own mind. I asked for your word, and you didn’t see that it landed you in my trap--you couldn’t accept mercy at anyone’s hand except Jaqen’s, you’d given Him your word. You couldn’t ask Jaqen for mercy, you’d given me your word not to. The trap: you couldn’t seek death at all.”

“Fuck, Arya,” says Jaqen. His hand over her breast firms, He cups it with greater intention.

She ignores the suggestion.

“How do you manipulate the House of Black and White?” she asks.

Both of them tense. Jaqen takes his hand away.

“Distract with contradictory information--is Jaqen serving Jon Stark because Jon Stark is a dead man, or is Jon Targaryen serving the Valyrian because the Valyrian is accruing power? Both are true, you seek to increase your secular power for the war against Asshai, and you do this by serving Jon because it is not in your nature to command. House picks one interpretation, the one that is congruent with the face of Jaqen H’ghar--that you do what you do for mercy to Jon, for mercy to those within the Wall. Along comes a question to make them see that the other is true-- how related, blood related, are Jon Stark and Jaqen H’ghar?”

Varro exhales. “How related are you?”

Jaqen snorts. “About as related as Daenerys Targaryen is to every last slave in Lys. We are descended from the same people, and they liked inbreeding, but that is all.”

“Not just any people, Jaqen,” she says quietly. “Valyrians. Lorathi eliminate bias. Braavosi court it.” She sighs. “Second step--two equally distasteful options, presented with a series of questions. Should we replace the Many-Faced God with his bride, or use her to kill Him? Neither is a true option, nobody wants either, they’re cruel options, fiercely cruel. Present a way out--a renegade.
Oust Jaqen H’ghar, without having to kill him—there is precedent for time, after all; suspend the sentence indefinitely. Jaqen will be fine, he’s got people he can lean on—very glowing, the reports Zural penned about the Starks. It’s the simple choice—vote to make Jaqen a renegade. The trap: if you want to make the easy choice, you just need to perform a small, simple test: can we do to the god what He does to renegades? Cut out His face from us?"

“The questions about renegacy,” she continues. “All the questions to me about the Wind...all of these were manipulations. A setup. For that question. The one question. It is phrased exactly as it needs to be done to make a renegade, isn’t it? An instruction disguised as a question. Asked innocuously, but with the power to undo that which lies at the foundation of the House of Black and White. Each Faceless Man that encounters it is vulnerable to it; the question spreads, like plague, leaving mind-broken renegades in its wake.”

All three of them are sitting up now.

“Zural and I sent ravens,” says Jaqen. “It’ll be stopped in its tracks. But this is a very complex construction you conjecture, beloved. What is supposed to have happened, someone comes to the black and white doors one day, and asks the questions and suddenly everyone is voting on them? Or,” Jaqen’s voice grows more controlled, “there is a traitor in the midst of the House. Someone that turned renegade in the interim—after I was bound, I have no reach, I wouldn’t have known. I only felt Zural because he was within my sphere of influence.”

Arya laces her fingers with Varro’s, draws his hand to her thigh; she grips him tightly, and lets the Wind speak.

“Every brother has a speciality,” she says. “If Ambraysis asks questions about magic, asks for a vote, it will be moved upon without much thought. If the Waif asks questions about a plant, brothers will go out of their way to accommodate the query.”

Is Jon Snow Eddard’s bastard or Lyanna’s? One person the question could have come from, and been given heed by everyone, not dismissed as politics or slander: Maester Luwin, when he was alive.

“Whose query, on the matter of renegades, would you take seriously enough to give it this much importance?” she asks.

“The renegade hunter’s,” answers Varro. His voice is hard. “Zural fed them selected information—that my body was almost recovered, some lingering poison. Nothing but the body, for Braavosi, they would have assumed Zural meant bone and blood and brain all at once. I could ask these questions, and have them answered. More credible that it comes from me, means the problem is serious—most know I am your creature, Jaqen, whatever strange bias Zural had in his head doesn’t extend to others. If I’m questioning you, it lends it more weight.”

“Yes,” says the Wind. “So why pin the accusation upon a new enemy when we already have one that fits so very well?”

Varro’s hand is cold in hers. “I could not have written out your name yesterday, Arya, let alone a coherent ‘request for information’.”

The Wind plays with his hair. “You were never an enemy,” she says. “I just like hurting you. It balances Arya’s overwhelming sentimentality towards you.”

Jaqen chokes.
Varro grips her hand tighter.

“Only one enemy, my loves,” she says. “Asshai.”

Varro exhales. “The one I hunted across half the world, right into the gates of Asshai. He sold out the House for coin. Even if he did not know, they could have drawn it out of him with sorcery, one thought at a time.”

“Sorcerers are not stupid,” she agrees. “And they are steeped in magical lore, they could have made the connection to the self-excision from the god-- I wouldn’t even have thought of it, I treat that face as a noumenal.”

“If he was not aware of it,” says Varro, “they’d at least have known the types of questions to ask to make him aware of it. He was balls deep in sorcerer plots before I killed him.” His mouth twists. “And then they got me.”

She has lost all sensation in her left hand, he grips her so tightly, and her him.

“When the deep discipline didn’t break with whatever sorcerers think counts as ‘torture’,” Varro says, no inflection in his voice, “they turned to magic. And they got your name out of me, Jaqen, they got Arya’s name out of me. And more. The holes in my memory cover large gaps of time, no count of days or hours.”

She hears Varro swallow.

“Arya,” he whispers, “They got my encryption key, Arya, and it’s only changed when a man returns to the House in Braavos. I was confined to the ship-- didn’t set foot on the Isle of Gods. Old man knew I was a renegade and I was dying-- I didn’t understand before, I couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t come see me. Because he didn’t want to answer my question as to why I couldn’t go home; student learns to read a teacher’s lie. He couldn’t let me die in the House, I would taint the hallowed ground, create something even Jaqen doesn’t seem to understand. And so I never returned to the House, the key was never changed, they wrote the questions in my name and signed them with my ciphers.”

“Intention, bias, perception-- this is the realm of the mind,” says Jaqen. “It is the body of evidence that must be falsified first. The physical source of the information-- it is known you are in Winterfell, a local Braavosi messenger with a scrap of parchment will be scrutinized and dismissed immediately, and the House will know the cipher is compromised.”

“A raven must go from Winterfell with the missives,” says Varro.

*There is a traitor in Winterfell.*


“Jon Stark,” says Varro.

“No,” says Jaqen.

“Of course not,” replies Varro. “But he is the most obvious candidate-- magic making havoc of my mind, and I’m fucking saturated with your favor. Jon Stark was resurrected by one of R’hllor’s priestesses, he’s R’hllor’s creature by body, though not anything else.”

“Plots within plots,” murmurs Arya. “Take the House of Black and White apart from the inside out,
and when the trail of causality is followed, it points to the god’s last bulwark—the King in the North. God turns on Jon Stark, perhaps—the bonds of brotherhood in the order are deep, renegacy or no, and we understand vengeance."

“Access to the ravensloft,” says Varro. “A propensity for sending messages unattended. Trusted by Faceless Men. Doesn’t know about the tears, or Jon’s complete severing from anything of R’hllor’s.”

“More than a third of the people in Winterfell,” says Jaqen.

Arya offers a new point. “New to the keep. Newer than Zural and Varro were—questions didn’t start till they were here a sevenday.”

Varro looks up. “After Zural returned from White Harbor—he left a day after you and Jon rode to Widow’s Watch, Jaqen.”

“What did Zural bring back from White Harbor?” asks Arya.

*Apart from supplies and ravens?*

“His new clerk,” says Varro. “An Iron Bank man, Zural said he was removed from his position because he cannot write properly anymore—lost his fingers to frostbite.”

Arya eyes are narrow. “He’s supposed to be for Braavos business only,” she says. “He wouldn’t be allowed to send ravens to the House, not even supposed to know about them. Zural is *Zural*, Varro, he’s always suspicious, always *watching*, just like the rest of us. More, since he was Last Blade for the Winterfell cell.”

“Arya,” says Varro, “how many watches in a day did Zural spend with Sansa and not supervising the clerk at the embassy?”

“I don’t know,” says Arya. “I was focused on you and Jaqen and Bran.”

*Zural trained with me for a watch in the mornings, then breakfast, then dinner. That’s about all I saw of him.*

A keen sorrow.

*Should have spent more time with him.* But what is time, to a servant of the god? *I thought I could never lose my teacher, unless he was felled by some enemy somewhere far away. Not when he was this close, within arms reach of two gods.*

“Almost a third of a day,” says Jaqen quietly. “Zural spent almost a third of the day with her, by the end.”

*In “daytime” hours, or the scandal would have been heard even by me. He spent the time with her when he should have been at the embassy.*

“Why did you let this pass beneath notice?” asks Varro. “Brother helps brother in the field.”

Jaqen snorts. “You mean, why did I, the Faceless Man that conveniently mis-delivers invitations to group training sessions so he can fuck a princess in some secluded alcove, why did I allow another Faceless Man leeway to talk and drink wine with the other princess?”

“Zural was Last Blade, our *field-leader*,” says Arya, appalled. “*Both* of you played ‘look the other
“I would understand,” offers Varro.

Jaqen snorts. “No. You wouldn’t. You make a reporting of your expenses as well, don’t you?”

“Of course,” says Varro.

“Focus,” says Arya. “We can play the blame-game later. Have I convinced the both of you?”

By the silence, she can tell that she has. A heavy, cold thing settles at the base of her stomach.

 Didn’t want to be right. Wanted them to tell me I’m mad on grief and poison.

Varro’s words: want is not need.

“The clerk is still here,” says Jaqen. “He’s supposed to follow Zural in a ten-day, so the correspondence between Braavos and the North remains uninterrupted while Zural’s on the road.”

MELISANDRE

Snow in her mouth, ice in her lungs, bitter black bile and blood at the back of her throat.

But her veins burn with fire.

She was dead, in the nothing. She was nothing. And then the Lord of Light reached and closed his hand about her heart and breathed fire and life back into her.

But everything is dark all around, she is buried, she doesn’t know where or how deep. She doesn’t know which way is up.

She has been assigned a task by the voice that woke her from the nothing.

My Champion is dead. Answer, Melisandre Firemane, answer to the call.

She answered.

Power fills her now; it won’t last long, but long enough.

With hands gone to claws with rigor mortis, she clears a space in front of her face. Everything is dark; she moistens her lips with snow, her tongue. It takes a long time to melt, she as cold as the snow around, she doesn’t feel it. But when the snow does melt, she spits. She feels the trail of spit arc slight, to her left: that way is down.

Melisandre begins digging her way out of the snow, one fistful at a time. Up, towards life, towards light. Up, towards Jon Snow, the Prince that was Promised.

I am the Champion of the Lord of Light.

Chapter End Notes
tl;dr:

1. Jaqen thought Varro had figured out a way to stop being a renegade, i.e. kill Jaqen and take Jaqen's images/memories into himself to replace the face he'd excised 200 years ago. Obviously, not true.
2. Jaqen resurrects Varro. This doesn't fix the renegade bond either--the sex was just about the sex.
3. A bunch of romancy stuff--all three are in love, yay.
4. The *true* nature of the darkness/souls is explained--Jaqen's blood is black, it's symbolic death made into a material thing. The "darkness" is Jaqen's blood, a god's blood, made symbolic.
5. The MFG is a swarm-god. ALL the FM together make up the MFG. And like a mirror can reflect much more than the mirror's own surface area, all FM reflect each other, the god. "The multitudes in one". ALL FM are a fractional part of the MFG.
6. Recursion--Jaqen is an FM, a fractional part of the MFG, but he IS also all the other death gods AND all of the MFG. A recursion of assassins.
7. Jaqen doesn't "eat", nobody "eats", everybody mirrors everybody, illusion and immortality.
8. The entire guild is a god.
9. Varro and Arya are entirely sexually attracted to the god parts of Jaqen in addition to loving him as a person and *him*. Jaqen's self-hatred is confused.
10. The nature of the HBW voting against Jaqen is revealed--they were set up with a series of questions coming from outside.
11. In Asshai, they got (a) information from another renegade about how to make renegades, and (b) they tortured/magicked Varro's encryption keys/ciphers from him.
12. They used his "specialization" as a renegade hunter to innocuously insert the equivalent of a magical email-attachment virus into the HBW. Anyone who tries to answer the question becomes a renegade/serial-killer and "falls out" of being the Many-Faced God.
13. There's someone at Winterfell sending this fraudulent information.
14. The servants have some wild theories--they think Jaqen is the Sealord of Braavos, and a whole bunch of other stuff.
15. The Charwoman is one of Sansa's secret agents.

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Well, here you go :)
ARYA

Quite apart from the principle of the thing, torture never yields good information--the subject lies, convincing himself lies are truth, just to feed the torturer what the torturer may want to hear.

Faceless Men rely upon physical evidence, and the evidence of their own eyes and ears: the clerk tried to run when he saw Varro walk up to the embassy doors. There should be no reason for Zural’s authorized deputy to run away from another Braavosi.

Now the clerk lies upon his bed, eyes closed, peaceful. His lips are blue with cold. The narrow window in his bedchamber is ajar, the fire went out and he forgot to build it up. No poison, no wine, no wounds--the fool just forgot to close the window and froze to death.

He’s done stupid things like that before--lost his fingers to frostbite before the Long Night had even begun.

Or at least, that’s the rumor that will fly on the morrow.

Varro finishes his very careful search of the clerk’s clothing, looking for anything they’ve missed, anything hidden in the seams. The clerk’s vest has already yielded a stash of gold, sewn into the lining. Jaqen, meanwhile, searches for evidence of magic--anything that the man could have used, somehow, to communicate with his handlers. The clerk was not a sorcerer himself, or the smell of him would have alerted every Faceless Man that came within arms-reach of him.

Arya sits at the clerk’s desk, and very, very lightly, runs a piece of charcoal over the empty pages of scribe-notebook. Pages were torn out, it seems; those pages are most probably ash in the fireplace now.

But the imprint of the writing remains.

The clerk didn’t have a light hand; he pressed down on the paper--because of his fingers, he had to grip his writing implements in his fist. A very neat, careful hand for all of that--Zural wouldn’t have hired him elsewise.

Layer by layer, exposed in its inverse, white imprint in black charcoal, the writing on the paper emerges. Nonsense. Jumbled letters and numbers, some crossed out, often underlined.

The scribe’s notebook is a practice-pad.

Not easy, for one not trained, to encrypt his words with a House of Black and White cipher in an impromptu fashion. He has to encrypt them first, check them, decrypt them, correct the errors, re-encrypt, then copy the final message onto a fresh sheet of parchment.

She looks at the pad for a while, then reads a set of characters from it.


She imagines her passkey being spelled out, letter by number by letter, just out there, in the open. She shudders.

“No magic,” says Jaqen. “No trace except the box where Zural kept his death-masks.”

“The gold seems to be it on this end,” says Varro.

“He was good,” says Jaqen, staring down at the clerk’s corpse. The god’s mouth twists. “But most men cannot help their biology.”

The scribe-notebook is the only hard piece of evidence. But it is good evidence: a Faceless Man’s personal passkey--one that only that Faceless Man, Varro, should ever use--used over and over again to check and re-check that an encryption is good.

“They don’t know about the checksums,” she says. “He checked it all by hand, letter by letter.”

It adds credence to the theory that Varro’s ciphers were taken from him in Asshai--neither thumbscrews nor blood-magic are suitable for extracting the subtleties of a cipher system that has evolved over a century and a half to serve the needs of elite assassins.

Varro absently snaps at the band of air encircling his left wrist. The welt underneath will scar if he keeps doing that.

Jaqen looks up. “Could the Wind please let the manacle go?”

Varro looks to Jaqen, blinks. “But we want to keep it.”

Jaqen’s jaw clenches, but He says nothing. Varro and Arya exchange a look.

**Manacles. With welts underneath. Slave-things.**

*But it’s not a manacle anymore!* Not the intention for it to be, Varro put his hand on it and wouldn’t give it back when she removed all the others; Wind liked that.

Varro jerks his chin at her: *Suppose we better get rid of it.*

She sighs, then walks up to him. She reaches for the band, plucks the strands of air free from his wrist. No barbs to it, no bite, it was just a...reminder. A residue of affection. She looks at Jaqen over her shoulder, then grins.

She turns back to Varro, his eyebrow is raised: *Arya?*

She smirks, and then reaches under his shirt--her hand is small, not much effort to slide it into the waistband of his trousers, reach down. Her fingers find his manhood, nestled in the fine, sparse hair.

His eyes are boring into hers, a little half-smile at the corner of his lips. He anticipates her; his cock twitches in her grasp.

She slips the strands of air around it.

Despite himself, Varro gasps; his eyes widen. The wind is a cold thing. She pushes the band all the way down to the base of his cock, then withdraws her hand.

She turns; the god is watching them, perhaps a little wide-eyed Himself.
“Not for hurting, Jaqen,” she says. “Wind doesn’t want to hurt him anymore.”

“Masochist says hurt me, sadist says no?” the god asks.

Varro smirks. “And the eldritch horror born in the slave-pits of Valyria is the only normal one, my lord; is that it?”

“We’ll find out, I suppose,” murmurs Jaqen. No disapproval in Him now, only amusement. Perhaps a tinge of curiosity there; she knows Jaqen. So strange sex-things are perfectly fine, but things that look even vaguely like slave-things are not.

Each returns to the task; together, they gather and sort the sheets of paper Arya’s spread out on the desk.

“Schoolroom, or here?” she asks, when they’re done. A base of operations is sorely needed now.

“Last Blade’s call,” Jaqen reminds her.

Strange circumstances, that the newest Faceless Man in the order is now field-leader to the god. But the reasoning that voted Zural into the position still holds: Jaqen was compromised to the Starks. He is still compromised. Daorys was sick. Now he is a renegade.

Arya Stark is a Faceless Man of Braavos. A Lorathi. Attachments have no place in this decision, no matter how much she may cling to her childhood, nor how much she may be inclined to choose what Zural chose, out of some misplaced sorrow.

So.

Foundation: all the individuals that make up the swarm may not recognize it yet, but Jaqen’s objectives have always been the objectives of the Many-Faced God.

Objective: The Wall must be taken down, one way or another. The god’s power is denied at the Wall, and neither poison nor blade nor any other weapon in the arsenals of Faceless Men can be brought to bear on the problem. And so a covenant has been made with a King. The price the King asks in return: don’t let my kingdom be overrun by the undead. A fair price, to ask of a god.

Objective: Asshai. The order must be restored; the Many-Faced God must be reintegrated into Himself and Jaqen must be reintegrated with His role as a Faceless Man.

Objective: The King in the North must be supported. The House of Black and White has been given the thing it had been trying to make in “Aegon Targaryen”—a king that can control dragons, and the political power that comes with them. One better than Izembaro’s “mummer-drone”—Jon Stark will not need dragon-horns as he has the blood; he will wed the Mother of Dragons. And an anointed king, a brother, is far better than a puppet king—puppets must be controlled; brothers cooperate. The bones of all worlds are dragons. Dragons will rise even as the sea finds its level. Dragons are not the enemy, and dragons are inevitable. Jon Stark, and his legacy, will be the secular and military proxy of the Many-Faced God in ensuring Valyria never rises.

The embassy is Zural’s place; hers now, by right—a thing that was of both Winterfell and Braavos, apartments Zural furnished and secured. There are secret passages, training areas (though they smell like shit), well-secured rooms for sleeping and eating and working. In splitting the cell, Zural let himself be swayed by Arya Stark and Jaqen H’ghar’s emotional attachments—a classic Braavosi mistake; he should have insisted that all Faceless Men say under the aegis of Braavos right from the start, provided the funds to replicate a stillroom here for Daorys. Zural should have questioned: what is more familiar to a Faceless Man? Proximity to his god, his brothers, or a bed in Theon
Greyjoy’s chamber?

Too late.

The aegis of Braavos has moved to White Harbor.

Counter: the embassy is not Jaqen’s place. The god has visited not more than a handful of times--and mostly for meals. But when has a Faceless Man like Jaqen preferred familiarity over utility? Only in Winterfell. One-half the decision to stay in the children’s rooms was Jaqen’s.

Varro is as recovered as he will be for the next few decades, and he has no role to play, outside pretend Faceless-Man to the Starks and pretend Stark-fostern to the rest of the world.

Varro is irrelevant to this decision.

Faceless Men must be free to work without prying eyes scrutinizing their every move--evasion adds an additional layer of complexity, to no purpose.

But the god’s links to the King in the North must not be weakened. Jon Stark is a dead man, and anointed--that is the symbolic link. The blood and bone of it is that Jon Stark is brother to the god’s Consort.

“I am Princess Arya Stark of Winterfell,” she says. “It is time I moved my household out of the children’s wing. Sansa has claimed the Heralds’ quarters as her own, all the way at the front of the keep. Jon takes the Lord’s Tower, two courtyards away from the family wing. With the ousting of the Braavosi for inappropriate behavior, Princess Arya will be claiming the former embassy of Braavos.”

Jaqen looks at her; the god is surprised. “Didn’t think we’d be giving up our chambers.”

“Does it hurt?” she asks.

“A little,” He says, hesitant

“Good,” she replies. “You and your bride have become far too attached to that place--understandable, your marriage-moon was spent there. But we cannot work from there, the space is too limited, the appointing not suited to Faceless tasks. And our every coming and going is watched, and reported to the kitchens or to Sansa Stark. Claiming the embassy for the Princess Arya does not make us any less Stark.” She reads the fleeting emotion across His brow. “We will return to the chambers for tonight,” she adds as gently as she can. “The move will not happen until after we return.”

“It’s the chambermaids, Jaqen,” says Varro to the god, his tone rueful. “Arya doesn’t like others eyeing her men.”

The god’s mouth twitches. “Clearly, that must be it.”

Varro turns to her then. “Household, you said,” he observes quietly. “Have you decided upon a role for the renegade?”

She considers him, the careful neutrality of his face. “The one who was once renegade hunter is wartime-advisor to the Last Blade,” she says. “Varro Massag is lover to Arya Stark.”

Truth. Truth. Not what he is really asking, but she will not take their once-brother, their lover, as a subordinate, no matter how urgently he feels the need for a framework.
She draws her lips to a side in a smirk. “His official title, a liveried position, is to be ‘Royal Ice Fisherman’.”

Lie.

Jaqen snorts. “To the chambers, then, for one last night?” His tone is mildly suggestive.

Even mild suggestion is enough to send a tingling heat to her core, make her flush with the awareness of how very near the two of them are to her.

“It’s not even time for afternoon tea,” she says. “There’s work to be done.”

She doesn’t miss the look the two exchange over her head. Unease. Caution.

Yes, my loves--Arya Stark is not Zural Mobhai. The time for ‘look the other way’ is done.

Without another word, she climbs out the window, takes to the roofs--she will pass from tower to tower and balcony to battlement, slipping into the window of Bran’s old nursery. Behind her, she senses Jaqen stepping out of the window and down to the ground until a patch of darkness envelopes Him. He will flit from shadow to shadow, avoiding the pools of light and activity, until He walks into the western doors of the family wing.

Varro simply walks out the front door.

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Her and Jaqen have made it to their chamber first. They stand upon their darkened balcony, and observe.

Varro’s technique takes longer than theirs. He walks openly; he changes every few steps. He wears a face -- “Daorys” is too recognizable in Winterfell. He wears a brother’s face, and he is no one--he mirrors the expectations of the people he encounters.

She extrapolates: an affable nod, and a drover thinks he knows Varro from somewhere, gives him a gruff ‘good afternoon’. A mischievous wagging of his eyebrow at a stooped grandmother, and she swats at him in mock-outrage: ‘isn’t that her husband, what’s her name, she used to take in the laundry for…’

With each shift of expression, of posture, of gait and movement, Varro places himself on the blade’s edge between vague familiarity and disinterest for every person he encounters. Memory is a strangely malleable thing--it’s as if his name is on the tip of their tongues, they know him, he belongs here, but they’re too preoccupied, or too busy, or he’s not important enough for them to wrack their brains to come up with the exact link.

He passes through the keep doors--a guard even holds them open for him. That was a breach of security, Varro wasn’t wearing “Daorys”. Sandor will have to be apprised.

Varro wears his own face by the time he knocks, and enters their chamber.

“Were you showing off for her?” Jaqen asks him. “That trip around the cart felt rather…unnecessary.”

“More than one way to impress a woman into using one’s name, Jaqen,” Varro drawls. “I’ll teach you a few if you like.”
“The normal way didn’t work today?” asks Jaqen, then shakes his head in mock sympathy. “It happens to many men, at some point in their lives. Nothing to be too ashamed of.”

“We have the proof,” she says, “we need to take it to the House.”

The teasing, the mock-challenge, it slides off of both of them, revealing the tense alertness underneath. Jaqen moves to take a seat at the small table in the antechamber to their bedroom. The tray he brought up earlier, unbeknownst to Arya, still sits on the table. He lifts the cover—bread, and boiled eggs, same as what the guards are eating.

Varro drops a cloth-wrapped package onto the table, and seats himself as well. The savory smell of meat pies rises from it.

_Not an entirely unnecessary trip around the cart._

Somewhere in the few moments he was out of their view, he managed to purchase pies. With the clerk’s money.

Jaqen grins at Varro, and starts eating.

_The way to a Faceless Man’s heart…_

_She_ may be impressed by skill, but it takes successful deception to impress Jaqen.

“Ravens are slow,” she begins, and seats herself across from the two of them. She picks up a peeled, boiled egg, smashes it between two slices of bread, takes a bite. “Braavos won’t even know about the question for another six or eight watches.”

Jaqen is thinking, as He absently cuts his portion of the pie into smaller and smaller pieces before forking the resultant mush into His mouth. “The dreaming,” he says reluctantly. “Though I must find someone that sleeps—and it doesn’t always work.” His mouth twists. “Unpleasant, when it doesn’t.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I don’t remember that.”

Jaqen looks to her. “Always worked for you,” He says gently. “ _And_ you,” He says to Varro. “Not a single failure all the way from the Jade Gates, except for when you kept waking up, or we couldn’t find you.” He shakes his head. “And two in the same dream, that has never worked before either.”

_Did He gain greater conscious control of His domain? Or is it that we are ‘god touched’, whatever that means? Or something as simple as the resonance between us three that led to the dreaming in the first place?_

“Conjecture is useless at this point,” she says. “The Wind will take you to Braavos--then we must try.”

Jaqen nods in agreement.

Varro’s gaze is distant as he chews. “What,” he says, “ _is_ the dreaming in the first place?”

**THE HANDSOME MAN**

The House is empty; the candles unlit.
Something is wrong.

He walks from alcove to alcove, trying to light the candles under the statues. Some light, others, stubborn, refuse to catch the flame.

Footsteps.

He turns.

Jaqen?

But the shape disappears behind a pillar.

He gives chase.

He is no one, but sometimes he thinks of himself as Arya Stark’s amusingly-named “Handsome Man”. Amusement is not a thing he allows himself. Unlike some of his brothers, he refuses to retain any peccadillos of character that echo the one he was born as.

No, what the monicker is, is a pleasant echo of his hypothesis.

For three hundred years he has iterated through the faces of his brothers, a feature at a time. Noses, this decade. The partial laying of a face upon oneself is not something many can do—only those that choose true namelessness—either through deliberate destruction of memory like the hunter, or through concerted mindfulness of one’s lack of a name. The layering of feature, lips upon lips upon lips till they blur together to create an amalgam, a true averaging of form and structure, that is something only he does.

The faces of Faceless Men are a near-random sampling of the faces of all the peoples of the world. True, the sample size is small and skewed towards the male. But individual comeliness spans the scale from the grotesque to the evanescent.

The original purpose of the work was to create the truly “average” face. One that could blend in anywhere in the world, one that was entirely unexceptional. A powerful tool for a Faceless Man. The work started with the color of the skin, then progressed to other features.

It is only in the last hundred years that he has seen a fundamental truth emerging in the mirror; something entirely unexpected. For it seems the more he averages the features of his brothers upon his face, the more—for no specific reason at all—he is regarded as handsome. And this regard is not limited to any one social class or race of people. The sharp-eyed Lyseni and the rounded Xi Tish both regard this face as comely. It meets none of the standards of beauty of either of those people—not the arch of the eyebrow, not the width of the lips. And yet, and yet, if a man on the street is asked, “is this face a handsome one”, he will be confused but he will answer in the affirmative. And if he is asked why, he will not be able to tell.

It is known that the more bilaterally symmetric a face is, the more desirable it is considered by potential mates. Bilateral symmetry is merely a mirroring of left-to-right across the axis defined by the nose. But a fundamental truth of human perception may be something far deeper than that: we do not desire symmetry.

We desire union.

No more than a hypothesis at the present—the work will continue for some time. Or it may all just be the lingering aftereffects of a very bad case of mushroom poisoning, as Jaqen mockingly suggests.
Jaqen. Wasn’t he just here?

He is.

The handsome man sees his teacher emerge from behind the statue of the Goat, then disappear into the shadows of the archway beyond. A game of hide-and-seek? The one who is no one hasn’t played this game since he was a novice, deafened by a potion, forced to use his eyes to listen.

There is a strange quality to the House, something he remembers very vaguely…

This is a dream.

He hasn’t dreamed, death-mask nightmares aside, for more than three hundred years, not since the day he died. Dead men don’t dream, though he knows Ambraysis has some strange kind of agreement with the god.

The god.

Sleep is a little death; dreams are the god’s domain.

The handsome man stops chasing.

And Jaqen finds him.

His teacher’s eyes are black with death.

The handsome man’s gaze is locked on his god; a smile blooms upon his face. He had despaired at one time, of ever seeing the god face-to-face. The changed faces of the statues in the House rekindled the hope. And now…

At long last, He has come to Himself.

The one who is no one bows his head, and Jaqen’s hand rests for a moment over his hair.

“Valar morghulis,” says Jaqen.

“Valar dohaeris,” he replies. Something at the back of his mind, something… “Something is very wrong, Jaqen. Some absolutely nonsensical questions about your Consort, about H’ghar blood, and they suddenly stopped coming. I had a sense. I’ve abandoned my contract--timing was not important--I ride to Braavos even now. You need--”

“There was a vote,” says Jaqen.

“What vote?”

“You were excluded,” says Jaqen. “Along with the rest of the nine.”

No one is taken aback.

There are many ways that Faceless Men divide themselves--emergent divisions, alliances, loose groups of individuals. This is one way that emerged when their sister of Yi Ti came to them: teacher to student, a lineage.

The nine--Jaqen’s students. The Faceless Masters to whom each Faceless Man can trace his own line of instruction. Some lineages are longer than others, some splinter like the roots of an oak tree.
The handsome man is the fourth one Jaqen taught. The old man is the first, of course, though he was of a time when there were no teachers and no students, and neither recruitment nor joining.

The nine were excluded from a vote?

“Braavosi politics?” he asks. *What madness are they up to now?*

Jaqen looks grim. “I am declared renegade.”

No one chuckles. “Good one. What is really going on?”

Jaqen just looks at him.

“I would understand,” says no one.

“Each stratum of the House’s trust in me is breached,” says Jaqen. “The soul—I am falling into the prophecy-trap of the Lord of Light; the Great Other is a pariah, not a brother. The mind—suspicion, of the Valyrian blood Jaqen H’ghar carries in his veins, that finds commonality with the King I have anointed. The body—questions, spoken aloud, *voted* on that never came from within the House. The heart—”

“Dead men don’t have a heart,” interrupts no one; a reflex. A whisper.

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “Not intrinsic to ourselves,” He says. A leading statement, familiar, from no one’s time as a new Faceless Man.

No one closes his eyes.

*Think*—what do dead men allow themselves as a filter of perception?

“Death,” he says. “The nature of death itself is questioned?”

“And so dead men learn fear,” says Jaqen softly. “And what they begin to fear is *me*.”

*Only renegades are supposed to feel fear.*

No one’s jaw clenches. “What happens if you become renegade?”

“I cannot,” says Jaqen. “By definition.”

The handsome man relaxes. “I would understand,” he offers.

“Come,” says Jaqen. “The others are waiting.”

*Which* others?

They walk towards the stairs beyond the temple. The silence pulls at the one who is no one.

“Very nice trick,” he comments, looking around appreciatively. The House looks as it always does, albeit darker than it should be. “Should have done this before; really cuts down on the riding back and forth for conclaves.”

Jaqen smiles a little. “Good training for you,” he says. “A century or two more, and you’ll be able to work your horse up to a canter, even.”

The handsome man snorts. The first time he saw a horse, he tried to kill it. The second time he saw
one, he fell off of it. Him and horses get along just fine now, but that’s never stopped Jaqen’s mockery.

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The small meeting room, the round table, also feels very realistic. Six figures in grey robes sit around it—the old man of Braavos, the lady who was courtesan in Pentos, the alchemist, the brother with the albino eyes.

*Four of the nine.* The handsome man makes five. Four are missing: their brother of the sea-gate, the one who lay the last wreath upon Valyria, the one of the Dosh Khaleen. Their sister who was once a priestess of the Black Goat in Qohor--she will be called the ‘mute one’ now, the handsome man thinks.

The other two faces present in this dream: Arya Stark. The hunter.

“Couldn’t reach the others,” says Jaqen as he takes his seat. “They do not sleep.” He nods to Arya Stark. “My bride, who gives me the range to reach all of you upon the wind.”

Her eyes have a certain quality to them, a cool assessment...

*She is no one.*

A Lorathi.

The first Lorathi in the order in over a century.

Zural and his ilk mistook inexperience and attachments to her former self as a fixed state, and no gentle arguments, especially that the making of a Lorathi takes *time*, were listened to.

The handsome man smiles, dips his head towards her in acknowledgement.

*A number of the questions had to do with her--whether she could replace Jaqen, for one.* It was to be expected--a second god in the House of Black and White.

The handsome man knows her well, of course, he was there at the making of her into a Faceless Man. *Not* strange, that she and Jaqen wedded one another. But it is the first such arrangement that is spoken of openly within the House. The handsome man is not sure whether he should disapprove of such speaking--what agreements Faceless Men make with each other are their own business, not the order’s; the Braavosi penchant for gossip should not be encouraged. And yet, no Lorathi does anything with a single purpose, and Jaqen’s motives have always been the most inscrutable.

*Some god-business there.*

But if that is the case, she needs to cast aside the “Arya Stark”. The old gods were *nameless* for a reason. Names define a person, names bind them. Constrain them. The wind should have no constraint.

The god gestures to the hunter. “Varro, who has provided a mechanism for me being able to bring more than three or four into the dreaming without setting the room on fire.”

*Varro.*

*He has taken his name back.*
The ideal Lorathi backslides?

How do dreams set the room on fire?

“I would understand,” says their sister, her limpid, almond eyes fixed on the hunter.

“A dream is a play--a theatre--played along the boundary between life and death,” Varro replies, entirely emotionless. “The mind hallucinates a semblance of a consciousness, drifts from memory and image to the abstract and back again. A shared dream is merely a shared hallucination.”

Nods, all around--the entire world is naught but a shared hallucination, from a certain perspective.

“In this dreaming,” continues Varro, gestures to the room around them, “we are the hallucination in Jaqen’s mind.”

Some blinks. Shifts of perspective.

“Through His favor,” and Varro touches his chest, “the god shares His hallucination with the rest of us. But there is a cognitive load involved--blood and brain. The less the resonance between the god’s mind and ours, the harder it is for Him to sustain a shared dream.”

That fits--the less empathy between a Faceless Man and another person, the less accurate the Faceless Man’s extrapolations of the person. A Faceless Man, a Lorathi in particular, mirrors--reflects another within himself, and achieves, temporarily, a shared understanding of the world.

Varro’s explanation suggests the god’s ability, this shared dreaming: it could be learned by others.

Needs thinking upon.

“But any dream with more than two or three people…” Varro trails off.

“A Valyrian’s mind is prone to overheating very quickly,” says Jaqen, dry.

Appreciative chuckles. None from Arya Stark.

Or Varro Massag.

The hunter took his name back; he shattered the deep-discipline.

“No one” will be a transient state for Varro now. The handsome man sees no benefit to this, as some of the other Lorathi, including Jaqen, do. Yes, “no one” can be summoned at will, but he can also be broken if the intensity of emotional upheaval is sufficient. Or if there is overwhelming stimulus. The latter is more likely for Varro--he consumes sensation the way Jaqen consumes verse.

“So we form a cluster of minds,” says Varro, “to distribute the load of mirroring each others’ hallucinations between us. Creates accuracy in the dream-state, a shared understanding that will then carry over to the waking world instead of fragments of conversations and images.” Varro looks to the handsome man. “Forgive, for the hide-and-seek. The god had to establish a common baseline to draw you into the cluster--the House is common to all, but each man’s experience of it is different.”

“Let us pretend that was a sufficient explanation,” says Arya Stark.

Some nod. Others do not--this requires further understanding, of what defines a dream as a dream, what is the purpose of a dream for a living man, a thousand other things.
“Jaqen was declared *renegade*,” she says.

The handsome man nods: *yes, we have more pressing concerns than dreams at the moment.*

Varro smiles slightly.

The handsome man extrapolates: Varro’s sacrificing the state of namelessness has something to do with his ordeal in Asshai. It is not a grave error--the discipline can be rebuilt. Always easier the second time around; the handsome man has had his own brush with identity after the Dance of Dragons. His teacher’s grace, that it stopped short of being a disaster. And *Varro’s* teacher, the old man, sits right here.

“The sanctity of the House of Black and White has been breached…,” begins Arya Stark.

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Lorathi respond as Lorathi will--each considers the evidence of the ciphers taken in Asshai, the questions. Each arrives at a conclusion through an entirely different process: *Asshai used the renegade hunter to create renegades within the House of Black and White.*

No blame is attached to Varro Massag. Faceless Men do not have a heart, no filter of perception, to mistakenly pile sorrow and regret upon the closest available target--blame accrues to the *violator*, not the violated.

But the matter of renegades remains. And the *how* of the making of them--the old way of making a renegade: (wrongdoing, then a vote; that way is obviously incorrect. The renegade excises the face of Jaqen H’ghar, and then Jaqen H’ghar withdraws His favor: *that* is the making of a renegade.

*God business, all of it, as in the making of a Faceless Man*. So what part must the House of Black and White now play?

The handsome man is of two minds--it seems the brother with the albino eyes is of three. But their five viewpoints clash directly with their sister’s. Jaqen says nothing; the argument grows loud--Lorathi arguments often do.

“Brothers!” Arya Stark interrupts the multi-sided discussions. “Blood and bone. There are highly trained, paranoid creatures with a compulsive desire for *irrational* murder wandering around the *House of Black and White* at this very moment. Jaqen felt two so far as we flew over the House, even in the dreaming. I would move towards an actionable vote.”

The handsome man feels a keen urge to wake up, to leave the small gully he’s found shelter in for the night, spur his horse towards Braavos.

He resists.

“My student,” says the alchemist. “She is in danger. *That* is what I felt, I--” he falls silent.

“Two acolytes, a dozen priests, all unable to defend themselves,” says their sister from Pentos.

*Something must be done*.

He notes the new dynamic around the table, thinks on it as the others slowly bring themselves into the consensus. Jaqen moves in suggestions, whispers. Jaqen uses the push as much as the pull--opposing a thing to see it come to fruition, supporting a thing to see it fall.
Arya Stark galvanizes action, brings them again and again back to the immediate topic at hand. No subtlety to her, it is all brute force—not a criticism. Her teacher was Braavosi. Use what you know—it is effective.

But why does Jaqen not tell us His mind? Why does he not outline a plan? Why is it his Consort and not Him that calls us to war?

There is a natural lull in the conversation. And finally, finally, Jaqen speaks. “I am the subject of this vote, this attack, brothers,” he says quietly. “My instinct is compromised—twice now I have walked into a trap set by Asshai. Thrice, three Faceless Men before me. The enemy’s plan is long-laid; they anticipate us time and again. We are not fools, to do the same thing again and again and expect different results.”

A shift in perspective. We are reacting, not acting. For the first time in almost half a millennium, Faceless Men are not the ones laying a trap; Faceless Men are the ones that are flailing, frantically trying to get out of one.

“If I direct our response,” says Jaqen, “I will hand the enemy the Many-Faced God on a silver platter.”

Uneasy silence around the table.

“But,” he says, and a small smile twitches at the corner of his mouth, “what the enemy cannot anticipate is Arya Stark.” The smile widens. “Asshai cannot predict the Wind.”

The hairs on the back of his neck rise.

“We need to move quickly,” she says. “Hour by hour, the number of renegades will proliferate.”

The old man appears haggard. “I will contain it. As soon as I wake. The question will be stopped, the ciphers will be changed. And every man that cannot prove he wears Jaqen H’ghar will be cast out.”

“Proposal,” says Arya Stark. “We define this ‘outbreak’ of renegacy as an attack upon us. We do not ‘cast out’ our brothers in their hour of need. We poison them into a coma if we must, put them in their cells, until we figure a way to undo it.”

The old man looks grave. “Two hundred years, I have been thinking on it,” he says. He shakes his head. “It is not possible.” His eyes are moist.

“No renegades on hallowed ground—find a storehouse somewhere.”

Their sister from Pentos does not agree. “Lorathi may have turned,” she says. “Not so easy to poison a Lorathi into obedience or contain him in a storehouse.”

Truth. A Lorathi commands his blood to circulate, or not, his stomach to break down the poisons, his intestines not to absorb them; many poisons can be rendered almost harmless by a Lorathi using acts of will alone.

“A gift must be given,” she says.

Varro Massag looks up at the last. “The discipline will hold,” says Varro. “Explain, and they will drug themselves.”
So even the hunter switches stance to support Arya Stark. *He learns the value of her impulsive unpredictability.*

“I am *still* much agitated by the thought of Lorathi renegades,” says their sister. “The discipline cannot hold something like *that* at bay.” Her lip curls.

Varro smiles, lopsided. “It holds *me*,” he says.

A shift in perspective: *not a brother.*

“*You* asked yourself this renegade-making question?” demands the brother with the albino eyes. “*You* excised *Jaqen?*”

Their sister has already pushed back her chair, she stands now, against the wall. “You are a renegade?” she asks.

And the handsome man realizes everyone has pulled back from Varro Massag slightly, himself included. All except Jaqen, and the old man, and Arya Stark, who must have known already.

*We live in strange times.*

The renegade hunter is a renegade now.

He has no loyalty, no word, no bond to hold him to the brotherhood.

*So what holds him? Why is he here and not fleeing across the snow with Zural?*

Jaqen rises from his chair, circles around the back of the table, till he stands behind the renegade. A very clear message, that: *the god holds him.*

One by one, everyone’s stance relaxes; their sister returns to the table.

*Empathy. This was our brother just a short while ago. He is a mirror of us, our might-have-been, had we just asked ourselves that unfortunate question. Regret, not blame accrues to the curious.*

“It has been but two days since the question was asked,” says their sister, her eyes sliding away from Varro. “Discipline may hold, but for how long?”

“Two centuries,” says Varro quietly. He shrugs, and there is a bitter twist to his mouth. “At least,” he says, “that is how long *I* have been a renegade.”

Stunned disbelief; even Lorathi have a limit to what they can control.

And Jaqen places his hands upon the renegade’s shoulders. The god speaks, amidst the echoing silence. “Though he was not aware of it when he was no one.”

*All this time?*

A shift in perspective: *not a victim of an attack. Two hundred years, a compulsive killer, a man without restraint or reason, living in the midst of us.*

The old man’s head is bowed.

*Can’t dare to look the rest of us in the eye. Harbored a renegade, helped him cloak his broken mind from us?*
“A gift needs to be given,” says the Alchemist. “Immediately. Jaqen--”

“Not yet,” says Arya Stark. “He has things he must say to us. They are important.”

Varro’s mouth twists–bitter amusement. “A trade, faceless ones? Something in exchange for truths you will not get from anyone else.”

*He* bargains?

“You will have to speak truth for a thousand years before you ‘balance’ the lies you have spoken,” observes their brother of the albino eyes.

Varro Massag looks into their brother’s eyes then. “The intent was not to deceive,” he says. “The intent was to *serve*.”

And then the handsome man knows the face of Varro Massag’s compulsion.

*The renegade that hunts* other renegades.

“Jaqen *used* you,” murmurs the alchemist, he looks up at the god. “Poorly done, Jaqen, to force a sick man to do what you would not. Mercy needs to be given *now*.”

“A Lorathi does not do anything for just one purpose,” murmurs the brother with albino eyes: a reminder.

A shift in perspective: *Jaqen is not softhearted. Jaqen sees more than the rest of us do; Valar morghulis--no plan is more long-term than His.*

*His teacher helped cover it up. Jaqen participated. Was the worth of Varro Massag so much that the sanctity of our Temple, the safety of our home, was worth sacrificing to him?*

“No,” says Varro, addressing the handsome man directly. “No, it wasn’t.”

*He was a brother. Was his life worth the denial of mercy?*

“A proposal,” says Arya Stark. “We hear what the renegade has to say. We give him what it’s worth at the end of it.”

The proposal is voted upon.

The vote passes.

And Varro Massag speaks.

Of black blood. Of the symbolic and the material. The Many-Faced God. The nature of the Valyrian.

*A recursion of assassins.*

There is much silence at the end of it. Silence, born of a thousand different shifts in perspective; each will have to be measured, reconciled. Dizzy-making. But truth is truth. Truth *fits*. It reconciles the seeming paradox at the *heart* of the House of Black and White: a man that is an equal, but not. A god that is brother, but not.

Free men, free in all things, that still *serve*. 

We serve the Many-Faced God.

We serve ourselves, as all free men must.

We are union.

The handsome man speaks for the first time. “Forgiven, renegade,” he says. “Forgiven.”

Murmurs, echoes from around the table.

“Forgiven,” says the old man. Second-to-last, the sister of Pentos; she is silent for a very long time. But in the end she, too, must recognize what the truth is worth.

“Forgiven,” she says quietly.

And at last it comes to Arya Stark, to the Wind that made the Night of Ice.

“Naught to forgive,” she says. “He spoke no lie to me.”

She plays by rules, the handsome man thinks; some slight disapproval. The Braavosi still lingers in her.

As for Varro, the forgiveness is not enough, not yet. Again and again the vote will have to pass--Faceless Men will have to choose to listen to him. Not just the ones present in this dream; each and every one of them will have to hear with the renegade says, and see if it is sufficient for them.

And if it comes to pass that the entirety of the Many-Faced God forgives Varro Massag?

A question that has no answer as of yet.

AEGON

His “cousin” nestles in his arms, runs her fingers through the sparse hair on his chest.

“Must be the Martell in you,” she murmurs. “Targaryens are not supposed to be hairy.”

He snorts. “Targaryens are not supposed to be many things, Arienne. Friendly to Martells is one of them. Friendly to Sands is another.”

He tires of this game. There is nothing to be achieved here. The Golden Company slips out of his grasp, and Westeros is already gone. The welcome he’s come to expect as his due in the palaces and homes of the highborn wears thin. Very thin.

He sighs. “I will not be King,” he says.

“Not the King of the Seven Kingdoms,” says Princess Arienne Martell. “Not unless you’ve got a dragon or two hatching somewhere.”

Not even then. Not a real Targaryen. Can’t control dragons.

The House of Black and White had always been vague about that part. But they’d had a plan. Whatever it was, it’s dust now.

No missive. Not from Izembaro, not from Braavos, not from anywhere.
He’s been cut off, without a word.

He should feel angry. All he feels is sorrow.

Arianne Martell levers herself up on an elbow. “I would very much like to be a Queen,” she says.

He summons up a grin from somewhere. “Make me a King, oh beautiful one,” he says, “and my heart is yours.”

She smiles then. “The Mother of Dragons sails to Westeros,” she says. “Poor thing can’t manage two kingdoms, surely?”

He blinks.

“She’s taking the Seven Kingdoms from you. So take Meereen from her.”

He exhales. And then he lies back upon the pillows, thinking.

“She’s taking the Seven Kingdoms from you. So take Meereen from her.”

“Meereen,” he murmurs. Daenerys freed the slaves, but she should know just saying it won’t be enough. The roots of slavery run deep in Slaver’s Bay.

*I could be King. I could do something.*

The House of Black and White despises slavery; it’s how Aegon came to their attention in the first place, earned a coin from a nameless man—by knifeing a slaver in the gut, grabbing the two street-children that ran with Aegon’s gang. He’d freed a few others by accident in the process—couldn’t get the little ones’ manacles off without unhooking the entire chain.

Hadn’t used the coin—didn’t know what it meant—for a very long time. When he *did* use it, it earned him sweeping and mopping and washing corpses. Not the life of an assassin he’d envisioned.

*And so I traded the coin again for a name I’d heard once on someone’s lips, and liked.*

Aegon. The “Targaryen” came later. He *knows* his name isn’t Aegon, of course, but he’s been using it for so long, he’s forgotten what else he’d been called. “Boy”, he remembers, “hey you”. “Shifty eyes”, “Crank”—names earned in his little street-urchin gang upon the streets of Volantis.

*Aegon Targaryen.*

Maybe if he’s King, and he makes strides towards solving the problems for the freed slaves Daenerys has caused with her heavy-handed dragonfire-and-execution mode of governance…

*Maybe I’ll earn another coin.*

**arya**

Her and Jaqen end up tangled on the chaise, their mouths on each other. Jaqen cups her rear, his strong fingers knead her flesh as she writhes against him.

He groans against her mouth. “Say it again.”

She pulls back a little, “I would move towards an actionable vote,” she says, very amused.
“Again,” He demands.

She stretches out against Him, presses herself to His chest. “You enjoy the ‘warhammer’ far too much.”

His hand moves without warning; He shoves it into her britches, buries His fingers roughly into her unbearably wet cunt.

*Point taken:* she enjoys His silent machinations far too much.

She rocks over His hand, back and forth, eyes half-closed.


He pulls back a bit, looks at her. “I don’t know that one,” he says, his brow furrowed, though his fingers do not let up their rhythm.

“He eats stars,” she says.

Jaqen’s expression clears. “Ah, that’s just...me.”

She tilts her head to a side. “You?” she asks.

Jaqen leans back, rests his head against the back of the chaise as he considers her. “You like me?” he asks. His fingers scissor inside her.

A slow smile spreads across her face as she leans forward. “You asked me,” she murmurs, “what I saw when I looked at you a certain way.”

His eyes are intent upon hers, dark with lust. “The things you make me want to do to you,” He murmurs.

Another question answered, it seems. She saw the elemental face of death. The end to all things, not the faces and names mere men have prayed onto Him like suits of clothes.

*And Varro saw the face of death He chose for Himself.*

A soft sound, in the room across the hall.

“Guess he woke up,” says Jaqen. He grins at her, closes his eyes. Varro had requested some time with the old man.

*Wish I could speak to Zural.*

Jaqen did try, for her sake; He couldn’t hold Zural’s sleeping mind.

She waits but a breath before He opens His eyes again. “Sorrow,” He says. “It spills over.”

They look at each other. “Sex is a thing in and of itself for him, not a tool.” Curing by fucking won’t work with Varro, and unlike Jaqen or her, he won’t like mingling lust with anything heavier than mild discontent. Perhaps it treads too close to his darker compulsions.

Jaqen withdraws his hand from between her legs. They breathe, in tandem, the Wind drinks down His need, and hers; the throbbing between her legs subsides.

“Be careful with him,” she murmurs, “he will react poorly if he believes he is coming between me
and you.”

Jaqen nods.

Footsteps, leading to their chambers. Varro knocks, enters upon Jaqen’s calling. There is a drawn quality to Varro’s his mouth. His eyes, bloodshot, suggest weariness and pain in equal parts.

“Love?” asks Arya.

He folds to the ground beside the chaise, rests his head on Jaqen’s knee.

“I’m out of the order, of course,” he says. “No coma in a storehouse for me.”

“Because we need you with us,” she says.

“Because I am not a victim of this attack,” says Varro. “My cipher will be cut out.” He exhales. “Old man said, if you two didn’t want me dead when it was done, a commission could be bought for me in a free-mercenary company. Offered a couple of other things when I said no—a clerk, for one of the shipping conglomerates, they’re expanding because of some politics in Braavos, hiring every man that can add two numbers together.” Varro’s mouth is a thin line. “He warned me--he knew my mind on you, Jaqen, before I entered the deep discipline. Part of him thought--I didn’t correct—that I chose to serve because you turned me down. You know. Jaqen the Unseducible. So just before I woke he said, ‘Don’t make a fool of yourself, boy, you’re on very precarious ground.’ Varro snorts, his voice changes to the cadences of the old man. “‘And be careful of Arya Stark. She’ll turn the world inside out for a brother, but now it’s only Jaqen’s goodwill that keeps her from your throat.’”

She sighs and slides off Jaqen’s lap to sit on the ground. “At least he didn’t offer you a spot as a courtesan in a brothel,” she says.

Varro shrugs. “Told me to ‘cultivate’ you if I could--‘she can get a position for you in her brother’s household--Starks are allies, the King is close to Jaqen, it’ll be some sense of familiarity for you while you adapt. The god will withdraw his favor, you’ll have to learn how to fit into these times, these people. You will have to learn how to age.’ And so on.”

Jaqen’s turn, to join them on the floor.

Varro smiles, sad. “Kindness, all of it. I nodded, thanked him for the advice.” He sighs. “He goes far, far beyond what is required for my sake, or correct of him to offer--the others won’t trust his judgement for a very long time because of me.”

“Why didn’t you tell him about us?” asks Jaqen.

“Can’t,” Varro mutters. “There’s going to be a lot of talk regarding all of this. Old man may try to defend me. Again. A world of supportive arguments can be constructed around the two of you taking me to yourself.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow: so?

“It’s not me that’s in a precarious position,” says Varro. “It’s you that’s dangling over a pit, Jaqen. Protecting a renegade instead of giving him mercy, well, that’s Jaqen H’ghar, doing the impossible. Lying with a renegade? Exposing Arya to me? You saw the initial reactions—and they’re your students, they’re Lorathi, deep-discipline. Braavosi, the ones you actually have to bring over to your side? Perception is everything--neither you nor your bride can afford a renegade as a lover at the moment.”
Jaqen knows all of this, yet the god is a rebellious sort of soul: *dissent; defy; disobey.*

Arya shrugs. “If it does come out, we say we’re working on the House’s primary priority at the moment--how to un-renegade a renegade.”

Varro grins, the first real grin she’s seen on him for a while. “Fuck the bond right back into me?”

“Lie back and think of the god,” she says.

“Tried that earlier,” Varro says. “Didn’t work. God’s going to have to lie back and think of *me* next time, Arya Stark.”

Jaqen snorts. Then he leans forward, captures Varro’s lips. “Think of you any which way as it is,” he murmurs. Varro seems to be drinking in the kiss; his fists unclench, the underlying tension in his legs seems to ease.

“Love?” she asks again, when the two separate, a little glassy-eyed.

Varro looks to her. “Heartsick, Arya,” he says. “Nothing more. It will pass.”

Jaqen’s arm snakes around her waist, pulls her up and around Him; she allows herself to be dragged half onto Varro’s lap.

“Hold that,” says Jaqen. “It always makes *me* less maudlin.”

“Yes, *that* is the purpose of my existence,” says the Wind, acid, even as she nestles into Varro’s side. “Making people *feel* better.”

Varro kisses the back of her neck, draws her closer to him.

“Ravens are slow,” he says, “and Jaqen, your dreaming is powerful but…”

“But it cannot reach anyone that is not asleep,” she finishes.

The question is spreading, radiating outwards from Braavos by raven, by messenger, by ship. Three days have passed already--the question will reach Faceless Men on the field ahead of any counter the House may devise.

Something must be done.

**VARRO**

“The silver woman,” says Jaqen thoughtfully. The shape of Varro’s nightmares has come out now; analyzed, torn to shreds by the three of them. The woman that created the nightmares, the compulsion to kill himself, *her* face has been found.

“She implanted suggestions in you while you were *awake* ,” says Arya. Anger licks at her irises.

“ Warg dreams, or dragon dreams,” says Varro, his face controlled. The silver woman’s Valyrian look suggests the latter, the mind-control, the implanted suggestion, so similar to Bran’s experience of it (‘hold the door’, ‘kill yourself’...all suggestions), the scents Varro experienced--they suggest a *warg* . And he shared in her power, her memories somewhat--the scents of Jaqen and Arya, wrapped around him...the images of chains in Asshai...
Arya draws her knees up to her chin. “The Wind would like to try,” she says. “If I can but drop a word, a piece of news into others’ minds…”

Then the question can be stopped faster than a raven’s flight.

“Maybe even calm a renegade,” she says, her eyes on him: a test?

Varro stretches out on his side, leans on his elbow. “You want to invade my mind, Atthrarido’anni?”

Yours, as I have been for moons now; not sure if the mind knows that, though.

Conscious control over his faculties belongs to Varro. But without the deep discipline, the totality of mind being made silent, the underbelly of his consciousness seethes with fear, with anger, and lust all tied up into a powerful self-hatred, the need to lash out.

He looks to Jaqen; seems Varro and the god are in agreement.

“Too many unknowns, beloved,” says Jaqen. “The nature of the technique, the target. What his underlying thought-patterns actually are --we’ve never had a captive renegade to study before.”

Jaqen imbues the last with a bit of a leer.

It helps; the paranoia changes faces, from ‘they’re going to take my mind from me’ to ‘they’re going to take me’. And the last has no fear associated with it, only lust. Perhaps some rage. He smiles at Jaqen: thank you.

She’s caught the nuance of the interplay between him and the god.

“Another idea,” she mutters, “find a brother, make the wind spell out ‘beware question excise jaqen don’t ask’ in leaves in front of him or throw up mud against a wall...”

Varro furrows his brow. “Land has no shape,” he says slowly, “save that which wind and water make of it.”

Arya looks up. “Carve the fucking warning into the nearest flat surface?”

“Can you?” asks the god.

Her eyes film white; a draft of air, not cold though, it brushes past him. A hissing, sawing sound—a gouge appears upon the wooden surface of the small table beside the chaise, then deepens, as if some invisible file with a very fine grade is being rubbed against the wood over and over.

A character, in the logograms of Rhoynese Temple script: “caution”.

“Seems I can,” she says. She almost sounds surprised. “But I don’t know more than a handful of names. I recognize maybe two dozen faces. I don’t know how to find them.”


“Oh,” she says.

And that’s what it means, Jaqen, to think like a mage--to bind unrelated concepts into a continuum of application. The Valyrian is the only one of us that can.
Varro snorts.

For all of his watching of sorcerers in Asshai, of all that he has gleaned from Ambraysis, the best Varro can do is slice open a vein, and pray.

A VIRGIN

She turns her head to a side, considers the low wooden screen that separates her pew from the one before. The ecclesiastical services of the Maiden of Light require much kneeling, but the target is in reach. A greased step, the trailing hem of her veil, caught between a door; the River That Heralds Spring will trip, and fall into the spring that has been coaxed to thaw with oilfire burning day and night for this ceremony.

But there’s something strange happening to the wooden screen. Scratches appear on its surface, they almost look like words.

A cold breeze wraps itself around her hands, folded before her in an attitude of prayer.

Arya Stark; the Wind.

The scratches are words. Temple script. Logograms. Four of them: “Magical-trap false-question-from-shadow it-makes a-traitor-is-born”

She puzzles at it; not for long. She hasn’t picked up the latest set of correspondence from her dead-drop. Good, because she’s the sort that likes answering questions.

How many others also like answering questions?

There is no answer. The Wind has already moved on.

MISSANDEI

She unwinds herself from Grey Worm. There is a heaviness to her limbs, a satiety Lorathi do not often experience with many lovers. She takes in the muscled form of the Unsullied commander, the expression on his face as he sleeps, entirely trusting. A small smile tugs at her lips.

I will be in the Queen’s service for many years, unless the House has other need of me.

Grey Worm sleeps upon his side; the flesh between his thighs is scarred, a small protuberance where his manhood was cut down to the base, enough left for urination, for the prevention of some infections.

It is not secret, that Missandei spends her nights in the commander’s bed. There is some mockery.

Sex begins in the mind. It travels downwards, arcing across clusters of nerves, leaping from cluster to cluster, under fingertips, under tongue, nerves buried within the body, nerves rising to skim along the surface of the skin. Cocks and cunts are merely tools for the awakening of the mind--powerful tools, overwhelmingly powerful sometimes, but tools nonetheless. The body has others.

There is a reason Lorathi have a reputation. They do not limit themselves to the conventional when it comes to tools.
Grey Worm has taken to sex with an ardor that leaves the both of them breathless, leaves her awed by the passion he incites in her. As to how she, a scribe-slave learned of these things...there are some questions slaves do not ask of one another.

A breeze tugs at her wrist; her skin pebbles. And upon the wooden chair-rail that runs across their tiny cabin, scratches appear that turn to words.

“god-wife speaks-warning magic-trap-question be-vigilant”

What is going on?

Something is wrong.

God-wife: Arya Stark.

**Arya Stark has the power to carve words into wood from hundreds of miles away?**

“Missandei!” A hissed voice from behind her.

She whirls; in her shock, her absorption, she has let her senses lapse. Grey Worm stands behind her, looking at the writing upon the wood. He cannot read it, but he can recognize characters when he sees them.

Did he see them being engraved?

His dark eyes bore into hers. “That is magic, Missandei?”

She says nothing.

“You do magic?” he asks, his nostrils flaring in sudden anger, distrust: what else do I not know about you? “What are you?” he demands.

“What I have always been,” she says.

His jaw clenches; he reaches for the knife at the side of the bed.

The cold breeze tugs at her wrist again.

“I am what I have always been,” she says. “One who was once a slave.” And she turns her back on Grey Worm--she can move faster than him, and he does not know it. He will be weighed down by hesitation. If he attacks her, she will not hesitate.

More words, a mixture of syllables and logograms form upon the wood:

*the House is under attack. Brothers made into renegades. Error--forgive--field of vision is limited to faceless men's breath--did not see unsullied.*

A short pause, a hesitation in the scratches. Missandei processes, and quickly: someone targets the House of Black and White. A magical attack that creates renegades out of brothers.

Arya Stark uses some power out of desperation, without knowing fully its limitations and scope. Arya Stark warns--Missandei only receives news from the House once every few moons; she would not have known of this attack until long after they reached White Harbor.

“Warranted,” Missandei murmurs aloud. *Faceless Men’s breath--she can hear me as I speak then. “Nothing to forgive.”*
My House is under attack.

Then more words appear.

Jaqen says use your discretion--the name of your unsullied can be learned.

She exhales, and slowly sinks to her knees.

“Missandei?” Grey Worm’s voice is hesitant.

Jaqen knows. He hasn’t seen me for decades, he doesn’t see my face, sees nothing but the breath in my lungs, perhaps, and yet he can read me. But then, her and Jaqen, they have known each other for a very, very long time.

She is the only one of the god’s students that shares his fondness for verse.

“No one does not love”—it is not a statement of fact. It is an instruction to the self. A warning.

Too late.

“Are you a free man, Grey Worm?” she asks.

“Because Daenerys Targaryen made me one,” he says.

This is the crux of the problem. His loyalty will forever be held by Daenerys; loyalty is a form of conditioning, and the Unsullied are very well-conditioned. Freedom, self-determination, choice—these need to be exercised to be understood—a very Braavosi statement for her to make. Still.

Choice cannot be exercised unless options are presented.

“I was made a free man when I prayed to the shadows in a slave-pit to kill my master,” she says.

He kneels beside her, his beautiful face confused. She reaches out a hand, traces the arch of his brow.

“Flesh is an illusion,” she says softly.

His eyes are wild.

“I have no proof to offer you,” she says. “I cannot--it compromises my cover.”

He swallows. “Missandei, what are you saying?” His eyes are bright.

She sighs. “I am no threat to Daenerys Targaryen.” She allows her mouth to twist, a little. “I do serve her, ironically enough--Missandei, this one, she has bought into the dreams of the Breaker of Chains. A Valyrian. I should despise her. But I have a soft spot for the good ones.”

She can read the questions being born moment by moment in his mind--she knows his face, she knows the taste of his thoughts; her extrapolations are accurate: has she gone mad? There is magic. Who has gone mad, me or her? Is this a dream?

“His name is Grey Worm,” she says to the air around her.

The breeze whispers around her head once, then dissipates. And then she focuses all of her
attention upon her lover.

The House is out of her reach. Her brothers are out of her reach. The god is out of her reach. But Grey Worm is here; one person she can try to save, albeit from herself.

They kneel across from each other—a slave’s posture—upon the rough wooden planking of the deck.

“I died in Valyria-that-was,” she begins, “just a handful of days before the Doom...”

A WANDERER

He used to have a name once. They took it from him, and now they’re after him. There used to be a man, someone he doesn’t quite remember. The man told him to kill someone.

As soon as he kills the person he’s been told to kill, they’ll stop chasing him.

He doesn’t remember who he’s supposed to kill. He leans against a boulder, one of the last solid pieces of earth left to him—ahead of him spreads a vast desert, dunes of sand shifting, turning. Taunting him.

The wind rises, it throws sand before him.

He knows the Wind. He voted for her.

Dust. Stone dust. He looks at the boulder he leans against. It looks...as if scratches in the stone—“you-are-a-traitor-made magical-trap fear-is-mind mind-is-enemy come-home”

He blinks.

Fear is mind.

Mind is enemy.

But he is a Faceless Man. He doesn’t know fear, death banishes fear, I--

A chain of logic suggests itself.

“Arya Stark” he says, runs a hand over his face. He knows her, he knows the wind. Her memories wash over him. Memories of a man in a cage. A man is called Jaqen H’ghar.

The name he did not remember—as long as someone remembers for him, no one does not need his own memory.


“Jaqen H’ghar!” His voice rings amongst the lonely sand-dunes; the hiss of the wind is his only answer. His face does not shift, there is no memory associated with that name in him.

I am a renegade.

How?

The question.
Renegades are always hunted down and killed.

*Come home.*

**A VENTING-MAN**

It’s a good face, as far as faces go. Squirrely. The face makes him a good venting-man: small men that crouch and crawl behind the great boilers, unclogging the vents. The boiler-men and sweeper-men look down on the venting-men; venting-men earn curses and kicks when they’re in the way.

A small, squirrely man can duck out of the way.

A kick is aimed at him.

An anger-urge rises through his fingers; it passes. Then he drags the boiler-man’s body behind a boiler and stuffs it down a vent. Not for the first time, he wonders why he is so angry as of late. This is the fourth boiler-man he’s had to stuff down a vent.

It’s hot behind the boilers. Then suddenly it’s cold: air, fresh air.

*The Wind.*

There is a teeth-scraping sound, a screeching that almost drives him out of his skin—nails scratching into metal. Words, on the skin of the boiler before him:

“Braavosi home-going brother-in-danger”

The anger-urge again. *Who endangers my brothers?*

The man lets the meek face, the squirrely face, slip back into the darkness.

*I have to go home.*

**A MILKMAID**

The Faceless Man stares down at her butter-churn in some consternation. The butter has frozen solid, and words—symbols—have appeared on its surface.

“I cannot read this tongue,” she says aloud. Not *all* Faceless Men take to the languages and the learning; she confines the “wits” part of the Braavosi creed, “wits, weapons and winning” to practical matters, not languages that have been dead for three hundred years.

It feels as if the breeze around her *sighs*. She grins a little.

*You are Zural’s student, Arya Stark. Exert yourself.*

A large wheel of hard, yellow cheese takes the brunt of the Wind’s cutting this time—simple shapes on the surface, plain Valyrian script: *question-is-magical-trap-of-Asshai, many-renegades.*

A cold fear grows in her.

*I voted against Jaqen. Is it that, the making of a god into a renegade, that has caused this?*
“Should I go home?” she asks the air.

More letters on the cheese-wheel: home-is-not-safe. stay. be vigilant.

**GENDRY**

Winterfell. The towers in the distance have grown till the wall bounding the keep is in sight. Sentries watch the little convoy as it makes its way over the packed snow that marks a “road” amidst shoulder-high white banks on either side.

A large area, trampled, is open before the keep. Four men work to pile what looks like blocks of peat-moss over something.

“What happens here?” calls out Lady Brienne.

One of the workmen looks up. “Fool left a window open, froze himself to death.”

*So they burn the bodies?*

A waste of fuel. But Northerners are a superstitious lot--they’ve been hearing rumors of frozen men coming back to life.

Trepidation grows. What do I really know of these people? An entirely new life before him, chosen simply on the strength of one letter from a girl he once knew.

*She’s betrothed now; her armsman had said.*

Cautious, they dismount from their horses, lead them to the gates. A sentry bars their way.

“What is your business here?” he asks.

Lady Brienne pushes herself forward before Gendry can speak.

“I am Brienne of Tarth, oath-sworn to the Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell,” she announces, her voice high and proud. “I have returned from a mission she sent me on to the Riverlands.” She gestures to Podrick. “This is my squire. The others are men from the riverlands, looking for work.”

She doesn’t mention Gendry in particular. A rift has grown between them, and he doesn’t understand exactly why, except that it started when she mentioned he looked like King Renly, only that Gendry was far too muscular and smith-like to pass for the King.

*Shouldn’t have said what I did, about King Renly being soft, and about Ser Loras. Offended her.*

He reaches into his vest, pulls out the missive he’d received.

“I am Gendry Rivers,” he says. “A blacksmith. Lady Arya has given me a retainer, she has asked-...”

“Oy!” the sentry calls over his shoulder. “Tell the Captain the She-Wolf’s smith is here!” The guard turns back to them, a smile on his face this time. “We’ve been waiting for you.” He’s more dubious when he looks to Lady Brienne. “We didn’t know of your coming, m’lady. Um.” He calls over his shoulder again. “Oy! Send for Beron, or the new page-girl! Someone to take this Lady to the Mistress.”
Disrespectful nicknames. Guards have leave to use them openly? Either there is a great lack of respect, or a great deal of affection for the Starks.

But he is expected. And the guards seem friendly.

“A warmer welcome than I was expecting,” says Gendry to the guard.

The man grins, though it is hard to tell whether it is a grin or a grimace underneath his bushy beard. “You’re alive,” he says. As if that explains anything at all.

A young boy, about ten, rushes up to them.

“Sirrah?” he asks the guard.

“Beron,” says the guard, “take this tall lady and her squire up to the Princess Sansa, would you?”

Some quick back-and-forth about the horses—a groom comes, to lead them away. And then Lady Brienne is gone.

“You wait right here,” says the guard, pointing to one side. “Captain will come for you himself; we were given instructions.” The man raises his voice. “The rest of you lot, come with me, we’ll get you sorted out.”

A lot of initiative, for a guard. All the gate-guards he’s known in the past just stand around and pass visitors onwards to someone with authority, or act obtuse. Gendry moves to the spot the guard has indicated, and observes.

Winterfell looks busy—mud and snow-slush on the streets—but beyond there’s a courtyard that shows bare stone, shoveled clean. Two carts, one selling meat-pies, one selling some heated drink. The roof of Gendry’s mouth aches, and he wonders: the people have coin enough to buy food and drink?

A far cry from the other holds they’ve passed; a very far cry from the rumors he’s hearing of King’s Landing.

Heavy footsteps, the jangle of chain armor. Gendry turns. His eyes widen. The face, the scars, the terrifyingly tall stature.

Sandor Clegane. The Hound.

He realizes he’s stepped backwards.

No. I am not a child anymore.

He grips the handle of his smith’s hammer tightly.

The Hound slows down as he approaches Gendry. He’s peering at him. “Gendry Waters?” asks the Hound.

Gendry nods.

“You look familiar,” says the Hound.

Gendry clears his throat. “We met once, long ago.” While you were fighting Beric, and Arya
wanted to kill you. “Brotherhood without Banners.”

The Hound’s expression clears. “Brothers come with you?” he asks.

Brothers?

“Guard took ‘em over,” says Gendry, gestures. Everything is mighty friendly so far, though nothing is what he expects it to be. No need to be the first to fuck it up.

“Good,” says the Hound. Then he seems at a bit of a loss. He peers at Gendry again. “Don’t rightly know what to do with you. She-Wolf’s supposed to take you in hand, but she’s out of the keep.”

Disappointment curls in Gendry’s stomach. She’s not here? It was not expected that Lady Arya Stark would come greet him herself, but he’d hoped he could make a leg to her, speak to her sometime soon.

The Hound looks up, and off to a side--a suite of rooms above the bailey, with firelight pouring out through the windows, shapes moving inside. “She’s busy, looks like,” he mutters, then sighs. “Come along then, take you straight to the top.”

The top of what? A conveniently high tower?

Gendry keeps his witticism to himself, lowers his head, and follows the Hound--the Hound of all people--through the almost maze-like connections of archways and courtyards, deeper into the keep.

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The Hound’s taking me to the King!

It was made clear as they passed sentry-post after sentry-post, and were challenged at each. He was searched, at the last one, though all they did was tell him to leave his knives and hammer outside. Then he was taken to a tall, round tower with Stark banners hanging from each side of the great doors. A sparse antechamber was within, and the Hound indicated one of the chairs before the fireplace.

“Just wait here, I’ll check if he’s got a moment.”

And so Gendry clenches his jaw, and waits. Not long. A man in dark furs, with shoulder-length black hair and a large sword at his waist, he strides out of the inner doors, Sandor Clegane right beside him. The man’s air is unmistakable, as is the authority in his stride.

Gendry rises, torn between bowing and kneeling, then opts for the latter. “Your Majesty.”

“No, please, rise!” says the King. “This is the North. We do not kneel.”

The day has become passing strange. Gendry rises to his feet, looks up, uncertain.

This is Arya Stark’s brother. The resemblance is there, he thinks.

The King extends his hand, bemused, Gendry follows suit. The King clasps forearms with him, shakes his hand. “You are Gendry Waters,” he says.
“Sire.”

“Jon, please,” says the King.

Gendry chokes.

“My Lord will do, if you’re uncomfortable with names,” says the King smoothly. “Please, follow me.”

They wind up in what looks like the King’s own sitting room—a massive chamber. Chairs, arrayed around a very large circular table, more chairs in a loose semicircle around the fire, even more chairs beside a smaller square table. It’s to the last that the King leads them.

“You’ve had a long journey,” says the King. “I won’t keep you long, just a few questions.”

Fear grows in Gendry’s stomach. He doesn’t let it show. The fear has to do with a woman, and a room in a faraway keep, and leeches, and blood, and names chanted over a brazier. “Robb Stark” was one of those names.

Robb Stark died.

Some part of Gendry holds on to a terrible fear: I made it happen. It’s not reasonable, it can’t be real. And still the fear remains.

“Wine?” asks the King. “Or tea?”

What?

“Sandor?” asks the King.

The Hound rubs a hand over his face, pulls up a chair. Sits down, without asking for permission. “Yeah, Jon, might as well. Day’s just going to get worse.”

The King reaches for something in a cupboard--pulls out two tin cups, and a bottle of wine. Pours, brings the cups over to the table.

The Hound looks at the cups, snorts. “She got yours too, huh?”

“Gave them to her,” says the King. “All rightfully hers anyway.”

“Fucking Starks,” says the Hound, then drains half the cup in one swallow. The King grins, then takes a seat at the table across Gendry.

“So,” says the King, “you are Arya’s friend.”

“Yes, Sir--My Lord,” says Gendry. He pauses. “Leastwise, we were, when we escaped from King’s Landing, then Harrenhal.” He looks to the Hound. “We were separated at the Brotherhood Without Banners. Ser Sandor was there…”

He sees the King and the Hound exchange a glance.

“Melisandre took you, Arya said,” says the King. His raised eyebrows invite comment. They know.

Gendry swallows. “The priestess,” he says. He cannot suppress a shudder. “She said--” he stops
himself. “Don’t rightly know what she wanted, my Lord.”

“Your blood, we’ve assumed,” says the King.

Gendry’s eyes widen.

The King leans back in his chair, assessing Gendry. “Our sources tell us there is a good chance you are Robert Baratheon’s son.”

“I…” Gendry stammers. “I don’t rightly know, My Lord,” he says again.

“One source is in White Harbor, and the other one’s fucking out joyriding with the She-Wolf,” says the Hound, his voice sounding disgusted. He peers at Gendry again. “He looks it though. Fat Robert in his prime.”

Sources? Not her, or I’d be chained and bled right about now.

“The North is good to bastards,” says the King, a glint of humor in his eyes.

The Bastard King.

There is something about King Jon. Something that hangs in the air. In that moment the King’s expression reminds Gendry of the statue of Baelor the Blessed in the Great Sept.

I am tired, Gendry thinks. It has been a long journey, and a long time keeping secrets.

If they’d wanted me dead, just the suspicion would have been enough to behead me.

He bows his head. “I don’t know,” he says to the table; his voice is almost a whisper. “She said I was. Bled me. King’s blood, she said. Used it for some magic.”

The King sighs. “Thank you for telling us,” he says. It seems some sort of decision has been made because then the Hound says “I’m not sure.”

“He’s Arya’s friend,” says the King. As if that means something.

Gendry prays that it does. At the moment he feels very, very isolated. Confused. Nothing makes sense here.

“The Braavosi was her friend too,” says the Hound.

“Not his fault,” replies the King. “You know it wasn’t his fault—he just happened to have the ill-luck of being the first casualty.”

The Hound growls. “Fucking magic.”

At that, Gendry has to look up.

The King and the Hound are studying each other.

“You don’t know if the red woman left any magic in him,” says the Hound, pointing to Gendry.

Magic? In me?

“No, no magic!” says Gendry. It’s real? They think it’s real? Northerners are superstitious, but this is the Hound, Sandor Clegane, that’s talking about magic as if it’s a real thing.
The King turns back, considers Gendry. “Davos said he helped you escape.”

Gendry exhales. “Ser Davos Seaworth?” He’s here?

The King nods. “He’s mostly in White Harbor these days. But he spoke up for you, alongside Arya. Said you were to be trusted, that you’d been poorly used by Melisandre.”

Poorly used by Melisandre.

He didn’t realize it meant something, to have someone say it. It does. It says it was real and not a nightmare; that it was wrong and it was done to him, trickery and blood and fear.

Tears prick at Gendry’s eyes. He presses his lips together.

“Well,” says the King. “Arya will be back in a few days. She’s got grand plans for your smithing.” He rises to his feet. Perforce, Gendry must rise with him. “Sandor’ll show you to your quarters, and the smithy. Maester Samwell will be by a bit later, explain the wages and such to you. Do you need something at the moment?”

Gendry shakes his head. “No, my Lord.”

The King extends his hand again, and again Gendry is bemused as he clasps forearms with Jon Stark. “Welcome to Winterfell, Gendry Waters.”

PETYR

He slogs over the rain-drenched bridge, and onto the isle of gods. He’s taken a safe number as escort—four men, two of them of Braavos, two of them his own handpicked knights of the Vale. Enough to show seriousness, not enough to even pretend to be a threat.

Few men venture directly to these doors, but he’s been stonewalled ever since he found the thread that led him to the agents of this particular guild. Braavos is not kind to outsiders. A thousand unknown plots swirl around every locus of power in this place.

Petyr Baelish almost feels like he’s come home.

He strides up the steps that lead to the gargantuan doors—one black, one white. The doors are closed, and he bangs on them, once, twice.

It takes some time, and the hood of his cloak is soaked through with cold wetness before the black door creaks open.

A man in a cowled gray robe stands there.

“Yes, but it’s the knocking that gets me the attention of one of you.”

Custom and protocol are everything in the Free Cities.

“I’d like to buy a name,” he says.

“There are channels for the undertaking of such business.”
Petyr Baelish smiles. “I find it’s best to take it directly to the source when one reaches the limit of what intermediates can offer.”

This one will be expensive; you don’t want to hand me off to a flunky.

“Give us the name,” says the man. “You will receive a message within three days as to what the price is.” The man doesn’t specify how Petyr is to receive the message, nor how they will know where he is located. Not Petyr’s problem, he’s got enough on his plate dancing around the Iron Bank—he was the one that took out loans in the Baratheon and Lannister names, after all.

“I’m glad we can do business,” Petyr smiles.

It’s taken him two months to sift through the list of names he wants dead—he has a very long list. But he is looking for a name that will cause just the right kind of chaos.

Daenerys Targaryen is set to marry the King in the North. Whose youngest sister will marry the Sealord of Braavos. A dangerous alliance—a triangle is a very stable shape.

Petyr has found the key to the breaking of it.

The Iron Bank may finance this assassination, in exchange for the tide-table calculations everyone seems to be interested in; the only copy of the formulas exists in Petyr’s keeping. The Captains’ Union mathematician had been most insistent they were correct, he insisted on it with his dying breath.

The House of Black and White may carry out the assassination, though Petyr has been told they call it ‘giving a gift’.

A nice wedding gift for someone.

Once the news of the who and the how gets out, the Sealord with turn against the two most powerful guilds in the city. Stark will be united with the Sealord, and the Iron Bank, which finances Daenerys, will no longer support her suit to Jon Snow. Daenerys will insist upon the marriage—Snow’s a Targaryen, after all, the last of the blood left, and she’s got three almost feral dragons on her hands. So she will break with the Bank; the Bank will then have no choice but to accept Cersei Lannister’s offer: a lord of the Iron Bank’s choosing as Lord of Casterly Rock. Petyr’s for the asking, for the price of a single very vital bit of information: the true nature of Euron Greyjoy’s game. Slavery in Westeros. Very principled in some things, the Iron Bank. They will buy the death of the King of the Iron Islands from the House of Black and White; the bank always gets a discount, it’s said.

And then, a trade—Casterly Rock to Tyrion Lannister, the Hand of Daenerys Targaryen. In exchange for the hand of Daenerys Targaryen. As for Cersei the Mad, well, dragons can eat her if she survives her own rule long enough.

If the Bank doesn’t finance this death... well, that’s what the two Braavos bodyguards he takes with him everywhere are for--let it look as if the Bank financed it and the House of Black and White carried it out. Let the bodyguards gossip.

Let the corpse speak for itself.

Sorrowful Men are far cheaper than faceless ones.

All this goes through Petyr’s head in an eyeblink—it doesn’t matter if each step works as desired, as long as the most important one does.
Hurt the Starks.

Petyr smiles up at the Faceless Man. “The name,” he says, “is Arya Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

Hiya everyone! Glad people are still here, still reading :)

I'm going on vacation shortly, until the end of December, and I won't have access too often. Not entirely sure I'll be able to push out the next update. But have no fear, a whole bunch of them will be ready when I come back, right up to the resolution of the wights and Night's King :)

Love you all.

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tl;dr

1. Jaqen and Arya and Varro figure out how to do the dreaming to take the warning about the renegade-making-virus (and other updates) to Braavos. Unfortunately, it only works if someone's asleep, only works with FM (hallucination shared through the Many-Faced God: the Many-Faced God, the collective entity, dreams and distributes the images to the individual constituents).

2. Arya learns a new application of Wind-power--she sends messages to all the FM. A number, both Lorathi and Braavosi, have become renegades. Those she tells to come back to the House of Black and White. The "dream council" has already decided they're going to drug the renegades, put them into deep sleeps and store them somewhere until more data is known.

3. Gendry comes to Winterfell, it seems his history has been given to Jon by both Arya and Davos Seaworth.

4. Through Gendry, we start seeing the effect of Jon's anointing by a god--he invokes some feeling of safety/trust/confession in Gendry, makes Gendry think of Baelor the Blessed (from GRRM).

5. Petyr Baelish wants to make chaos, destabilize everything, and end up marrying Daenerys. He's pinpointed the death of Arya as being the one thing that will cause the most chaos (and rightfully so, the Stark-Braavos alliance depends upon her, the Stark-Targ alliance will fall apart if the Sealord and the Iron Bank pull in opposite directions--obviously Petyr doesn't know of the inner goings on of Jon's and Dany's councils and Bank plots).

6. Petyr just told the House of Black and White he wants (unbeknownst to him) the death of one of their own. Ah, fun and games :) we're setting up the Braavos arc.
JAQEN

They’ve left Winterfell far behind. The road out here is a deep trench in the snow, its surface hard-packed, befouled by the passage of hooves and carts. All moved out in the past weeks, towards the staging-ground of the war to come. Only Riders and messengers traverse this stretch of the road now, but its surface is still strewn with small stones and salt.

Till the next snowstorm covers them.

The banks to either side are shoulder-height on a mounted man. At twice that, the trench will be covered over, the insides washed with seawater then left to freeze.

_Tunnels made of ice, deep beneath the snow._

A Braavosi idea: no more horses, but small ice-ferries, a variant of the rope-ferries that traverse the canals of Braavos. A system of pulleys and gantries, pulling the blade-mounted barges up and down the ice-road. In Braavos the “trenches” are already made—Braavos waits for the canals to freeze over. The same problem, in infinite variation. The same solution should apply.

There is a “Northern” ice-tunnel, a prototype, leading up to the Long Lake. Zural has left his mark upon this landscape; Zural’s hand, in the smooth expediting of the negotiations.

_Zural. Johannes. Soleihil. Pas’pahe--_

A rustle of wings at the back of his mind. A towering rage.

_Teeth._

His ribs feel like teeth, ripping at his lungs.

Sixty-three newly broken bonds he holds on to.

Human lifetimes pale in compare to the years he has walked beside his brothers.

_I will rend Asshai limb from limb._

“Corwyn’s Tower in a few watches,” he says. A long-dead lord’s hunt-lodge, turned into a relay station. _Shelter. Beds._ Perhaps such comforts will be an inducement to distraction. Surely a man with two lovers can be distracted from his rage long enough to be effective in the moment.

His bride smiles at him over her shoulder, a mysterious, dark smile. Her gaze shifts to Varro, and her expression grows more vicious than is Arya’s wont.

A suspicion.

“Arya,” he says.
“Arya is sleeping,” she replies. “She keeps wanting to rifle through your packs for the Blue Pearl. It’s me you’re going to have to seduce, Defiant.”

_That sounds suspiciously like a challenge._

There is no white to her irises.

She has learned how to control the outward face of the body.

“How long have you been playing Arya Stark?” he asks.

“Since I woke up with a question circling my thoughts,” she says, “with your hand on my tit and one thing on your mind.”

“And you don’t want to give it to me?” he asks softly.

_Do you want me to take it from you?

The Wind slices into his thoughts. “I crave you,” she says. “And you cannot have me.”

He moves; dives across his horse, unseats her from hers, drives her into the snowbank that walls the road.

He embeds her wrists in the snow, his knee between her legs pinning her writhing form under him.

The Wind whips around him, saws at what skin he has exposed to the air. Sharp, stinging pinpricks of pain; nothing lethal.

Not yet.

He looks over his shoulder—Varro has dismounted. He moves swiftly to their side; keeps her pinned down for Jaqen as his hands roam over her form, the curve of her breasts, the dip at the small of her back.

She is hissing and spitting; he is rock-hard by the time he holds the vial in his hand.

He pulls back to peer at the smoky glass. There is a quarter-finger length of viscous blue fluid left at the bottom of it.

_Three doses since this morning._

He draws her to him, enfolds her within his cloak.

Every brother has a specialty; the poisons of the mind are neither Jaqen’s domain, nor the Waif’s.

_Need to dream the Alchemist._

**THE WAIF**

The four hide, just inside the great black and white doors. All four are Braavosi—regardless of what has been decided, Lorathi might just give the gift to a renegade instead of drugging him into a coma. The House stands empty, the god’s servants scattered to the wind, in and around Braavos proper.

Three of the four hold gladiatorial nets.
She holds the throwing-powder.

The idea is that a brother—who may be a renegade—walks in, entirely unaware. He gets netted and powered. The powder will slow even a Lorathi enough that he can be bound with the Valyrian-steel cuffs.

In the seventy years between the founding of the order and the Doom, Faceless Men were captured. Even Jaqen, once. Dragonlords ordered the forging of bespelled cuffs to hold the god’s servants—multiple attempts were made to interrogate them. Two sets of cuffs have survived the Doom, and she’s got one of them tucked into a deep pocket of her robe.

Once the brother is netted, powdered and cuffed, he needs to show the four he can wear Jaqen H’ghar’s face. Otherwise it’s another dose of Princess-Lies-Sleeping, and a cart to take him to the abandoned distillery that serves as a storehouse of renegades now.

The long stretches of time between arrivals are spent in games. Over the past few days, she’s been named the Silent Sentry. The Philosopher. The Mourner.

Sometimes they play together.

At the moment they are playing “bored guildsmen”.

The net-and-powder setup is a good one. It’s worked on all three renegades that have walked into the House so far. Also on six other brothers, one of them a Lorathi. Also on two that were not brothers—slight confusion there.

It has also worked on Umma.

*That* may have been a mistake. Umma felt sorry for them; she was coming by to give them a crock of hot stew.

They will not be getting any more stew.

But Umma has a sense of humor. She’ll come around.

Once she wakes up.

It’s a good thing Petyr Baelish knocked. A good thing for Petyr Baelish. A bad thing for them.

“What do we do?” asks the Tyroshi brother. She doesn’t know his name, they haven’t been introduced.

All the guild’s work has come to a standstill. The city at large doesn’t know—on the whole, people try to curtail their curiosity about the House of Black and White. But appearances must still be maintained. Contracts must be heard, ravens must fly. Business as usual.

*And what happens when the immediate crisis passes? When all the renegades that are coming back have been secured?*

Whoever is in the House has authority over its workings. It’s the four of them now, and it’ll be whoever shows up to replace them within six watches or so. But in the meantime Petyr Baelish is their problem to think about.

“There are very many poisons we can use,” she says.

“Terrific precedent,” says the logistical brother, the Braavosi that does the books for the House.
“Poisoning *customers.*”

“Tell the Sealord, get *him* to cut Petyr Baelish down to size,” says Spie Xo’san.

*That* earns the Braavosi from Qarth a narrow-eyed glare from the other three. “Faceless Men running to the Sealord for *protection?*” asks the Waif. “*Really,* brother?”

No one has ever asked for the life of a Faceless Man before. There’s a reason even Braavosi abide by the Lorathi rules regarding names. But now a name has been given. The House will set a price on *any* man. Arya Stark is a man. And the problem with setting prices is that they must be set to something the man *could* actually pay, if he cared enough. Petyr Baelish cares all right—*the venom in his voice when he’d spoken her name...*

“If you can’t solve a problem, make it the enemy’s problem,” says the logistical brother. “Tell him the price for her is *his* life, and leave it at that.”

Spie Xo’san snorts. “And what if he takes us up on it? Shows up in novice blacks?”

“He could be useful,” says the Tyroshi brother. “Schemers always are.”

“He’s a slaver,” says the Waif.

Raised brows in her direction.

“He owns half the brothels in Westeros,” she says. “Call it wages, but if the whores get further into debt each year they work for him and can’t ever get out, that’s slavery in all but name.”

No slaver is *ever* given a coin, nor a man that has ever owned slaves of his own accord.

It doesn’t always help.

A brother was made renegade, some time after she came to the House.

It is almost impossible for a Faceless Man to operate in certain circles in the Free Cities without owning slaves. Always discomfort-making, but slaves *are* purchased. The practice is to manumit them the moment they are paid for, the documents of manumittance placed in confidence with the Iron Bank. A shaded half-truth—*the slave himself does not know he is a free man until his “master” disappears, and an agent of the Iron Bank comes bearing parchments and a purse with the back-wages that were owed. The ripple-effect of adding gold to the slave-economy is also managed—*the purchase price of the slave is always retrieved, one way or another.*

There are *reasons* Faceless Men hate Valyrians, and it’s more than just history.

History belongs to the past. The past has left a stamp on their world.

*Lys the Beautiful. Lys the Corrupter.*

The brother that bought slaves, he *used* them as one would a slave; the manumittance was not filed. He auctioned them off when he no longer needed the cover.

*Did he excise the god before or after he made this choice?*

Irrelevant at the end. Six brothers rode out from the House the moment the vote was tallied. The first and only time, or so her friend has told her, that Jaqen himself rode alongside the hunter to bring down a renegade.
And now it is the hunter’s turn to ride alongside Jaqen.

The urge to save instead of kill—that can be nothing but Arya Stark’s influence.

“Petyr Baelish wants the death of Arya Stark,” she says quietly.

“So fuck the Many-Faced God and the guild and the rules,” says the Tyroshi brother. “Knife Baelish, throw him into a canal.”

There’s an undercurrent of something akin to fervor amongst the Braavosi she’s talked to. Arya Stark warned brother after brother before they could turn renegade, calmed down many of the ones that did turn.

The old man said Arya Stark was the one that made the Lorathi call it an “attack” instead of “Braavosi stupidity”.

The logistical brother shakes his head. “Everyone wants to knife someone. But we don’t have a name except ‘R’hllor’, and a god is definitely a Jaqen-level target. If Baelish’s ‘bodyguards’ blab, and some of our incoming see the writing on the wall before getting through these doors?”

There’s a large number of Braavosi converging on the House, some of them very dangerous. Many of those are renegades the Wind guided back home; her name rattles through their breath.

If they find out that her name is for sale?

A bloodbath on the streets is not entirely out of the realm of possibility.

“Like the Purge?” she asks. But no. From the stories she’s heard of it, the Purge was a punishing vengeance. Focused.

We are devoid of all focus.

“Baelish,” says the logistical brother, his eyes narrowed, focused on something distant. He shakes his head. “There must be a plan in place for him. Not like her, or Zural, to leave a piece like Baelish on the board without the means of controlling him.”

The Waif nods, thoughtfully.

“It’s renegade Lorathi that worry me,” says Spie Xo’san. “We have no idea what to expect—no Lorathi’s ever turned unless the sex went bad.”

No, Spie Xo’san, the sex doesn’t go bad, the Lorathi...despair.

The logistical brother exhales. “Well now we know what happens, right?” he asks. “Whatever two Lorathi do in their cells to each other, they only do it the once—and it’s so fucking bad they can’t bear to have their god see it, even in their memories. Guilt,” he says. “So they try to excise Jaqen.”

Desolation--better to break with the god, break with everyone rather than feel that again? There is one whom she could conjecture accurately with; he trusts her, the Lorathi of the layered face.

“No supposed to feel guilt,” mutters the Tyroshi brother.

“But what if they could?” says the logistical brother.

There is some silence as the three brothers contemplate what sex act could be so depraved that a dead man would start feeling guilt.
The Waif must speak. “I don’t think that’s it,” she says. “It is a thing of the Lorathi, of those that are nameless.”

Spie Xo’san gives her a narrow-eyed look. “You anomalies always know more than you let on, don’t you?”

Anomalies—Braavosi that were trained by Lorathi but did not become Lorathi themselves. Great disappointments to their teachers, perhaps, but they are great a great ‘victory’ for the Braavosi. They serve as a bridge of sorts between the two factions in the order.

“Come on,” says the Tyroshi brother. “Tell us.”

The Waif knows how to keep her mouth shut--there is a reason he trusts her when her own teacher does not.

She shrugs. “I do not know, brothers.”

Truth—knowledge of a thing assumes an understanding of the thing. And understanding a thing requires experiencing it. To experience this thing that makes Lorathi despair of it and crave it in equal measure, it requires that she be a Lorathi.

But her statement has effectively killed this line of inquiry.

“Heard a rumor,” says the logistical brother. The brothers perk up. Rumors are a good distraction from the ruins of their world. “About the hunter.”

Spie Xo’san snorts. “When isn’t there a rumor about him?”

“This one,” says the logistical brother, “I got from someone who knows.”

“Go on then,” says Spie Xo’san.

“So,” says the logistical brother, “apparently it’s not two, it’s three. He makes one of them wear Jaqen’s face, then uses it as a model to carve the likeness into the other one with a knife.”

“Where’s the sex?” asks Spie Xo’san.

The logistical brother leans forward. “That’s the best part--there’s never any sex. Having sex with his god’s image would be blasphemy to the hunter. It’s just the carving-up.”

The Waif raises an eyebrow. “I’ve never treated a brother with Jaqen carved into their skin.”

“It wouldn’t be treated, would it?” asks the logistical brother. “It’d be kept as a sign of piety.”

“Far fetched,” she says.

“No!” says the logistical brother. “A sign of the hunter’s piety. The recipient accommodates, is all-a lot is accommodated, no?”

“Lorathi are fucking strange,” says Spie Xo’san.

“Good thing he’ll never turn renegade,” mutters their Tyroshi brother. “Wouldn’t want him coming through the doors right now.”

“He didn’t go after Zural,” she says thoughtfully.
Teacher never turns on student.

“And we come back to Arya Stark,” says the logistical brother.

Jaqen is remote. He’s a Lorathi god, inscrutable. Him of the Many Faces--most of Jaqen’s faces are hidden.

The punishing Wind is very Braavosi; she’s got the wits and the weapons and she always wins. The Lorathi are convinced she’s theirs, but they’d claim any god that walked in the doors.

The logistical brother sighs. “Old man wants to speak to everyone tomorrow.”

“What about?” she asks.

The logistical brother shrugs. “The truth of the Many-Faced God, he said.”

“Too little, too late,” says Spie Xo’san. “Would have been useful after the Night of Ice, when we were chasing our own tails, trying to figure out what the Lorathi already knew about Jaqen.”

“You anomalies didn’t know?” asks the logistical brother.

She doesn’t reply.

Zural knew. Didn’t help him avoid becoming a renegade. Only Arya Stark’s grace, that all of us didn’t turn—which I voted against the Valyrian.

Done is done.

Spie Xo’san gives them a twisted half-smile. “Suppose it’s good, finally getting official word that Jaqen is the Many-Faced God.”

The Tyroshi brother’s eyes narrow, focused on some inner thought. “Maybe we can get rid of the Lorathi anarchy,” he says. “Equality is good, in theory, but a clear chain of command is better. Jaqen at the top, put Arya Stark beside him, two divisions--like the army and the navy. Lorathi report to the Many-Faced God, Braavosi to the Wind.”

Spie Xo’san rubs at his face. “Something doesn’t seem right,” he mutters. “We gave our lives to Jaqen, not Arya Stark. Excising him makes us a renegade. Arya Stark should be under him. Sub-commander.”

The logistical brother glares at the Braavosi from Qarth. “So Braavosi can keep being treated as lesser? When we finally have our own god?”

They pause.

Light steps, disturbing the grains of sand strewn upon the steps before the doors. A brother. But one who is not expecting an ambush.

She readies a handful of powder.

ARYA

The horses are restless, have been, for a half-watch—the wind carries the scent of wolf upon it.

Her exhaustion, the shocky agitated state of her, it holds her in its grip.
They’ve built up the fire very close to a winter-bare oak tree; Jaqen’s promised relay-station is still far away. Her and Varro sit shoulder-to-shoulder against the tree-trunk. Jaqen’s head rests upon her lap.

The god dreams.

There is a hollow look in Varro’s eyes; it comes and goes. It mirrors the hollowness in her breast, in Jaqen when he speaks of what the road they traverse will become in a few months.

“I know why Zural turned on Jaqen,” she says.

“The question,” replies Varro, flat.

*The question is a tool; a man must be willing to use a tool.*

“There are things,” she murmurs, “Varro Massag things, that I did not tell you.” And she must hide her face in his chest. “You know there are betting pools running all the time in the House,” she mumbles. “*On everything.*”

“I try not to pay attention to Braavosi diversions,” he says. “It feels unclean, betting on things with coin that’s not yours.”

“I was Braavosi,” she says.

Varro turns, his eyes narrowed: *I thought it was a misidentification.*

She grins, false. *“Not a ‘Lorathi waiting to happen’. Zural tested me--I was wearing Jaqen’s face, and Zural wore it as well. The sudden dizziness, the nausea, the reason why Braavosi get so fucking uncomfortable when they see Lorathi sitting around wearing the same face--I felt it. That test was the only reason the old man handed over my training entirely to Zural instead of teaching me himself.”*

*Best of both worlds. I can play a Lorathi lying like a Braavosi.*

She pulls away a bit. “You’d asked, where Zural would get the idea of you and me. You had it the wrong way around--he thought it would be *me* and you.”

Varro raises an eyebrow.

“Novelty breeds speculation,” she says. “There was an Arya Stark Virginity pool for a while.”

He snorts. “And I was a candidate? Rather flattering, that, given the bloody reputation.” He narrows his eyes at her. “Or debasing for you, I’m not sure.”

She shrugs. *“Contingency plans. A flutter on a coin. A second name I made Zural put in. He gave me a look— that thing he does with his brow, you know, the grimace. ‘Pah! Arya Stark! What are you to be doing?’”*

Almost unconscious, she traces circles over Varro’s chest, his shoulders.

*Mine now.*

She tries to chuckle, realizes she is crying, and her voice is choked. “He wept, Varro. He wept and told me you were dead. And I didn’t understand because I used to dust the masks with the Waif and I know the face of every Faceless Man in the alcoves, and yours was not there, it wasn’t cut out, and then I was crying because I thought you were *lost*, drowned somewhere, I don’t know.”
And Zural came to my cell and he told me ‘Jaqen H’ghar is dead’, and *then* I understood you were Lorathi.” She takes in large gulps of air. “He wanted you to win the fucking bet. He knew me, no? Knew I’d find an excuse to make you take your name back.”

His shoulders tense.

She looks up.

“Ver’Yalli,” he says, “you cannot be like this.”

He has held on to control so desperately since yesterday; she is not allowed to cause him to come apart. And so once again she buries her face in his chest.

*I am no one.*

Lie.

Winter has come.

There is no mercy in it.

*I am no one.*

And she is.

She blinks the film of tears from her eyes, then pulls away.

“Does Jaqen know?” asks Varro, a forced lightness in his tone. “About my name in your pool?”

“He wanted to know who the ‘competition’ was,” she says. “So I told him. And He said, ‘*you keep obsessing over Zural’s teacher, beloved, I’m going to start to think there’s something for me to worry about.*’” She glares down at the still, sleeping face of the god. “He’s been laughing at me for a long time.”

“A part of me,” says Varro, “wants the comfort of believing there is a puppet-master lying in your lap.”

*That we are subject to the god’s will. That there is a plan.*

The first prayer of the faithful.

“*Jaqen H’ghar* is a puppet-master,” she says. “But you and I, we are a thing that straddles both the man and the god, and the god just staggers from situation to situation, drunk upon sorrow and self-doubt.”

*Zural was a reflection of the god. As are all of us.*

Arya Stark blamed the old man for Varro’s state of forced namelessness. Him of the Many Faces was the scapegoat Zural chose.

*His atheism was a reaction to the depth of faith in Daorys.*

“Reflections,” she murmurs. “In all our madnesses.”

She feels the agitation under Varro’s skin.
Enough, enough, stop now.

She leans into him, raises her face to his, demanding. He kisses her, gently, and she breathes him in, the cool comfort of his lips, the quietness of his awareness against hers.

Sorrow-laden, gentle kisses, traded back and forth between them, until Jaqen stirs.

The god opens his eyes. Tilts his head back, looks to Varro. “Was she good?” He asks.

Her jaw clenches.

Varro raises a hand, makes a half-and-half gesture in the air before him. “Patted me down for the vial,” says the renegade. “Used Zural as a distraction. Wept while she did it. Didn’t search you, though.”

What they don’t know…

She wants to sneer. Doesn’t. She is no one; she doesn’t need to play at affront at their “assumptions”.

Instead she raises an eyebrow at the god.

“I was disapproved of,” He mutters. “In vociferous terms—Alchemist has a bitter bite to him.”

Disapproved of, for ‘allowing’ me to use the Pearl to save a renegade?

Renegade or brother, she suspects the Alchemist’s response would have been the same: No one does not love. Let it go.

She sneers at the image of the hooded, dark-haired man in her memory. “You set him to rights.”

Jaqen grins. “Asked him, all humble-like. ‘Accommodate, brother—new to the state of marriage. The next time I want to force my wife to do something against her will, how should I go about it’?”

Even Varro must grin at that.

“What did you learn?” she asks.

Jaqen raises his upper body, tastes her mouth, his tongue swiping over hers. “You’ve been kissing another man,” He murmurs.

A gentle deflection.

“Same one you were, last night,” she replies.

That the deflection is obvious, for all its gentleness, means He’ll tell them soon enough.

Soon as Jaqen H’ghar can tension the puppet-strings to his liking.

“Let’s pretend we’re Braavosi,” He says.

Ooo. Gossip that passed the Jaqen-test: factual and capable of providing much opportunity for mockery.

“Spill,” she commands.

Varro makes an uncomfortable noise at the back of his throat.
She grins at her lover. *What rules, Varro, that say Lorathi are not allowed to gossip?*

“Not in good taste,” he mutters.

“Nor is playing kissy-face with a renegade,” she points out.

He has the grace to look abashed.

“So,” says Jaqen, “the Braavosi have developed a *stratagem* to deal with renegades the Wind sends to the House’s doorstep.”

She groans; a groan stolen directly from one of Izembaro’s plays. She gives Varro a sidelong glance. He glares at her, but offers a half-hearted groan of his own. Despite his best judgement, he’s going to play along, though not enthusiastically.

“What’s this brilliant stratagem?” she asks.

“Hiding behind the door with gladiatorial nets and sleeping powder,” says Jaqen.


Varro snorts.

“Effective for the *most* part,” says Jaqen. “But…” He pauses. “*Two* Lorathi.”

*Oh.*

“Not renegades, luckily. But Braavosi don’t expect Lorathi traveling in quantities greater than one. There was an…altercation.”

*Who, who, who?*

Jaqen looks to her. “Alchemist and your ‘Handsome Man’ raced each other to Braavos. Felt a known presence behind the door, mounted the steps, all very trusting.”

Her eyes are wide with anticipatory glee. Even Varro has drawn forward.

“Nets came out,” says Jaqen. “Alchemist moved first, used Patchy-Face Horse-Friend as a shield, got him trussed up.”

A chuckle escapes Varro. Then another.

“Gets better;” says Jaqen, almost gleeful. “With the brother netted and out of the way, our sister of the philtre was free to sling handfuls of Princess-Lies-Sleeping powder straight into the Alchemist’s face.”

*Good for her.*

“His own student,” Jaqen says. “Motivated, *excellent* throwing arm.” He chortles. “Lead-to-Gold is going to be ‘under the weather’ for *weeks*, Lorathi or not.”

*And a subject of mockery for centuries.*

Jaqen nods. His mien sobered a little. “Another visitor to the House,” He says. “A name has been asked for. It complicates the Braavosi thinking.”
Braavosi think best when things are simple—a Lorathi observation—disparagement and due-giving in equal measure. Lorathi fuck up the simple things sometimes.

Like keeping track of one single, tiny little vial.

The thought is sudden. And she realizes Jaqen managed to distract her from the needling want at the back of her throat, at least for a few breaths.

Should I tell Him?

When He sees fit to share what He knows.

“Petyr Baelish,” says the god. “He tries to buy the name of Arya Stark.”

“Knife him, dump him in a canal,” says Varro.

“We don’t knife customers just because they asked for a complicated name,” she says.

“Use a renegade,” he counters. “No guild is responsible for men it’s expelled.”

Useful things, renegades.

But no.

“Something like this was anticipated,” she says calmly. Zural’s paternalism has its purpose. As does the old man’s caution. “We were going by our own names at Winterfell—very possible for ‘Princess Arya Stark’, or her ‘lover’, to make enemies.”

She can feel Varro’s eyes on her, questioning. She grins. “The god’s price is always ‘take what you can get’. But what you can get—well, that depends upon a man’s capability, doesn’t it?”

Petyr Baelish is a very capable man.

Also a predictable one, to some extent. As far as Baelish knows, Jon is irrelevant as a claimant to the Iron Throne. Daenerys is untouchable at the moment. So when it comes to real enemies other than Starks, Petyr Baelish is not exactly spoiled for choice. All he’s left with is Cersei Lannister.

And Euron Greyjoy.

Jaqen sits up, freeing her to her poke the fire into renewed effort.

But “Capable Uncle Baelish” is bereft of the Vale, bereft of his incomes from Westerosi brothels, bereft of the hooks he’s set in Sansa.

He will need a little bit of steel in his spine to move against their mutual enemies.

A few words of encouragement, perhaps.

PETYR

In Braavos, lanterns hang over almost every bridge and footpath. And the ornamental fountains of intricate ironwork now serve as exhaust vents from a network of pipes that run under the city; they carry hot air instead of water. Stray dogs and beggars and and two-bit street vendors warm themselves around fountains.

The rich pretend they don’t.
He sips spiced wine from a tiny, almost ornamental, cup, and watches Braavos be Braavos. And there is no place Braavosi are more Braavosi than when they stop at one of the seemingly infinite drink-stalls that dot the bridges and squares of the city. The drinks on offer have changed: hot toddies of spiced wine, strong tea, a viscous brown liquid that looks like it has been dredged from one of the bottom of the canals.

Petyr has never traveled to Essos in winter—he has never seen this face of the city; secrets spill out from every grate and windowed rectangle of light. Too much light, almost—his eyes have to adjust to the forbidding black of the Long Night every time he steps out of the pool of lantern-light around a drink-stall.

For a city of cut-throat traders and secretive guildsmen, Braavosi talk far too much. The drink-stalls facilitate impromptu gatherings of strangers, who strike up conversations as if they’ve known each other for decades. The Sealord’s betrothal to a Stark is a state secret, so of course it is discussed by every sailor and shopkeeper and sludge-drinker with great gusto.

“...high-and-mighty Westerosi nobility, ...”

“Democracy is the cornerstone...”

“...a bravo and beautiful enough to be one of Madame Losanaris’s...”

“...Syrio Forel...”

The discussions meander sometimes. As now—a space has been cleared around two of the stall’s customers; swords have been drawn.

A passionate people, Braavosi.

And their dance-like, almost womanly, form of swordplay is not to be underestimated.

The man dressed like a buffoon, in slashed yellow trousers with bright blue leggings underneath, he strikes like a snake, lunging forward, the tip of his sword flashing gold in the steady lantern-light.

Bright red blooms across the other braavo’s chest; Petyr winces in remembered pain. In Westeros such a cut might have been a death-sentence from infection.

“First blood!” calls Petyr.

“First blood!” echoes the buffon’s hastily-appointed second.

Every duel between bravos is moderated by seconds. In sudden disagreements like this, two spectators—strangers to the fighters—generally step up to take on the roles.

The injured man inherited a stake in one of the city’s largest trade cartels.

His opponent, the buffoon, was taught bladework by a student of Syrio Forel’s.

It is a precarious situation—the moneyed of the city are skeptical of the Starks. The swords of the city are very passionate about the Starks, about Arya Stark in particular.

The last student of Syrio Forel.

This dual was not a particularly tricky engagement to set up. A few murmured observations, timed right.
Wealthy Braavos will have to pay a steep price to prop up that decimated pretend-kingdom of Jon Snow’s.

The Iron Bank is reluctant to support this choice of the Sealord’s—Bankers know what’s what when it comes to wise financial decisions, it must be said.

Daenerys Targaryen—shouldn’t the Sealord have betrothed her instead?

Petyr hides his grin. He moves swiftly to the injured bravo’s side; the man is muttering—typical loser’s talk: *blinded by the lantern, man’s trousers were distracting* …Petyr unbuttons the man’s doublet, all the while keeping up a steady patter of reassurances.

The unusually dark-skinned drink vendor hands Petyr a moistened cloth.

The cut is shallow, the blood is cleaned away to show a thin, diagonal cut across the man’s front. It won’t even require stitches.

*Excellent.*

“Won’t even scar,” says Petyr.

The injured man’s lip curls in a sneer. “How would you know, Westerosi?”

Petyr draws the collar of his fleece-lined doublet aside, far enough down that the man can see the beginning of the puckered scar. It’s a thick one, ropy, its edges uneven. It says: *I know a thing or two about losing duels.*

The man focuses upon the scar. His sneer disappears.

Petyr is dressed carefully today. A dark-grey shirt of understated brocade, all the more expensive for its sobriety. The fleece-lined doublet is of a Norvos cut, and new. Also expensive, since the Norvos harbor is frozen solid now; any Norvoshi goods that come to Braavos must come overland at triple the cost. The clothes say: *And I know quite a bit about gold, young man.*

KOVASH THE VENDOR

The acolyte known as “Kovash of Kettle-Bell Bridge” keeps Petyr Baelish in the corner of his eyes and serves up another cup of chocolate to a Braavosi.

Baelish is trying to cultivate the rich of the city.

It’s the second new thing the acolyte has to report.

The first is that there’s another Faceless Man watching Kovash’s surveillance target. The Faceless Man is wearing a mask, but the eyes…the acolyte knows those eyes. He’s seen them around the House of Black and White. Before the House was temporarily closed for winter refurbishment.

*Cold hearts, the faceless have, to match their cold home.*

The smooth stone of the House holds no heat. One large fire for the kitchen. One for the baths. That is all. The cold makes the acolyte’s hands curl into fists. It is why that girl keeps beating him with the staff. Again and again. He does not know how she finds him. He looks over his shoulder and there she is. All hours of the day and then she drags him off his stone bed in the middle of the “night” so she can beat him black and blue.

The humiliation of being beaten by a little girl has long faded. The bruises *try* to fade, but she does
not give them the opportunity; new blows land on top of the old ones.

The refurbishment is a welcome respite.

Word’s not out yet—people still go to the Temple. There is a Faceless Man that has drawn door-
duty.

The acolyte ladles spiced wine into a cup for another customer.

The acolyte has found himself a nice street corner to sleep in, right above one of the forced-air
heating vents of the city. The air coming from the vent smells like cooking and spices—the
exhaust of one of the merchant-mansion kitchens. He wakes hungry every day from the smells.

The crowd of spectators has thinned; three people remain. Petyr Baelish and his rich mark. The
Faceless Man.

The acolyte pours a generous dose of rum into the cup before handing the assassin the chocolate
he’s purchased.

The rich man leaves, but not before Petyr Baelish has finessed a meeting out of him, to “discuss”
investments.

“You are a hard man to find alone, Petyr Baelish,” says the Faceless Man.

Petyr Baelish smiles, sour. “I am an honest man. I have no secrets.”

The assassin’s expression does not change. “The price has been set.”

Petyr Baelish’s eyes widen slightly. Then he smiles, oily, his too-pale, foreign features distorted in
an effort to appear uninterested.

“Two hundred thousand, for the guild’s price,” says the Faceless Man.

*This is a test*, the acolyte realizes. His eyes widen, he drops his head. Not hard, *two hundred
thousand gold*? He’s never even seen *two hundred* gold in his life. Petyr Baelish glances at the
“drink vendor”. The acolyte’s hands tremble, he keeps his gaze downcast.

All Braavosi know the rituals of buying and selling with the major guilds. Impossible for even a
street vendor to mistake that Faceless Men are doing business *here*, right in front of him! He bites
his lip, his gaze flickers up, takes in the cup the Faceless Man holds. Some small dismay. Worry:
did he like it? Was there enough sugar? Too much?

Petyr Baelish is grimacing. “The girl holds no lands in her own name.”

The Faceless Man nods. Commiserating. He spreads his hands, as if to say: *naught I can do*. “The
price for a Stark Princess had already been set before you asked, Ser Baelish.”

Baelish’s lips thin. “Another ‘customer’?”

“We cannot say.”

Baelish’s lips twist. “Two hundred thousand. I can hire *eight* sorrowful men with that much gold.”

“You get what you pay for.”

Baelish sighs. “Very well,” he says reluctantly.
“Two hundred thousand,” says the Faceless Man, “and the Iron Throne. The god exacts a price as well.”

The acolyte very, very carefully puts down his ladle. Makes a pretense of dismay, that he has run out of fresh tea-leaves. He ducks under the stall, rummaging in his stores.

Hiding.

As a good little street vendor would. _Hide, but not run._ A man doesn’t abandon his wares, can’t pick them up and flee without bringing attention to himself. And both the Faceless Man and Petyr Baelish are still holding his cups. Those are _expensive_ to replace, if a customer breaks one or walks away with it.

“…from each, according to his ability,” says the Faceless Man. His tone is expressionless.

“You think _I_ can take the Iron Throne?” Baelish sounds both surprised, and pleased.

No response.

Petyr Baelish chuckles. Forced. “So what do you want? The actual chair? The Kingdom?”

“We want what you want.”

Silence for a bit. Then Baelish says, “let me think on it.”

A street vendor is conversant with the polite phrasing of a customer’s refusal to buy: “maybe later”, “I’ll have a cup on my way back home”, “do you sell anything cold?”. “Let me think on it.”

“Valar morghulis,” murmurs the Faceless Man.

No response from the Petyr Baelish. Possibly a silent nod “Kovash” cannot see, hidden under the stall, overheating, pressed up as he is against the small steam-tank.

Petyr Baelish’s footsteps can be heard retreating over the bridge. The acolyte emerges to see the Faceless Man staring into his cup.

“Too much sugar, sir?” asks Kovash.

The Faceless Man considers the acolyte. “Kovash is dead. Go to a house with a lion-faced locker on the big isle off Purple’s third. You are Shamash of the Summer Isles.”

The acolyte bows his head.

**BRONN**

The room is cold; they cannot risk pilfering fuel from the palace’s stores. Instead, Qyburn has brought in a small brazier; they burn charcoal in it. The space is cramped—most of it dominated by the large bed.

Jaime Lannister is dead. Because if Euron Greyjoy discovers that Jaime Lannister is still alive, if he finds out it’s Qyburn that’s saved him and Bronn that’s hidden him…

The sellsword turned lord perches on a stool at the foot of the bed. He should have risen when the Queen entered the room, offered her the seat. But what’s the point? The entire keep knows the Queen is Queen in name alone.
Her belly swells with child.

But the mute on the bed calls for her in his delirium—it comes out as “shee-chee, shee-chee” but both Bronn and Qyburn know who he is calling for.

*Only so long a man can hear that before he caves.* A risk—Qyburn was not sure who they would get, Jaime Lannister’s twin, or Euron Greyjoy’s puppet-queen.

“Get out!” snarls Cersei.

“No,” he says.

“He is my brother, and I am your queen. Get up, and get out before I have you dragged from this room in chains.”

“Not just your brother,” he says. “Your lover.”

She stills. “You sign your death-warrant, Lord Stokeworth.”

Bonn shrugs. “It’s dynastic if a Targaryen takes his sister to bed, but it’s heresy if a Lannister does it? Didn’t make much sense to me, ever, but what do I know? I’m just a sellsword.”

Bonn sighs. And then he does stand—he’s not a tall man, he is not a physically intimidating man. But he’s armed. He has a reputation, grown darker in the past few months.

Cersei Lannister pulls back into herself.

Bonn’s mouth twists. “If the Queen’s brother is not safe in the Red Keep,” he says quietly, “what guarantees the Queen’s safety?”

The Lord of Stokeworth was a Lannister man. For a time it was the only way a lord had for keeping his head and his lands.

Jaime Lannister hasn’t been out of the bed for a moon. There is sepsis in his blood, the fevers come and go.

He has bouts of awareness though. Just lies there, eyes open, staring into the darkness overhead.

Bonn’s wife has been a victim of rape. All highborn seem to react the same--they shut down. Go somewhere in their heads. Smallfolk don’t always have that luxury. Bonn’s own mother didn’t, she got up, washed the blood off herself. Helped eleven-year-old Bonn bury the son-of-a-bitch who’d done it in the field behind the house.

A very large part of him wants to wash his hands off this problem. But he’s not eleven, with nothing to lose and a road that takes him out of town. He has lands now, a name. A wife. He has a role to play. Things that need holding on to. Can’t have the rights and none of the responsibilities—that’s where all these lords born to the name go wrong. They expect to get something for nothing.

Cersei’s eyes are bright. “I will find who did this, and when I do—”

“You fucking know who did this,” says Bonn. He deliberately does not look at the shell of a man lying on the bed.

She draws her arms around herself.
“I’ve always known what your Hand does with the ones that just disappear,” he says quietly. “I help him get rid of the bodies sometimes. We’re dark, twisted men, Your Grace. And you know it. But you also know we’re Lannister men. And when both your Hand and the last fucking sword that Jaime Lannister commands fucking tells you Euron Greyjoy needs his throat slit, you have to fucking listen.”

It’s no use. He knows its no use. But he owes Qyburn, and the man has begged Bronn to try.

Her jaws are clenched. She, too, does not look at the figure lying on the bed. Instead she goes over to the arched window that overlooks the bay. The moon, its face hidden by wisps of racing clouds, makes scattered reflections upon the black water.

“Another queen is coming,” says Cersei, almost a whisper. “Younger. More beautiful. I need Euron.”

Bronn snorts. “I’ve never loved anyone in my life,” he says. “So I don’t rightly know how men stack up against chairs.”

She says nothing.

“Believe me or not,” says Bronn, “it’s Euron Greyjoy that attacked your brother. Maybe he didn’t do it himself--doesn’t seem the type to fuck men. Maybe he didn’t even order the rape, his men took ‘initiative’. But he is the reason Jaime Lannister hovers at death’s door without a tongue in his mouth.”

The Queen turns, and the rage in her is a hollow thing, Bran thinks. She smiles then, bitter. “Winter has come, Bronn-the-Sellsword. The great Sea-King needs a winter port, or he’s not a Sea-King anymore. Pyke is ice-locked now. White Harbor will follow suit very soon.”

“So why doesn’t he go to Dorne?” asks Bronn.

And take his fucking Ironborn with him?

“Because the Mother of Dragons is coming to Dorne,” she says. “Euron needs me. He knows how much I loved Jaime, he knows Jaime was all I had left. He knows I will tear the man that did this limb from limb, and then I will have Qyburn resurrect him and I will tear the man apart again. And again. And again. Until there isn’t enough of a man left for Qyburn to put together. There was a mutiny—Greyjoy men hunt the perpetrators even now. They will not stop until they bring me the ones who did it.”

For a moment there, just a moment, she had sounded like the vicious bitch-queen he’d known her to be. But the last sounds like something Euron Greyjoy came up with, and put in Cersei Lannister, along with his seed.

Fuck her. Fuck them. Fuck all of them.

He heads towards the door, takes in the slumped figure of the Queen standing at the window. Her gaze has finally worked itself up to looking in the direction of the bed.

“I’m leaving, going to Castle Stokeworth,” he says. “My knights will stand outside this door until dawn; won’t do much good against a fist of the whoreson’s pirates, but it’s something. And there will be a cart tomorrow, down near the small-farm gate.”

“Gold his shroud,” she murmurs.
“Jaime Lannister is not dead,” he says. “So maybe you should see to it that the man who was once your lover makes it onto the cart. Before the great Sea-King kills what’s left of him.”

ARYA

The fire is roaring; the wolves are closer. The Wind says there are not too many—a half-dozen or so. Not even a proper pack. And they’ve learned to be wary of men with fires like theirs; the wind blows them the scent of man-with-steel, man-with-arrow.

It’s her watch, but the two are awake alongside her. She hasn’t even been able to uncork the vial that rides, once again, in her keeping.

They watch me far too closely.

Not enough to do on the road save ride; they need a real problem to focus on. There’s one she’s been saving up for two days. Jaqen knows—He’s seen it coming. She found the tea in His pack when she went looking for the Pearl the day before.

The small pot of snowmelt comes to a boil.

One cup is all she brews.

And then she seats herself across the two, presses the cup into the snow, equidistant from all three of them.


She knows Varro’s views on it—they mirror his teacher’s: dead men should not bring life into the world.

Varro looks back and forth between her and Jaqen. Disbelief. “A Stark heir?” he asks.

“If Jon falls,” she says, “The Many-Faced God will lose His hold over the North.” She smiles, bitter. “Sansa bearing Zural’s bastard—that would have served just as well.”

Though Zural’s views were no less rigid than his teacher’s.

But if Sansa Stark was moved enough to consider the idea of lying with him, well, Arya Stark believes “dead men shouldn’t…” would prove itself the weaker thought-pattern in that interaction.

She shrugs. “A moot point.”

Varro loves me. Loves Jaqen. He just needs justification to make the want a need.

Jaqen is watching her, not Varro. “Blood wanes,” He says. “Generations of progressively more ‘domesticated’ dragons. Matched by the dilution of the Targaryen blood—a less powerful bloodline to begin with, the Blood of the Dragon skips entire generations in them sometimes. But the dragons Daenerys woke are older, much older, turned to stone long before the time of the First Men. They listen to her as a fledgling listens to its dam. For now.”

And we’ve been destroying dragon horns as we find them for centuries.

Jaqen turns a little, extends his arm—into the fire. The flame lick at his skin, giving it a golden glow. “Perhaps there is a world where blood is just blood, as we want it to be,” says the god quietly. “But upon the world we are born to, even the blood of social fictions like Kings breeds magic.”
If she bears Jaqen’s child, the H’ghar blood will breed true, the dilution of it matched to the progression of domestication in the eggs laid by Daenerys’s wild dragons.

*And no fucking inbreeding required.*

She grins at her god: *that is a very good justification.*

“A brood-mare?” says Varro.

Both her and Jaqen look to their lover, surprised at the vehemence in his voice.

“A Valyrian brood mare?” Varro demands. “Is that the role Arya Stark is supposed to play for Him of the Many Faces?”

“Valar dohaeris,” she snaps.

*Arya Stark will not be limited to the role expected of her, even if it the House that has expectations.*

“Childless woman warrior” is just as much a constraint on identity as “highborn baby maker”.

*The Wind will not be constrained, even by herself.*

Varro rocks back on his heels. “Dragons loose on the world,” he says. “Red Priests bespelling everything that moves. War after war and the Starks in the middle of them. That you two, of all people, even considered it in the first place…” His nostrils flare.

She grows a trifle impatient. Playing at the perfect servant was a Daorys thing, a subconscious urge to mitigate himself.

*Not needed anymore.*

“A Faceless Man, a dead man,” he continues, coldly furious, “subjected to carrying around useless weight. Almost defenseless for months, her own life at risk from a miscarriage, a breech-birth.”

The Wind wraps itself around her lover’s throat; gentle. She doesn’t even raise a welt. “Two dead gods,” she says, “and a wasteland between them.” She sneers at him. “Define ‘defenseless’ for me.”

Jaqen draws His knees up to His chest. “The situation has changed,” He offers.

“Yes,” says Varro. He glances down at the cup. A short, sharp bark of bitter laughter. “When you offer equality you really fucking offer equality, don’t you? Three votes, I’m outnumbered two to one, so you offer a veto as well, just to accommodate me.”

If the child is Varro’s, it will still be the get of a Faceless Man, with ties to the Many-Faced God that cannot *be* severed. Generation after generation observed, advised instead of having to be controlled.

“Still a Stark heir,” says Jaqen.

“And if the hair is light?” asks Varro.

Stark blood does not override everything—when it mixes with Rhoynnese or Andal stock, the results are unpredictable, like Sansa and Bran’s Tully look.

“I show them the Valyrian,” says the god. “Catelyn Tully’s hair was far darker than Sansa’s, no?”
Some variation is expected.”

She considers the set of Varro’s shoulders, the stubborn tilt of his chin. “No,” hisses the Wind. “If it is the renegade’s, he will snap its neck in the cradle.”

Now, now Varro looks at her, and she knows he cannot read her.

*He cannot mirror this thing in me.*

The Wind wails.

“He’s done it before,” she says.

“So it *is* possible,” murmurs Jaqen: *A dead man making life.*

“Mistress of the Prince of Coins,” says Varro, voice entirely expressionless. “She wanted a child. Gave the Prince a gift in her bower, but…” He smiles at Arya. “Some women pretend to drink when their lover is watching. Vomit it up afterwards.”

*Is that what you’re suggesting I should do?*

He blinks; confused.

No, *he* trusts *Arya Stark.*

“Did you kill her?” asks Jaqen.

Varro’s mouth twists. “Wasn’t in the contract. I’m not Jaqen H’ghar—what was it, Arya, thirty Lannister soldiers at Harrenhal? Forty?” He thinks. “Your life, I suppose, worth that at least. Still.” Varro shrugs. “Went back when it was due.”

The Wind reaches for him, she gently turns Varro’s face to hers. “Will you kill Jaqen’s child?” she asks.

“Your mess,” says Varro: *Yours to clean up.*

She nods, takes her hand away.

“Our House is burning to the ground,” says Jaqen gently.

*The is risk, there is a period of defenselessness. There is uncertainty. All of that, nine months of surrendering my body to a base biological function and all I get for it in the end is even chances at a corpse in a cradle?*

She is no one. “Vote no,” she says.

Jaqen purses his lips. “No,” he says.

Varro remains silent.

She picks up the cup, downs the now chilled tea in one gulp.

Chapter End Notes
Dear gods I'm exhausted. Just got back from the trip, saw the clamoring. This chapter was edited by gul before I left, but when I was offline I made so, so many changes and shufflings...trying to keep the chapter-count within reason, removing unnecessary things that don't do much more than titillate ;)

So much has happened while I've been gone! So many new stories, some old greats that have returned, comments to reply to, stories to comment on. A huge backlog. I'll get through it--tired out at this point. Missed you all!

As always, let me know what you think!
THE WAIF

He is Lorathi, and one of the nine. The Princess-Lies-Sleeping releases him long before it’s released Umma. It still takes him almost a day to return to full alertness—the Valyrian steel cuffs have that effect on Faceless Men.

Her teacher, master of the craft though he is, took a dose meant for an elephant. Twice. He will be out for quite some time.

She’s been spelled off from the door-duty; four fresh Braavosi run the House now.

“Forgive,” she says. “It could not be chanced.”

“Naught to forgive,” he says. “You did no harm to me.”

They sit in the remnants of the garden, frost blooming on leaves, frost blooming on the flat surface of rocks, all around. He sits next to her upon the low wall that retains the banked earth.

“Your teacher worries,” he says gently. “Let me dream him word.”

“If he wants to speak with me, he should speak to me.”

She feels a light touch, looks down, startled. His hand rests lightly on hers, his eyes upon her are sad.

“Okeo,” he begins—the Dothraki word for “friend”, for “one who is trusted”, he always calls her that. “What is spoken in haste—”

She draws her hand away, clutches it to her chest. “When I asked you take my virginity,” she hisses, “I didn’t think it would obligate you to interfere in my relationship with my teacher.”

He blinks at her. Then he looks away. “What relationship?” he asks. His voice maintains its even, gentle tone. “You two have not spoken to each other for more than seventy years.”

“Lorathi,” she says. It’s not a curse that escapes her mouth often.

_I do not understand you. You are no one. No one is not supposed to care; Lorathi are not supposed to tolerate excessive shows of emotion. After all this time, time and time again I use harsh words with you and then I turn around and weep on your shoulder. Why hasn’t it driven you away?_

He sighs. “I am tired,” he says.

_The world falls through our fingers like sand._

“Why?” he asks.

The thing he has never asked her; the question has hovered between them for a very long time. It
means: why not me?

I am tired, she thinks.

Tired of the evasions, tired of all of it.

I am a disappointment to my teacher, who wanted me to be a Lorathi. Instead I took to the philters and potions he’d warned me away from, and now I set bones and mentor new acolytes and take a contract but once every few years.

Let us close the circle.

Let me be a disappointment to you as well.

“Tired of all of it.”

“I am a disappointment to my teacher, who wanted me to be a Lorathi. Instead I took to the philters and potions he’d warned me away from, and now I set bones and mentor new acolytes and take a contract but once every few years.”

Let us close the circle.

Let me be a disappointment to you as well.

“Tired of all of it.”

“I am a disappointment to my teacher, who wanted me to be a Lorathi. Instead I took to the philters and potions he’d warned me away from, and now I set bones and mentor new acolytes and take a contract but once every few years.”

Lorathi do not tolerate constraint.

He looks to her, his brow furrowed. “I constrained you?” he asks. Bewildered, almost. He pulls away. And then his expression suddenly clears. “There is someone else, someone that has captured your interest.”

She laughs then, bitter and mocking in equal parts. “I have lain with others,” she says. “Someone walking past in the market-square. A Faceless Man speaking to me over meals. An informant, once, in Myr,” she says. “And I am trapped. Because there has never been anyone but you.”

His bewilderment would be endearing if she wasn’t drained of all capacity for endearment.

Her mouth twists. “I have the liking of other women, Okeo,” she says. “And for all that there is naught but your name that whispers through my mind, it is in the form of a wish! For all that you are handsome and you grow more so every decade, there is no more desire in me for your form today than there was all those years ago.”

I have tried. I have tried. I am trapped.

He reaches out then, brushes his fingertips over the side of her face. A small smile pulls at his lips. “Okeo,” he says, and now he sounds amused, “flesh is an illusion.”

“Everyone says that,” she says. “But it is not. And if it is, I cannot bring myself to see past the illusion-- that is what traps me, that is the disappointment-making thing in me.”

He sighs. And then he raises his hand to his face.

“No!” she says, reaches out to him.

Too late.

He has wiped away his features; he wears her face now. Her stomach lurches; bile rises in her throat.

What have you done?

“You worked on that face for centuries,” the Waif whispers.
The other shrugs. “What is time to one of the god’s servants?”

The Waif has been party to the latest batch of experiments, layering feature after feature upon his face, taking measurements, recording reactions and parameters of symmetry.

_He was so very close...another few decades and he would have amassed an amalgam of every brother in the order, created the truest average of us, created a face of us that showed us why Lorathi weep when they make love to other Lorathi, that it is a vision of perfection they seek, and they seek it in union, and they are destroyed when it is dissolved._

“If it was that easy,” says the Waif, newly bitter for what he has thrown away for _nothing_ , “I would have asked you to wear a face long ago.”

“So explain it to me,” says the other.

There are tears making trails down the Waif’s face now, she knows not why; it is far too cold for weeping. “Because if I am with you, I will constrain _you_ ,” she says. “Constrain you to a form that is not yours, to be someone you are not. Lorathi do not tolerate constraint. Eventually you will come to despise me for it.”

The other _chuckles_. “Ah, Braavosi,” she says. “You really don’t _get_ no one, do you?”

And then the Waif finds herself face-to-face with their sister of Pentos. “This is who I am,” says the other. And then she is a brother, a Braavosi, from Leng. “And this,” he says. And then the old man. “And this.” Then Arya Stark. “And this.” Faces flicker, one after another, across the other’s visage. “Flesh is an illusion--for _me_. I _am_ each of the multitudes I contain within me. My truth is the face you see before you.” And the other settles once again upon her face, the fragile, waiflike features, the short, fine hair.

The Waif is lost in the radiating lines of the other’s eyes, the one thing that remains after the entire world has changed before her.

“The one you want, wearing the wrong flesh,” says the other, “feeds the mind and the soul but not the body. But one you do not want, wearing desireable flesh?” she smiles, a little sad. “That does not feed Faceless Men. It empties us.”

_I know._

“It is rare when all things--the body, the mind, the soul--when they align,” says the other thoughtfully. “Rarer still that those for whom such a thing is possible become vengeance-ridden assassins.”

The Waif looks to the other, startled. “It does not align for you?” she asks.

“The soul has always been yours,” says the other.

The Waif’s breath catches; she is wept-out.

“And neither my body nor my mind are constrained,” the other continues, gentle, her voice the Waif’s voice—it sounds strange from another’s mouth. “Lorathi despise being constrained by that which was not a _choice_ --by that which they were born to, that which was expected of them. The return for our service is not vengeance--that is just a recruitment bonus. The return for our service is the grace given to us to be able to transcend that which enslaves us.”

The Waif blinks, but does not wipe away the tears as she looks away to study the patterns of frost.
upon the ground. “Is this what a Lorathi is supposed to learn from their teacher?” she asks. “That I
did not learn because I was not good enough?”

“You would be surprised at how long it takes Lorathi to learn it,” says the other. “Some learned it
just yesterday. If it could be taught, it would not be.”

But of course. Why teach what is useful if riddles and half-formed ideas can take up teaching time
with none being the wiser?

“So.” The other jumps off the wall, stands in front of the Waif. “Your cell is bigger,” she says.
“Mine is closer to the hearths. Pick--you are in the House far more than I am.”

It is how things are done--one Faceless Man moves their things into another’s cell.

Almost a hundred years leading us here, and it just...happens?

So what is it supposed to do, asks an almost-forgotten voice in her head--the gravelly, disapproving
tones of her teacher, the Lorathi that is known as the Alchemist-- so what’s it supposed to do,
spend another hundred years not happening?

“We have two watches before the conclave the old man’s called,” says the Waif. She starts
walking away, turns her head to the other, still standing at the wall, wearing the Waif’s face and
looking a little...off-balance.

Confounded a Lorathi, twice in one conversation? Do I get a prize if I do it ten times in a row?

“You pick the face,” she says over her shoulder.

ARYA

She awakens with a snarl to Varro shaking her.

“Ver’yalli,” he murmurs, “there are more wolves about.”

She groans, rolls over to a side. Her stomach feels hollow, hunger clawing at her from the inside.
The Wind is exhausted.

The breath of forty Faceless Men to find; luckily most were in Braavos.

Jaqen is going to be in no better shape; there are Faceless Men whose minds have diverged greatly
from the time of their deaths. The god has lost touch with them; the cluster of minds of those that
are not renegades struggle to hold on to all their brothers in the dreaming.

“Fucking Lorathi,” she says as she levers herself up to a sitting position upon the bedroll.

“Again?” asks Varro.

Her jaw clenches—answer enough. The second time in as many nights a vote has been called for
by the Lorathi.

To give the gift to all those sleeping in the storehouse.

There is a dangerous undercurrent amongst the nameless: democracy, voting, these merely
customs; there are no rules.
Should have helped our renegades run instead of calling them back home. Defenseless, deeply asleep, trusting that a solution will be found.

The Wind doesn’t care if they kill compulsively, if they leave a mountain of bodies in their wake. She doesn’t care if they are mad.

*Brother, teacher, lover. Mine and Jaqen’s are renegades.*

The Wind does not surrender that which is hers by right. Neither does Death.

A wolf howls.

*A proper pack now.*

“Fastidiousness,” says Varro, rueful. “Speaking as one who understands the mindset—the Lorathi want to keep the definition of the Many-Faced God *clean* of the renegade taint.”

“Death is not *clean,*” she hisses. Narrows her eyes at him.

*You’re just like them. To accept equality, you’d have to grant to others, wouldn’t you, Saint Varro?* Renegades are not offered a vote.

And yet she offered it to him. A vote and a veto. Over her body. *Her* child.

He did not vote. Did not participate except to judge, except to show the Wind a precedent that amounted to a threat: votes are irrelevant; I’ll kill it if it’s mine.

Implicit in the threat is a rejection of consensus.

The same thing the Lorathi are threatening to do, should the vote not go their way a third time.

The Wind whispers: *the wolves are watching you.*

“We need to go,” she says. Sighs, reaches over for Jaqen. There is no will in her to do this thing; she is a desert made of cold. But she has no heart not to.

She kisses His forehead, His lips, His chin. Breathes, gently, into His veins.

“Beloved,” she whispers, “awake, beloved.”

Jaqen’s arms come around her waist, hold her to Him. “Slaughter all the wolves for me, ice-eyes, and we can sleep a while longer.”

She kisses his lips again. “They keep the wights away.”

Where there are wolves there are no wights.

Jaqen sighs, releases her. Sits up. He looks haggard; the dark circles under his eyes are visible even by the dim firelight.

“How did the Braavosi take the truth?” Varro asks.

“It has hindered more than helped,” says Jaqen.

The hive, the swarm. Atheists finding out *they’re* the god they’ve “disproved”.

*...*
“The Braavosi are running around like chickens with their head cut off,” she sneers.

“Buzzing around like a bee with a concussion, surely,” says Varro, his tone mild. “Can’t put the head back on a chicken.”

“Three switched allegiance on the spot,” says Jaqen. “They spent the night trying to convince me they’d been Lorathi all along.”

*Like He would care.*

Whether they *are* Lorathi, or Braavosi pretending to be Lorathi, nobody really wants to ask. But they side with the ones that want to give the gift.

It tips the balance. Only her and Jaqen’s unwavering support for finding a true *solution* renders the vote a stalemate. The Lorathi still have faith in the gods—or maybe they were shocked into silence by the unmannerly—*furious*—tirade by the Wind.

“They need to pull their heads out of their asses,” she says. 

*Before it is too late to save anyone.*

**GENDRY**

With considerable effort, he pushes the door to the smithy fully open. Enough to let some of the torchlight from the courtyard into the place, get a look around.

The place is almost in ruins, dust and ash over everything. There is a small mountain of scrap—broken axles and axes and blades—piled up just inside the door; people have been tossing scrap iron in through the broken window, it looks like.

*For me to deal with, I suppose.*

He steps inside. The child—Beron—follows him, holding a lantern.

Gendry stares, a mingled sense of excitement and despair rising in him. It needs a lot of work. A *lot* of work. But the *size* of the forge, the three anvils, dust-covered tools…more things, in the shadowy recesses.

*Castle-steel was forged here.*

The smithy will be something to rival Mastersmith Mott’s.

He takes a deep breath.

“I will need an assistant,” he says aloud.

*Thirty of them should do it, I’m thinking.*

“Such can be provided,” says a new voice behind him.

He turns. The brown robes, the chain…the Maester of Winterfell.

A rotund young man, not much older than Gendry himself. He has a kindly look in his eye.

“Maester,” Gendry bows his head.
“Smith Waters,” says the Maester, mirrors the motion. Then with a flick of his wrist, he dismisses the page-boy; Beron runs off towards the keep proper, skidding over patches of ice. The Maester smiles at Gendry. “Would you like to take supper with my family tonight?” he asks.

*Family?*

The Maester is a Winterfell man then, his father and mother probably right proud of their son that has risen so high. He’s got a Maester’s refined, bookish speech; still a man of the people, not a high lord, welcoming the newcomer into his family’s home.

Gendry feels touched.

“There are administrative details I’m sure you are eager to discuss.”

Gendry ducks his head. “Pay and assistants and suchlike,” he agrees.

The Maester grins. “And suchlike.”

*Right. Of course.* “Um. Ser Clegane took—”

“Commander Clegane,” corrects the Maester. “Doesn’t like the ‘Ser’, but he’ll take his command-rank, now as he’s heading a legion.”

*Passing strange.*

Or not. The King is a strange one.

*Like Arya.*

“Commander Clegane sent a guard off with my bags somewhere,” he says, hesitant. “My quarters —?”

*There will be rents to the lord. Hope it isn’t something too fancy, for ‘Robert Baratheon’s bastard’. “A small room’ll do,” he adds.*

The Maester nods. “Follow me.”

What follows is a lightning-fast tour of Winterfell. For a fat man the Maester can *move*. They pass through the cavernous Keep kitchens, and a pretty, blonde young thing places a small, piping-hot sugar-tart in his hand.

“Thank-yee,” he says. Then he grins—he notices the Maester’s gotten *two* tarts.

*Explains why we came by the kitchens then.*

Juggling the piping-hot confections, they make their way through the keep. An uneasy feeling starts growing in him. No carpet underfoot, their feet ring upon the stone. Nothing like the Red Keep, or any rich merchantman’s house—this place is bare compared to southern homes. But the wealth is on display—shockingly so.

There are too many hearths. All lit, though some have burned down to embers.

It is *warm* inside the Lord’s Keep.

“Um,” he says, “where are we going?”
“Your rooms,” says the Maester over his shoulder.

Gendry swallows.

They cross through an arch, into a courtyard, swept clean of snow. Two women are crossing it, holding baskets.

“There was a house for the keep smith,” says Maester Samwell, “in Lord Eddard’s time. Out in Wintertown. It’s gone now—a lot of people lost their homes.”

“So…they moved into the keep?”

“Most are dead,” says Maester Samwell quietly.

Oh.

“There’s room for everyone we’ve got, room to spare, in Winterfell proper. It’s twice the size of the Red Keep, you know.”

I didn’t.

“So this here,” says the Maester, pointing to a portion of the Keep, “is the ‘Liveried Wing’. King’s Riders, Mistress of the Keys, Forestmaster, Houndsmaster, Horsemaster, Keeper of the Wardrobe, House Minstrel, Reeve, the new Master-Stonemason we got. You’re the Keep Smith, that’s your place.”

Some of Gendry’s disquiet subsides.

With the others of my real rank, not some red-priestess’s mad story.

It’s still a higher rank than any he’s ever held. But he is sorely needed here—the state of the smithy testifies to that.

The Maester points over to the right, to a tall, crenellated wall. “Beyond that is the Lord’s Keep itself. My quarters, the Legion-Commanders, save two. Prince Bran, he stays with us on the main floor.”

The Maester doesn’t explain why a Prince is staying where he is.

“Princess Sansa claims the old Heralds’ wing, near the front. Commander Clegane’s quarters are on the ground floor there—he likes to keep an eye on the gate.”

So that’s how he knew we’d come.

He’s seen the King’s Tower already.

He hesitates.

“And Princess Arya?” he asks.

“She’s taken the Northern Wing—used to be the Braavos Embassy, till it moved to White Harbour. There’s a lot of rumors, don’t listen to them—Ser Davos and the Ambassador found it difficult to coordinate things from out here, always a day’s delay for the ravens.”

The Braavosi, Sandor Clegane had said. I think I’ll listen to the rumors first, thank-yee, before deciding on which story to believe. But to espouse, he’s going to go with the Maester’s explanation.
They reach the other end of the courtyard, a heavy wooden door. Inside there is a winding staircase to the second floor.

“And where is the other Legion Commander that doesn’t stay with you?” he asks, since the patter of information has dried up.

“With Princess Arya,” says the Maester.

*Like Sandor Clegane, on a different floor from the Princess, with lots of stonework in between them?*

The Maester does not say: Gendry does not ask further. Servants talk. Especially maids, and to him in particular. The Baratheon looks are worth *something*, at least.

**JAQEN**

They make ready to ride. He’s had to search her again.

He kisses her forehead, and passes the vial to Varro behind her back. His first instinct would be to empty it onto the ground. But the Alchemist has dreamed him otherwise—*there is magic to it, Jaqen, the grip of the Pearl has grown stronger on every brother that has used it since dragons were born into the world again. Keep it on hand, dilute it, use it if the shakes progress into fits.*

He cannot let her know—she’ll use the knowledge.

“We’re on the move,” she says. “I’m tired all the time. I need to be alert, I need to be able to fight.”

He kisses her temple.

“I can’t stop,” she whispers.

“Not alone,” he murmurs. And he feeds the darkness into her, winds himself around her heart, curls through her veils like black ink.

There was one other brother that used the Pearl for as long as she has; almost slit his own throat to get away from the need. The Waif had to strap him down to the table by the end of it, he kept throwing off the sleeping potions.

“I told you about the fish hunger,” says Varro gently. “Wore your flesh for the countering of it. Even at ten-and-four Arya Stark had the fortitude to throw off what addiction Asshai had engendered in me. How is the Pearl any different?”

“Because the Pearl is not a magical shadow poison,” she snaps. “It’s a *good* poison. A House of Black and White poison.”

*Ah.*

*There* is the key he has been looking for, to bring her mind to bear on the task of countering the Pearl.

*But not yet.*

She must first understand the severity of her dependence.

Varro’s awareness, bleeding sorrow and fear around the edges, wraps around them.
The Wind pushes at Varro, isolates herself from him.

“Arya Stark needs it,” she says.

“No, she doesn’t,” replies Varro, his voice hard now. “You conflate addiction with need. The body is stronger than both. The mind is weak.”

Jaqen almost winces.

She has grown very still in his arms.

Varro reaches out, grabs her hand. “Here,” he says, and places the vial flat in her palm. “You’ll steal it back anyhow.”

Her lower lip is trembling. Gently, Jaqen takes the vial from her hand. “I’ll keep it,” he says.

She turns to him again, burrows under his cloak. “Shakes come really quickly,” she murmurs.

*The body is small. It hits her harder. But it means the poison will leave her system faster as well.*

“You ride with me,” he says to her, kisses the top of her head.

She shakes her head. “He’s watching,” she says.

Who, Varro?

“He’s not like you,” she says. “He judges .”

“Nevertheless,” says Jaqen, “I need you to ride with me.” He lays his hands on her shoulders, looks into her eyes . His hands stroke downwards, slowly, over her upper arms, lower, until his fingers are entwined with hers. *Intention.* “No Sandor this time,” he murmurs.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jaqen sees a slight widening of Varro’s eyes.

Not lust.

Jaqen extrapolates his renegade’s thoughts: *Ride with…? Oh. On the same horse. Like a fucking courtly painting.*

Jaqen’s lips pull to a side, snide, as he catches the Varro’s gaze: *so you really do judge.*

Varro steps forward a half-pace. “Daorys, he knows a Faceless Man does what is necessary. Though I’d request you ride with me and Jaqen take point—he knows the terrain.”

She shakes her head, still not looking at him.

She’s wearing a face Varro won’t be able to read—he’s never seen it, never mirrored it before: The brattish girl of ten-and-seven, simpering and raging by turns.

The Wind is being spiteful.

*Varro will start mirroring it soon enough.*

Jaqen sighs. The thwarted hope of a child saddens the both of them, but it should not merit *spite*.

“Saint Varro can’t stop being the *perfect* fucking Faceless Man,” she spits.
Ah. Alright, that merits some spite, yes.

The test of equality is not in the fucking or the accommodation of individual foibles. It is in the making and respecting of difficult decisions.

Varro is not stupid. He doesn’t need to read her face to know when she turned her face from him.

Will he know the why?

Varro closes the distance between them, raises a hand to trace it over her back. “Pick a farmer’s child, sweet Arya, give him the name, it’ll come to the same in the end. Uncontrollable dragons—so what? Let them fly about wild, like wolves, like eagles, man tries to control one, we give him a gift. Don’t need to breed to do that.”

There’s that word again. Yes, Saint Varro, I would turn a Faceless Man into a “Valyrian brood mare”, with you on hand to cull “imperfect” specimens.

Jaqen realizes his own irritation is rising.

Varro is not stupid. Jaqen has to remind himself of that. He just happens to have missed the point.

“Come ride with me, Ver’yalli.”

“No.”

Jaqen grins at Varro. “Wind doesn’t like you anymore.”

Varro kisses the side of her neck; she does not react. Varro’s eyes are still locked on Jaqen’s as he lets go to mount his own horse.

GENDRY

He’s still a little stunned by “supper”. The second sugar-tart was for the Maester’s son, a smiling child of around four years. The Maester’s…lady? Gendry doesn’t know the word, but her name is Gilly, and she is the Princess Sansa’s Lady-in-waiting.

Almost everyone in the Red Keep had paramours; the proclivities of the old Maester there were hardly a secret—especially because he had the habit of not paying.

Gendry did not expect it from someone who serves the Starks. But the little ‘family’ is so harmonious, the gentle care between the Maester and Gilly so very apparent, he doesn’t have the heart to put them in the same category as the people he’s heard about at King’s Landing.

An attachment from before he became a Maester?

Maybe Maester Samwell was ordered to the Citadel to apprentice there, like the way Gendry himself had been ordered to Castle Black by Mastersmith Mott.

What would have happened if I’d been in love with a girl from King’s Landing, and her with me?

Compassion is not something Gendry expects in the hightborn. Honor, in the Starks and some of the other houses. But not understanding.

He smiles at the little boy, wheedling his father for another tart.

The Bastard King is good to bastards.
A strange world.

Now the table has been cleared, candles lit.

“Your pay,” says Maester Samwell.

Gendry nods, pulls up his sleeve, ready for some good, hard negotiation—he’s seen the state of the smithy after all, Maester Samwell can’t deny that.

They settle on something that is thrice what he made at the Crossroads; Gendry tries to keep his jubilation hidden.

_Truly, I’m just a journeyman. They’re overpaying._

“I think we got a very good bargain in you,” says the Maester.

_What?_

“Wish Arya was here,” the Maester mutters, then stands up from the table. He fishes around in a heavy book-satchel sitting on a stool, pulls out a heavy tome he thunks down on the table.

After the first few words, Gendry lets the Maester’s enthusiastic talk wash over and around him. Maester Samwell turns pages, points out diagrams, flips a few more pages.

Talks and talks.

Eventually he falls silent, looks at Gendry questioningly.

“Valyrian Steel,” says Gendry.

“Well I mean I’ve oversimplified things, there’s quite a bit we just don’t know —even…um. Our source doesn’t know. Closely held even in Valyria. But that’s all specifics. We know how to do it! In general. It will take some experimentation, is all.”

Maester Samwell’s eyes are shining. Next moment, the shine dulls a bit. “We need it, you see,” he says. “The White Walkers are coming.”


He can feel the Maester nodding.

Gendry raises his eyes to the other man’s.

“Maester Samwell,” he says, “I cannot even _read_.”

**AEGON**

He staggers off the _hathay_ a third of the way across the Long Bridge. Tall buildings rise on each side, shops doing brisk business even in the cold darkness.

The dwarf-elephant pulling the cart turns, gives him a very sympathetic look.

He pats the elephant’s trunk.

“_You’re_ still my friend, aren’t you, Ramal?” he murmurs to the beast.

Ramal slobbers, placid.
“Stop trying to seduce the elephant, Aegon,” snaps Arianne, still lounging aboard the cart.

He whirls around, looks at her. “I’ll prove it to you,” he slurs. “The Targaryen name still holds power, the Bank—”

She rolls her eyes.

If he is to make himself King of Meereen, he needs gold to make it to the city in a style suited to “Prince Aegon Targaryen”. Arianne Martell says her purse is empty.

A test.

She is suspicious. Volantis despises the Dragon Queen, and yet door after door has been shut in the face of Daenerys’ rival, her nephew. There must be some reason, surely.

The reason is very simple, he thinks.

*Full-grown, flaming dragons.*

And the Iron Bank.

He stands now in front of the doors of the Volantis Factor House of the Bank.

With a casual wave behind his back, he hauls himself up the black marble steps, leaning on the balustrade for support.

The night began with a drunken boast: *the Iron Bank will give a Targaryen a loan.* Then he proceeded to get drunker, allowed himself to be goaded into the challenge.

Two guards in the sober black of the Bank bar his passage, spears crossed.

“I am Aegon Targaryen,” he snarls. “The rightful heir to the Iron Throne, heir to Daenerys Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons. *Open this door!*”

The guards exchange looks. Drunken noblemen with grandiose claims are a bit above their area of expertise—they mostly deal with shopkeepers and ship-captains. The highborn of Volantis summon merchantmen to their mansions, they don’t just… show up on the Bank’s doorstep.

“Wait,” says the guard on the right. Adds a belated “my lord, if you would.”

Aegon nods, imperious in his inebriation.

Within a few moments there is a whispered conversation; the door is opened.

He retches noisily over the balustrade. The looks of distaste on the guards’ faces are amplified in the face of the clerk that has come to escort Aegon inside.

Aegon crosses the threshold. The doors slam shut behind him.

A few curious looks. But everyone wears bank-black. No Volantenes, no foreigners.

Aegon straightens; every hint of the “debauched prince” falls away from him. “Forgive the deception, banker,” he says. “My cousin has…expectations.”

The clerk is studying him.
“I will see the keeper of this factor-house now,” says Aegon.

“I will see if he is available, your Highness,” says the clerk. He is starting to look uncertain around the edges.

_____________

Aegon's palms are sweating. This is a monumental risk. And a deception. Not a simple deception, like pretending to be a Targaryen prince.

No, it’s something much worse.

He is about to pretend to be a Faceless Man.

Many-Faced God, if you are real, help me now. I want to serve. Give me the means.

The prayer doesn’t feel quite…right. He tries again.

Izembaro, old teacher, wish me luck—I’m about to play my biggest role yet; I’ll lose my head if the audience doesn’t like it.

That feels better.

The keeper enters. A balding man, late-thirties, round spectacles perched on the end of his nose. Aegon rises to his feet.

The keeper gives him a quizzical look. Suddenly suspicious.

Royalty does not rise for bankers of middling rank.


The keeper’s eyes widen.

Aegon slips the mask off his face.

The keeper takes a step back.

Aegon does not smile. “There have been some complications.” He goes through the options he’s gone over in his mind all evening, something, anything, that would require a Faceless Man to run to the Iron Bank in the middle of the night. Something large. Something suitably cloak-and-dagger. He picks one.

“Slaves,” he says. Does not elaborate.

The keeper’s expression clears.

Wait, it’s working?

“Valar dohaeris,” says the man. “The documents of manumitting will be prepared. How many, and for how long?”

So that’s how Faceless Men operate in slave-cities! They manumit their slaves in secret. In secret from the slaves, too, no doubt.

How deliciously twisted.
Aegon now cobbles together a mysterious-enough explanation that requires slaves and gold.

“A matched set of high-house servitors—twelve,” he says, “and the bank will have to advance the gold for their purchase.” His mouth pulls to a side. “Complications, as I said—the manummitance will happen here, of course, but only on paper. They will be set free in Meereen—it needs to feel real.”

The banker raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

“The nephew of the Breaker of Chains must have a change of heart upon reaching Dragon’s Bay,” he says. “Aegon Targaryen must repudiate Volantis, no?”

The banker nods. Not enlightened, but it sounds good, at least to Aegon’s ears.

Aegon’s not going to buy any slaves, of course. But the gold-price for a set of twelve is high. No doubt he’s stealing from the House of Black and White’s coffers.

Well, they should have sent word, and then I’d have something to do instead of making it up as I go along.

The banker bows. “As you wish, guildsman.”

Aegon nods. Nicks his face with the dagger he palmed earlier, draws the mask over his face again.

Assumption after risky assumption—that the Iron Bank knows about the masks. That Faceless Men work in very close cooperation with the Bank. That a Faceless Man will not be questioned, he will be assisted. That slaves are a topic where irrationalities and internal inconsistencies in stories will be…overlooked.

He smiles.

Thank you, Izembaro.

He saunters over to the banker’s sideboard. Picks up a decanter—kept for important visitors, he supposes. He sniffs.

“Peach brandy,” he sighs. “It’ll do.” He pours a little bit into a small glass, then upends the glass over himself, his collar, his front.

“The things we do for our reputations,” he says, sardonic.

The banker grins. He likes being in on a Faceless Man’s game. “Should we have you thrown out for drunkenness?” he asks.

Amateur.

“No, you’re giving me gold, why would you throw me out?” Aegon lowers his brows at the manager. “Be obsequious, man. Bow and scrape.” He grins, mischievous. “You’ve got the next King of Meereen in your office.”

“Right,” says the banker. “Right.”

He is escorted down to the front foyer. The overly-enthusiastic keeper attends on him with all the bowing and scraping a Targaryen prince’s noble little heart could desire. Right out the front door, and all the way down to the waiting hathay.
He catches the look on Arianne’s face.

*Your assumptions are in for a nasty recalibration, dear “cousin”.*

**SANSAS**

Sansa folds her hands demurely in her lap, and smiles at the woman seated before her.

The woman wears full plate armor. To breakfast.

*Brienne makes a statement: I am a knight. A true knight. Better than the man you have standing behind you. Better than the Lannisters’ Hound.*

“It is not appropriate,” says Brienne, her lips tight with disapproval. “You are a Stark and a Princess. Third in line to the throne.”

Sansa does not sigh. “The King needs you more, dear Knight,” she says gently. “Needs you urgently. Almost four hundred women, all ready and willing to bear a blade. They need to be taught.”

Brienne leans back in her chair, crosses her mailed forearms. “You will never turn women into an effective fighting force--the King is desperate.”

“That does not sound right, coming from you, Brienne,” she says. “You are a fighter, an exceptional one.”

“Because I am me ,” says Brienne.

_Ser Duncan the Tall’s granddaughter?

“I was never like other women, ever,” says Brienne. “Some of these have had husbands, they go home to children.”

Sansa raises an eyebrow. “So they have something they’re fighting for,” she says, “the lives of those that are left, right alongside vengeance for the dead.”

Brienne’s nostrils flare. “There’s highborn ladies amongst the lot. You can’t go from dresses and tea-parties to sleeping in the field amidst corpses.”

Sansa feels a strange sense of dislocation. Brienne is not entirely wrong--it’s why Sansa sits here in Winterfell, dressed in brocade, and Arya rides alongside Jaqen to speak to the soldiers--Arya was not like other girls either.

*And yet the other men that have come from the Crossroads, from the Brotherhood Without Banners, they speak of Lady Stoneheart. My mother. Who was like other women, with the dresses and the delicate wine-glasses. And yet, and yet when it came time for her to rise, Lady Stoneheart rose.*

She supped upon Lannister and Frey corpses.

“ Valar morghulis ,” Sansa murmurs, low, for herself. She considers the woman before her. “So you will not do it?” she asks Brienne.

Brienne looks away. “Of course I will do it,” she says. “I will try, anyway, if that’s what you want me to do.” She looks again to the man standing in the shadows behind Sansa’s chair. “Though I would be far happier in my rightful place--not with the other women, but as your sworn knight.”
Sansa rises. “You are not with the other women, Brienne,” she says. “You are commanding them. That gives you higher rank than a knight. You report directly to the King, not his sister.” She looks Brienne of Tarth in the eyes--she can only do it when Brienne is seated, though the knight has risen quickly to her feet, a few breaths after Sansa. “You are an exceptional warrior, and your squire has spoken very highly of your instruction. You are the last living heir of House Tarth. You have been trained to leadership, not just arms, since you were a child.” Sansa dips her head towards Brienne, whose eyes are shocked, looking at Sansa.

*It’s the shift in demeanor*, Sansa thinks. *From demure and diplomatic to the King’s Hand, though that title is not used in the North.*

_Zural said I must learn to make smoother transitions._

“So it is time you were used as your hard-earned skill demands,” Sansa says. “As a leader, upon the field of battle, not as a show-fighter competing for laurels at a tourney, or as a wandering hedge-knight righting wrongs.”

But... *something is wrong.*

The Brienne she knows should be chomping at the bit to be given the authority she deserves. Her eyes should be aglow with pride to be recognized for her merits. Instead, Brienne’s gaze is focused behind Sansa, and the knight’s eyes glitter with hatred.

Chapter End Notes

So...Braavosi, Lorathi, what did you think? This is the last we'll see of the Waif POV for some time. Hope you liked it!

What did you think of Gendry, and Aegon and Brienne?

Oh, and next chapter, "Lover's Quarrel", will be up in a few days, it's in edits now.
ARYA

Jaqen’s arms are wound tight around her. The gait of the horse, their gentle sway into each other—the familiarity of it reassures her.

Her fingertips tingle.

She doesn’t dare refresh the dose too often, but even Jaqen-the-distractible is going to notice the level in the vial dropping soon.

Varro has the other one--she saw it, she helped him pack it into the pouch he now carries strapped to his side.

Her mouth curls.

Maybe I should have danced the pretty, let him carry me upon his horse.

But distraction will not work on Varro. Goading the renegade will be far more effective.

It just takes longer.

She can feel his gaze on them; cold. Twice she’s tried to reach out to him; twice his awareness has been so tightly wound within himself, she cannot even tell whether he breathes unless the Wind tells her it is so.

“He isolates himself from us,” she spits.

“He is a complex creature. There is always a reason.”

“He’s waiting for the vote,” she says. “And when it comes and you and I lose, he’s going to comply with it, like the ideal Lorathi Daorys was supposed to be.”

Just as he would have killed my child.

Jaqen can taste the truth in her words--He doesn’t try to counter them.

“He’s supposed to be us, not them,” she whispers.

“There’s always a reason,” says Jaqen.

“If he wanted to explain it to us,” she says, “he would talk to us, no? Or is the creature too complex to parley?”

The god chuckles, sweeps her hair back from her face to plant a kiss upon her temple. “Are we at war then, my heart, that we must parley?”

“I don’t know,” she says, “are you a Valyrian-slaver that will turn me into your brood-mare?”
Jaqen sighs.

VARRO

His awareness is restricted to the bounds of his skin, so tightly shielded not even his heartbeat will leak to another Lorathi unless they put their ears to his chest. It means he must rely on severely limited senses—the sound, the smell, the taste of the air. The world is washed out, a pale grey approximation of itself.

The House of Black and White is a reflection of the god. The god despised Himself—the House turned against Him. Lorathi want renegades to be given the gift. Lorathi are closest to Him of the Many Faces; the most pure reflection of Him.

What is the purpose of a vote? A vote is a justification for a decision that has already been made—just like the vote over their child. A demonstration—the most cruel way to show him he doesn’t fit between them, that he is part of no plan.

“The Wind doesn’t like you anymore.”

*Can’t get any more clear than that, can it?*

A storm is rising; dark-grey clouds boil overhead.

She wants is the Pearl he carries. But an addiction is not enough to be moved to cruelty. Cannot be that any poison has that much hold over a Faceless Man.

Arya Stark uses her weaknesses.

*Renegade lost control. He had to be put down.*

A decision: *so be it.*

*I am Varro Massag.*

The red washes over his vision.

He wants her to beg for him—he wants to look her in the eyes, her cunt still throbbing from the fucking he’s given it, and he wants to ask whether she still *likes* him.

*Does she feel it when I get hard, when the ring strains to contain me?*

Jaqen’s cloak falls around her now, shielding her from Varro’s gaze. Jaqen knows; Jaqen always knows. Knows the exact moment when to withdraw His favor, to lose Varro in the blinding snow. Jaqen will act, before Varro can hurt her.

A strange sort of relief.

*And then it will be over.*

“We’re making for Rand’s Mill!” says Jaqen over His shoulder. “Wind says the storm’s coming in too fast.”

Varro’s mouth draws aside in a sneer. Hidden, under the deep hood of his cloak.
They find shelter in the only building whose roof breaks through the snowline—the mill “Rand’s Mill” is named after, standing in the middle of the abandoned village.

She says villagers move to Winterfell in the winter, but with Wintertown razed she doesn’t know where these ones would have gone.

Jaqen is silent.

The horses are tethered under the sloping edge of the roof, almost wedged in, covered with blankets.

There is a pressure in the air, it presses down upon him and he knows it’s her doing. But the time for Jaqen to withdraw His favor has come and gone--Varro even fell back a few times, lost sight of them in the blizzard. But the darkness still curls through his veins; it defies expectation.

They climb down into the mill through the skylight, now no more than a hole in the roof.

She lights the fire--the smoke escapes through the hole.

The detritus of the miller’s hasty departure is strewn all around them, and Jaqen finds a cracked clay pot to suspend over the flames, make something approximating tea with the leaves from His pack.

The three sit equidistant from the fire, from each other, silence wrapped around them.

He inhales the fragrance of the tea along with the steam. It is the only warmth in this place; the Wind keeps a lot of the fire’s heat from reaching him.

Jaqen actually looks concerned. “You shouldn’t feel the cold this much,” He says. Turns, raises an eyebrow at Arya.

“I’m not doing anything,” she snaps.

Varro cocks his head to a side. “Maybe you could warm me if you took off your clothes?” he asks.

“Stop playing that game, Varro.”

“Alright,” he says. “A different game.” He pretends to think.

*I will choose how quickly this ends--you two chose which one of you wants to end it.*

She’s fast; not fast enough. He’s bridged the distance to her, drawn her sword from its scabbard at her waist before she can react.

*Her body still trusts me.*

Trust will always fuck up a Lorathi’s reaction-time.

Jaqen’s too far away, all the way on the other side of the fire.
Jaqen doesn’t move.

*As you will, my lord.*

The bared Valyrian Steel lies across her throat; she lies under Varro, supine. For emphasis, he pushes down on the blade, her skin is indented by it. Not cut. Not yet.

And then he begins to unbutton her blouse with his left hand.

Nothing but defiance in her eyes.

He leans down. “Wind should have stopped playing with me while she still had a chance,” he whispers in her ear. His eyes remain fixed on hers; she shows nothing but fury.

He is gentle, featherlight as he draws aside the ties to her britches, slips his hand inside. He slides his palm, slowly, gently down the plane of her lower stomach; his fingers encounter the curls between her legs. He pauses, allows his fingers to play a little, until he slips his index finger lower still, finds her slit.

It’s not until his fingertip is teasing her nub that she closes her eyes; two tears trail down her cheeks.

*Come on, Jaqen.*

“Stop,” she says. A broken whisper.

A heartbeat; he’s removed the blade, removed his hand from between her legs, he’s pulled himself back to the far wall, as far away from her as he can get.

He was *supposed* to hesitate.

And then the Wind slams into him. He is pressed into the cold stone, and sharp wire-like whips of air hold him down by the throat, the chest.

There is nothing but silence around them, silence and the hiss of the Wind. She crouches beside him, cruel amusement in her eyes.

“Learned from the best,” she says, grinning. “Wondered how far you’d actually have the will to go to earn a blade in your chest.”

“Well played,” he says. “I fucked it up.”

She smirks. “Again.”

“You weren’t even born for the last fuckup, sugar-tits,” he sneers, “don’t fucking act like you own it.”

Her eyes narrow. Cold fury; it rims his vision in white. Her shirt has fallen open, the curves of her, the hardened nipples, begging to be kissed.

He watches. Waits.

For her to take his breath, to give him whatever the Wind calls *mercy* so she can breed dragonlord *wargs* with Jaqen.

“You’re fucking *hopeless* ,” she says.
The Wind lets go of him.

He blinks.

She rises, she’s halfway across the mill’s floor by the time he sits up, terrified, aroused, entirely bewildered. She’s drawing her shirt closed.

“Beloved,” says Jaqen.

“No,” she says. “I will not be placated.” And she swings herself onto the knotted rope they’ve left hanging from the roof—a makeshift rope-ladder-and hand-over-hand, wreathed in the smoke from the fire, she climbs up to the hole in the roof, and out.

ARYA

She kneels in the snow a few paces away from the mill’s roof. The flickering firelight spills out from the hole; she positions herself downwind of the smoke. The storm is a silent one—heavy flakes of snow, falling softly around her in the darkness.

Her hands shake as she uncorks the vial she’s taken off him.

*Not too much, not too much, it has to last.*

She dips the tip of her tongue in the vial’s small opening, tips it back.

*Just a taste.*

All she tastes is sugar.

She blinks, pulls away, stares at the vial in her hand.

*He fucking tricked me?*

A tearing pain at the top of her scalp.

Something… *someone* holds her hair draws her up by it. A vile smell.

Her eyes water, they focus on the blue-black, rotted face of a man, his teeth, gums black with frostbite.

*Wight.*

The Wind strips the air from his lungs.

*I left Dark Sister behind.*

The wight snarls. Silent. Far too silent.

Arya screams.

The Wind slices at her own hair, falls out of the wight’s grasp.

Another pair of hands, cold, so cold, clammy, they close around her throat.

The Wind drives herself *forward*, a wall of woman and air, into the first wight. It staggers. She
ignores the one choking off her breath, buries one dagger, two, in the first one’s eyes.

The obsidian is wrapped carefully in silk, left at the bottom of her pack.

She pulls out the long-knife at her back.

She slices upwards, one motion, long-knife's not good enough to shear through bone. She hacks at the fingers. The Wind needs to build up fucking momentum to cut through their frozen flesh.

**VARRO**

“…sugar-and-snow sludge in the vial,” he says. “You could have intervened at any time.”

*Had you wanted to.*

Jaqen pokes the fire. “You need to be told to watch your thoughts, Lorathi?”

*I am not a Lorathi. I am not “no one”. I am a fucking renegade that was once called Varro Massag.*

“No,” Jaqen says, looking at him. “But she could not have played you had you not wanted to be played...what she incited in you to get at the vial...to end a very different way.”

Holding on to the threads of the conversation is difficult. He tries to focus. But the walls are sweating blood, black beads caressing the planes of the empty, abandoned mill.

“...always a reason with you, isn’t there? A proper, logically-thought out *justification.*”

*For what? The substitution with the vial?*

He shrugs. “Dead or not I didn’t want her to get at the Pearl.”

A flicker of expression on the god’s face--

“You rage?” Varro asks.

Jaqen’s lips pull to a side; an unreadable smile. “The ‘vision of perfection’ cannot rage, surely,” the god replies.

A scream. Muffled.

**ARYA**

Darkness rises behind her. The whisper of steel, cutting through the air. The weight pulling her back falls away; the hands still clutch at her throat. But it’s enough for her to turn, give the Wind the room she needs to saw through the knuckles of the fingers.

She breathes as the dead flesh falls away from her.

Varro’s decapitated the first wight. The head, with her knife-handles sticking out of its eye-sockets, falls to the ground, stays there.
The body crawls towards her. Varro slices off its legs. Then its arms.

The torso writhes in the snow.

She turns.

Jaqen is standing still. His eyes, black, are fixed upon the armless wight, a stream, a torrent of darkness rushing out of Him towards the walking corpse.

**JAQEN**

*Live. Live so I can make you suffer.*

The bruises around her throat are vivid red welts in his mind, he can see her heartbeat under her skin, in her veins.

The wight, it opens its mouth.

A shrill, piercing scream issues forth, punctuated by gurgles.

Jaqen smiles.

The wight is coming alive.

It *feels*.

Movement.

A snarl.

*Varro* throws himself between Jaqen and his focus.

**VARRO**

The walking corpse is taking that which belongs to *him*.

The stream of darkness diverts its course—it has found a familiar pathway.

Varro smiles.

*Mine*.

The darkness, almost *obedient*, agrees; it enters him.

Varro absorbs it.

*Relief.*

He staggers.

Sweet pain blooms behind his eyes, blood-vessels in his eyes, his face, inside his mouth bursting open with the pressure of Him.
ARYA

The air is suddenly redolent with the scent of bergamot, with citrus.

Varro bleeds.

The wight is screaming, black tears streaking down its face, its mouth tries to form words with a frost-rotted tongue.

Help me.

The Wind steps forward. It is instinctive, the only thing she can do—her lips close upon the cold thing’s face, ripped away in places to reveal the white bone of teeth.

She breathes in.

He was one of the Free Folk. He wanted a shiny bronze knife. Eating and coupling, and a small dog he’d raised from a pup. Someone died. The terror, seeing a White Walker rise before him.

She drinks down his unlife, the ripping burning cloying pain of him, the knowing in him.

All the warmth he ever had in him.

When she is done the corpse falls to its knees of its own accord.

“Valar morghulis,” she whispers.

A dull thud behind her.

Jaqen, too, has fallen to His knees. He is staring at his hands. Varro stands over Him, tears of blood—black in the darkness—staining the renegade’s cheeks.

JAQEN

Mine.

The sibilant hiss slithers through his veins.

He looks up, sees his bride looking at him with something akin to horror. He wants to close his eyes against it, but he cannot bear to stop looking at her; anything could happen to her if he looks away.

“I did not sense them,” she is saying. “They do not breathe, they are as cold as the landscape around them. I did not sense them.”

She is kneeling before him.

“Beloved,” she whispers. “What did you do?”

“I overreacted,” he says. His voice sounds calm, distant to his own ears.

Hands, familiar hands, around his arms; they draw him up. He shakes the hands loose.
“Suppose that answers that,” mutters Varro. “You do rage.”

“I listen,” he snaps. To the soft hiss of falling snow. Changes. Shifts in the ground. “There’s more coming. They heard the screaming.”

“They can be cut down,” says Varro, his voice tight. Varro’s blood-stained gaze slides away from Jaqen. To Arya. To the wight, kneeling in the snow.

“I drank down the blood you gave it,” she says. “Memory came with it. It has forgotten how to move.” There is some satisfaction in her voice.

“Should we press on through the storm?” he asks her.

The Wind looks up, and out. “A freeze is coming.”

*Horses won’t last the night away from shelter. The wights moving about now will stop moving, get buried under snow.*

“Well, we know what happened to the villagers,” he says. He looks over his shoulder, at the smoking hole in the ground. “They fear fire now.”

**ARYA**

She sits wedged up against a corner of the mill’s foundation-wall, Jaqen against her, Varro to His other side. All three armed; *Dark Sister* is back in her keeping, the obsidian blade in Varro’s.

Sounds filter down to them from the surface. Feet shuffling through snow. The creak of wooden beams.

They wights know the three of them are in here.

A whinny—the sound of a terrified horse. It is cut off, abruptly.

“I left my sword behind,” she says, wondering at herself.

*Why did I leave my sword behind?*

She checks the thought. Looks down at her left hand. The vial of sugary Pearl-substitute is still clutched tightly in her fist; its contents have spilled upon the snow, are being trampled upon by undead feet.

Jaqen exhales. She looks to Him—there is a weariness to Jaqen, a *deadness* in his eyes that makes the hollowness in her stomach into a vast, empty, cavernous thing.

“There was a contract,” He says to her. “A man with mage talent taken, unwilling, into the House of the Undying. By the time he was released, his lips were blue and he was addicted to the thing only the Undying could provide. His wife learned what she could about his addiction. Sold us the knowledge in exchange for a name.”

*What are you talking about?*

“Your ‘House of Black and White’ poison,” says Jaqen. “The Blue Pearl—it is a Warlock name for the seat of ‘enlightenment’ in a man’s mind. The same thing Bran says Euron Greyjoy feeds Damphair to keep my priest compliant.”
Lie!

Jaqen sighs. “The Alchemist stripped it of the magic that ejaculates visions upon the tongue. But the rest of it is still the thing they dreamed up in Qarth—Aeron is kept strapped to the front-mast of Euron’s flagship, without food, without water, without letting him sleep for days on end. Why do you think he is still alive?”

The Blue Pearl.

She draws to a side. Retches. Naught in her but bile and snowmelt, the taste of dead flesh on her lips; nothing comes out.

The god puts an arm around her.

She cannot bear to look at Him.

She cannot bear to look at Varro.

She feels Jaqen’s fingers, gentle, tracing shapes upon her throat.

Bruises, she realizes, blooming under the skin already.

Her head whips around, she meets His eyes. “You wanted to hurt the wight?” she asks.

Jaqen’s turn to avoid her eyes. “Varro stopped me.”

Varro snorts. “If I’d been coherent enough to know you wanted to hurt it, I wouldn’t have. Thought you were giving it something it didn’t deserve.”

She feels Jaqen shift, turn to Varro. “That ‘mine’ was you ,” He says, and there is wonderment in His voice. “I heard you.”

“Yes, well,” says Varro, “when I claim something I try to keep it.”

The Wind stares at her lover. “You dare... ”

VARRO

A stinging slap against his right cheek.

The whispering, needling thoughts are shocked into silence.

“You dare,” she hisses again, her hand at his throat.

He just looks at her.

Everything. Gave it to you. It hurts.

She kneels over him, straddling his legs.

He cannot help but strain upwards, wrap his arms around her.

Arya.

Slowly, her eyes locked onto his, she unbuttons her shirt, draws it aside. Exposes her left breast to
the air. Her skin has pebbled in the cold.

Oh.

He raises his head, takes her nipple into his mouth. Sucks. Flashes of chill and heat bloom over his upper body; patches of need. Her arms come around him in turn, cradle his head to her chest.

Arya.

“You are mine,” she says, and the gentleness in her voice is his undoing. Arya, Arya. “Used what is mine.”

He raises his head, strains upwards again. Her lips feel so very soft against his, no scent to her but the smell of cold, of horse and campfire-smoke. But her mouth tastes like death, like rot, the sweet-cloying scent of annisse upon her breath.

The Pearl twists at her. It has been twisting at her for days, through her, at him.

“Thought you’d decided to let me go,” he whispers.

She lays her head on top of his. The softness of her breasts presses into his face; the edges of him blur. A sinking in into her, a dissolution of skin, warm and want, and more.

A film of fear keeps him within himself, his awareness locked away from hers.

The Wind is capricious.

Another fuckup, he thinks, and she’ll throw me away.

She kisses his forehead. “And if I do?” she asks.

He closes his eyes. Exhales. He can offer her naught but truth, all the dregs of it at the bottom of the soul’s well. “Then I’ll follow you around everywhere, making Sandor-eyes at you.”

“Sandor eyes?” she asks. “All you can manage is tragically angry.”

“Sandor-eyes, as I said.”

He lays his head against her chest; listens to the beating of her heart.

JAQEN

The rage has drained from him, the panicked fear of seeing her with a wight’s fingers wrapped around her throat. He breathes out, deliberately relaxes his shoulders. Feels the echo of darkness under her breast, under Varro’s.

His bride turns again, slides over to his lap, her legs draped over Varro. She tucks her head into Jaqen’s chest.

A paranoid delusional, a manipulative addict, and a raging horror walk into a village.

Her hand is making circles on his chest. He feels cold air, looks down—his bride has managed to unbutton a part of his shirt; she slides her hand inside, caresses his chest.
“Bad Arya,” he whispers. “Saint Varro is watching.”

“He’s going to have to stop being so saintly if he wants to do more than watch,” she says.

“Undead dancing on our heads,” says Varro.

“Need you,” she murmurs.

*Need you.*

Jaqen looks up. “They can only fall through one at a time.” She moves against him; he looks down, watches his wife draw her shirt off her shoulders. Her moon-pale skin glows silver; the heat from the flames cannot touch her.

*He can.*

“Here,” he says, as she reaches lower. “Let me help you with that.”

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**VARRO**

Jaqen’s skin is gold in the firelight, dark against the luminosity of her. She sits on His lap, facing away, outwards, towards Varro. Her head is thrown back against Jaqen’s shoulder; His hands on her hips guide the rhythmic rise and fall of her body.

*Need you.*

Varro trails kisses up her thigh; tastes the joining of them, heavy, intoxicating. Reckless even in the most controlled, slow sheathing of Him inside her.

He rises.

His tongue dips into her navel, before he traces the line between her ribs.

He travels up across Arya’s breast, over her arm, and onto Jaqen. He kisses his way up the god’s shoulder, His neck, till he reaches their mouths, entwined.

His breath mingles with theirs; lips chapped from the dry air capture his.

*Take it, take it and use it all yours in the first place.*

And every drop of fortitude he has in him, every fragment of will, renegade-tainted or not, he pours it into her; a prayer.

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**ARYA**

She lies curled up on her side, next to Varro. Him and Jaqen sit side-by-side with their backs to the corner-wall.

She can still taste Varro’s seed in her mouth; it overrides the cloying blue film at the back of her throat. Jaqen’s hunger, oscillating between alarm and release, it throbs against her, it distracts her from the steady pulse of the keening, clawing *want* under her ribs.
There is a pleasant soreness between her legs.

She allows her awareness to drift, between breaths, into the air around them.

“...renegade,” Jaqen is saying. “Renegade from what? A framework you don’t belong in anymore? The definition of ‘traitor’ is meaningless to you now. And still you want to die. Why?”


Jaqen’s hand glances over her head. “Translate, beloved?” he asks her.


“Not to us,” says Jaqen, flat.

“Neither of you would remember me,” Varro points out.

“Like you didn’t remember?” asks Jaqen, acid. “Most renegades forget me entirely—they hear my name, they ignore it, their eyes glance over my face.”

Her lover is silent.

Jaqen sighs. “Left with holes in our head, heart-of-mine, where you used to be.”

And then Varro’s awareness unfurls, a roiling sense of the self, trembling on the edge of uncontrol, heedless of it. “Not going to kill anything we haven’t voted to kill,” he says.

Jaqen snorts. “You figured it out. Well done, Varro.”

“Voices don’t always understand your humor—they believe everything you say.”

“You are mad,” Jaqen observes.


The murmur of their voices lulls her closer and closer to sleep. It is accommodated—encouraged; Jaqen lies down beside her; He holds her a little too tightly.

Not going anywhere without my sword again. Promise.

Movement draws her awake, momentarily. Jaqen is building up the fire. The smell of peat-moss and smoke fills the mill.

They’re letting me sleep a second watch.

She turns, lies upon her other side. The world is soft, blurred with fatigue.

There is a gentle hesitancy to Varro; through the god she feels Varro traces his fingers over Jaqen’s shoulder, down His arm and back up again; he is murmuring into Jaqen’s ear.

She’s curious enough that she surfaces, listens.

...where are you? Down there I noticed,
under my throat and just above the heart,
a certain pang of grief between the ribs,
you were gone that quickly.

I needed the light of your energy,
I looked around, devouring hope.
I watched the void without you that is like a house,
nothing left but tragic windows.

Out of sheer taciturnity the ceiling listens
to the fall of the ancient leafless rain,
to feathers, to whatever the night imprisoned:

so I wait for you like a lonely house
till you will see me again and live in me.
Till then my windows ache.

VARRO

He wakes holding a very pleasant armful of god. He opens his eyes, blinks—frost has formed upon Jaqen’s lashes, it dusts His dark brows.

The rest of the world comes into focus. A warmth, behind him. She has shifted, closest to the fire now. She sleeps curled around him, her cheek pressed into his back.

He tenses.

Why is nobody on watch?

“I can feel the disapproval radiating off of you,” says Jaqen. “Cold snap’s come and gone—hear?”

He listens.

Silence. A creak.

Splitting ice.

Varro sighs, kisses Jaqen’s brow. “Vigilance,” he says. The habit is hard to break. Especially after last night. “I should let go?”

Jaqen rises upon a forearm, His hair falling around His face. “Suppose at least one of us should behave as an assassin trained by the House of Black and White.” The smile on His face is mischievous; Varro’s cock hardens further. “Though a little less ‘holier than thou’ would be… rewarded.”

Varro closes his eyes.

Dear fuck I’m a hypocrite, if even Jaqen feels compelled to point it out.

“Definition,” he says; it ends in a gasp—Jaqen’s hand has found his cock. She stirs against them, her leg riding higher upon his leg. “Can’t be holier than you two.”

Arya rises towards wakefullness. She places a soft, sleepy kiss at the sensitive spot where his neck meets his shoulder.

Jaqen’s hand tightens around his manhood, squeezes, just short of painful.

He arches into His grip.
Yes, please rub it, milk it—

“Like this?”

Fuck. Yes.

“There is only one enemy worth being vigilant against,” says the god.

The self.

“I am no one,” Varro whispers.

Jaqen’s hand pauses. Arya’s fingernails graze over his chest. “Lie,” she says.

The nameless one’s truths—the lying game, to non-Lorathi—it has shifted form. He knows, in his bones, there is only one set of truths that works anymore.

“Aohon ,” he groans.

“Truth,” she murmurs.

He has no other fundamental truths to offer up—no “Faceless Man of Braavos”, no “dedicat of Him of the Many Faces”.

“Aohon ,” he whispers.

Same word. Different truth.

Jaqen rewards him with a longer stroke.

I am no one.

And he is.

He finds his hair being seized, his head drawn back. Her lips capture his; he cannot but moan against her mouth.

No anise-taste, no bile. Your mind is ours again, Atthrido’anni.


“So un-renegade me.”

“Tried.”

He lies back down, rubs his hardness against Jaqen’s thigh. “Try again,” he suggests.

“Won’t work,” she says; sad.

He grins. “I know. But the experience is worth repeating.”

Jaqen smirks: later .

Because, of course, blood-play is not something one indulges in out on the field. Just suggesting it is tantamount to dereliction of duty or something.

See? No more judgemental prick with a stick up his arse.
Jaqen considers him, a mocking smile on His face. “I don’t think he quite gets it,” He says to her. “You still keeping him?”

“Don’t want a Sandor-Eyes,” she mutters.

A sudden tension; her eyes film white. They detangle themselves from each other. Her eyes rove over the ceiling. “You want the good news or the bad?” the Wind asks.

“There’s good news?” says Jaqen. “What a wonderful morning.”

“Wights are no longer a problem,” she says.

Which means…

“Wolf-pack,” she says. “A more than proper one.”

Lust is banished to the underlying foundation of him, relegated to becoming just another one of his whispered desires.

“We’re down a mount,” says Jaqen quietly.

ARIANNE MARTELL

She sweeps into the topmost chamber of her townhouse in Volantis, dismisses the slave that is wiping down the floor with fragrant rosewater. Filigree lanterns cast starbursts of light over the walls; a chest-of-drawers inlaid with lapis lazuli and ivory stands in a corner.

She unlocks the middle drawer and pulls it open, then reaches into the back for the indentation cunningly hidden in a knot of the wood. The false bottom to the drawer springs open. There, sitting a bed of blue velvet, lies a chiseled black stone.

She brings the stone, and the knife beside it, to the table in the center of the room, its inlaid garlands of flowers a match to the chest-of-drawers. Another knot in the wood conceals a panel in the center of the table that opens to reveal three, small vials.

She has been careful; she does not use them as he intends. Only when she needs to, and only to speak to him. She uncorks a vial now, downs it.

Dornish figs, wrapped in boar-meat. Fruit, rotting on the vine, the sweet stench of flies on them. The taste of Euron’s sweat, his blood, the salt-sea thrashing in fury. Tears.

Every taste she has ever tasted blooms under her tongue; bitter and sweet and triumph rises in her mouth like smoke.

The procedure is practiced, swift. She still looks away as she slices into her hand, bathes the black stone in blood.

“Burn,” she whispers.

The obsidian candle shimmers blue and red and green, the blood planing down its smooth sides. A blue flame appears in the air, a finger's breadth above the candle.

She sees things when the candle burns. Things he does not necessarily intend for her to see, for fear
they will hurt her.

They do. But they are necessary.

Now she sees a red bed with a gold queen lying on it, thrashing in orgasm. A black bed with a gold knight on it, thrashing in pain. Darkness, and fires and woodsmoke.

The Iron Throne, wreathed in garlands of ivory and lapis-lazuli and every garland is a face. A hundred faces, all the same, their dead eyes looking at her, judging her.

*It is Arianne*, she calls. *Do you hear me, my love?*

His lips form in the flame.

It is enough to trigger a painful longing in her breast.

_Aegon is not an imposter. He has been persuaded to sail to Meereen, and I go with him, to take the city from Daenerys Stormborn._

Euron Greyjoy’s lips smile. And in his smile she *sees* .

Noxious sulfur fumes, bubbling out of outcrops of rock. The sea boils, blue and blood-red by turns, the air is choked with screams. A broken tower, leaning to a side at an almost unnatural angle, as if frozen in the moment.

Corpses, dangling from the ramparts. Mummified and encrusted with sulfur. The bones of dragons loom behind them, frozen again in mid-movement, wing-bones half-unfurled. Armor and swords and gold and treasures beyond counting, strapped to dead dragons, the corpses of their dragonlords still clinging to the rotted saddles; evacuees that escaped the first wave of destruction that marked the Doom.

They could not escape Valyria.

Euron Greyjoy did.

And he brought out of its ruins the most prized treasures of the dragonlords.

Pairs of obsidian candles.

Dragon eggs.

Euron smiles, and his teeth are the jagged teeth of the rocks in her vision, smoking and pitted.

He blows a kiss at her. She reaches out, captures the kiss from the air in her hand, holds it to her breast.

The candle splutters. Goes out.

Arianne Martell allows herself a moment to lean against the table, breathe in the scents of Volantis again. They have a vision, her and Euron. Of Valyria, rising from the ashes of the past.

*No kingdoms* will satisfy now.

Only an empire.

It will begin with Slaver’s Bay.
Dull, heavy clouds bear down upon them from above, their fingers reaching towards the earth.

The three ride, swift, dark-gray shadows moving single-file along the eastbound road. There is a wildness to the steeds’ eyes—the horses need no goad to maintain their pace.

A howl. Then another, further north.

The wolves coordinate. They hunt man.

What has taught them that?

Need, most likely. Two-legged prey is almost all that’s left now, and two-legged prey fights back with fire and steel and traps.

But the howls have been growing more distant with each watch.

We outpace them.

In open snow, the wolves have the advantage. They pad, lightly, over the deep snow in places where hard-hoofed horses sink, founder. The road is the horses’ only hope.

All confrontations have statistical outcomes. Unlikely events do occur—the king is felled by a stable-boy, the assassin misjudges a lunge.

She is the Wind, and Death rides upon her heels, but they are, all three of them, man. Playing a game of chance with twoscore man-eating wolves is neither necessary, nor wise.

The two horses are lathered by the time the Wind raises a fist, signals; the wolfpack has turned aside.

A question, arcing along the boundary between their awareness: regroup?

Yes, the renegade answers.

She wears the face of Arya Stark. An illusion, but the horse feels it as a lesser weight than the body of Varro Massag. All things that confer an advantage to mounted speed are availed of, including light riders and a drastic reduction in their travel-packs.

The god slows her steed—Death also wears the face of Arya Stark. She who was born as Varro Massag flicks her reins, prompting a short burst of speed from her own mare.

Breath by breath, the red-edged rush that says threat focus fades from her surface thoughts to reveal the whispered, insidious thought-patterns underneath.

The whispers grow louder.

By the time her steed has drawn abreast of theirs, her mind is a fucking sewer littered with caltrops.

With a sigh, he lets Arya’s face dissolve into the darkness. So does Jaqen.

Arya herself is slight, but Jaqen’s horse will still feel the doubling after a gallop like that. Arya holds out her arms to Varro; he swings her over to his mare, holds her to him.
“My heart,” he murmurs to her. She clutches his arm tighter to her ribs.

Habits of thought, in well-worn circular grooves, refuse to release their grip: pull her off the horse, plant her facedown in the snow, make Jaqen watch... Daorys always stopped at the blade, stopped long before he ever got beneath her clothes. Daorys didn’t know what it felt like to move in her, the silken, slick slide of her clenching around my cock...

Arya twists around, raises an eyebrow at him. He rolls his eyes: yes, that again.

“There is no need to obsess over something you can have for the asking,” she says.

We must not feed the compulsion.

“But, apparently,” he says, looking down at her in some consternation, “we can confuse the fuck out of it.” Because the flurry of images have hunched down, sullen, away from the forefront of his mind.

“Worse?” asks Jaqen.

“More detailed,” he replies. “Seems to be turning into a sex-fantasy.”

Like the other.

“One for each of us,” says Jaqen, dry. “How nice.”

Varro snorts, and focuses upon the world outside his head. The creak of the horses’ bits, the soft whuffing sound of hooves upon snow. A smell he used to call cold, he reads now as a change in the composition of the air--an absence of the smells Westeros should have: horse-shit and mud.

A howl, very far away now.

The eastbound road will end soon, Jaqen says.

And then what?

Jaqen hasn’t said.

“Beloved,” says Arya.

“Hmm?”

“You and I, we never kept things from one another before the Wall,” she says.

The god exhales.

“How do you stand it?” she asks Varro.

The dribbles of information, the shaded half-truths?

He shrugs. “Never minded it much before.” He glances at his god. “I served,” he says. “Servant doesn’t always have a need-to-know.”

There is a tightness about Jaqen’s eyes.

Her gaze upon the god speaks of cold assessment.

“A ‘need to know’ implies a judgment call,” she says. “And one must know things to exercise
judgment of this kind. God doesn’t know everything.”

Varro opens his mouth; she forestalls his theologian’s arguments with a raised hand. “Blood and brain,” she says. “He may know, but He will not be aware of what He knows until He is made aware.”

A fragment of the Stranger’s prayer, unspoken by Silent Sisters… *Let me be the instrument of thy…*

“Wind knows things, but what she doesn’t know cripples her,” she continues, “She’d have told Him everything—the vote, the question-asking. *If* she’d known something was threatening our bond to Him. She couldn’t *tell* what was important and what was just…” Her lips curl upwards in a sneer. “Hiding for the sake of my *tender little heart*.”

Jaqen is silent.

*Faceless Men* are silent creatures, thinks Varro. *I lived out a decade once and never noticed I hadn’t spoken to another person until the day I opened my mouth and my tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar act of language.*

And he realizes then that he never knew how isolated his existence had been until she gave him his name, and the towering Black and White edifice that had always stood behind him fell away.

*Brotherhood was assumption, not practice. Even friendship, even my faith—assumptions, all.* In practice, Varro—no one—he has spent no more than a few handfuls of moons, *cumulative*, with Jaqen. No more than four years learning from his teacher.

*The silence.*

“Habit is stronger than love, sometimes,” he says, watching the lines of the god’s profile, the fur cloak cascading over the horse’s withers. “Until you reached the Wall the tests were all yours, to share as you did, or not. Jaqen has always borne *His* tests alone; the god wraps himself in layer upon layer of silence and supposition.”

“But he had you,” she says. “He always trusted you.”

*Standards of trust were not what had to be met.*

She smiles, sadly. “We’re still not good enough.”

Jaqen’s jaw tenses.

No one snorts. “His price is always ‘take what you can get’. It’s us He’s got, He’s going to have to make do.”

*Yes, let’s break some habits.*

“So,” he says, “exercising equality and all—I will *ask*. Two days too late. Still. What is this Stark business we’re out here for?”

“Soldiers, riders, out in the snow for almost a moon now,” she says, “just…waiting. Wights and storms and hard trail rations. Raven came—morale’s dropping, a handful of suicides, or errors maybe, men growing careless with disuse.”

“You’re going to play Princess at them,” he says.
She nods. “Jon’s mobilizing other House levees, and Sansa can’t ride out that far.”

He grins. He wants he hear the Wind give an *inspiring* speech.

“I thought you weren’t coming with us,” she says.

His arms tighten around her. “Jaqen was going to give me my name either way. The morning after the dream.”

“You were coming out here to die.”

He gives Jaqen a sidelong glance. Nods. But he needs a truth to offer, however small, or this is an exercise in “do as I advise, not as I practice”.

“Habit breaking’s a hard thing,” he mutters.

The god’s eyes, black mirrors, focus upon His renegade. “You would choose to live?” asks Jaqen.

He shakes his head. “To believe.”

*That the ‘love’ in your mouth is not a game you two are playing with me.*

Then there’s the other— the Many-Faced God paid a heavy price for my life when I handed myself and my ciphers over to Asshai.

“Need to find Lyseni sugar-cake for Jon,” he adds.

The god’s eyes widen almost imperceptibly.

No one shrugs.

Jaqen turns His attention back to the road. It takes another league of featureless road to pass beneath their horses’ hooves before the god speaks. “There are other objectives to this excursion,” He says.

Feeling the sudden, almost childlike joy in Arya’s awareness is like watching the sun rise again.

“A thing I cannot tell you until it happens,” says Jaqen, “or it defeats the purpose--creates bias.”

*Fair. Curiosity-making, but fair.*

“And I need to get away from Bran,” He adds.

Silence.

The Wind whispers over their heads.

“At the Wall,” she says. “There was more to the twisting of your soul than just the pleas of the dead.”

Jaqen nods. “I claimed the boy R’hllor had defined as ‘Champion’ for the Great Other.”

*Claimed the identity of the Great Other by inference? As surely as you would have, had you killed the Prince that was Promised?*

“A trap’s a good one if you want to fall into it,” says the god. “I saw it coming. But…”
“I wondered why Bran didn’t die,” she says slowly. “He was dying, on the verge of it—he would have, the moment the Pearl faded from his blood.” She gives the god a sidelong glance. “You had no power upon the Wall. I did. I could have resurrected him.”

“You could have,” agrees Jaqen. “But there is always a price.”

What would Bran Stark have become, had the Wind taken him?

Irrelevant; it seems Jaqen acted again on instinct, using R’hllor’s prophecy. The Champion, once claimed... all proximate causes would align, wouldn’t they --the potion would always be the right one, his blood would circulate in just the right way, a thousand chances would add up to Bran Stark’s improbable survival.

She sighs. “I’m not sure it was worth it.”

Jaqen gives her a lopsided smile. “Bran said the same—I told him of the House’s vote. I made the choice knowing what it might mean.”

Jaqen is a Faceless Man. He would have been saddened by the death of Bran Stark. But moved to recklessness by the possibility?

He must ask. “Why?”

The god’s gaze becomes distant, fixed upon the white trail in front of them. “Jon prayed to me all the way to the Wall,” He says. “Right beside me, how could I not hear it? Whispered, desperate prayers, to save Bran, to keep death away from this last brother he had left.” Jaqen shakes his head. “When Jon recognized me, he knew his prayers could be answered. He is a king—he understands what it means for a subject to ask something of him, he knows the sorts of prices kings must pay, sometimes, to grant the boon. So he stopped asking.” Jaqen turns to Varro. “It is another form of debt, love, when the devout do not pray--there is a power to it, almost more compelling than prayer, because now even the base comfort the simple act of prayer grants to the faithful is sacrificed by them in my name.”

He blinks away the sting in his eyes. “So I did burden you,” he says. “I should have prayed more, all these years.”

“What was it you said?” asks Jaqen, sardonic. “On your knees, praying and masturbating by turns?”

“You’d only have gotten the former, beloved,” she says, wry. “Daorys didn’t remember the ‘vision of perfection’.”

Done is done, he reminds himself. “Go down on my knees a lot more now, I think,” he murmurs, his eyes too upon the road. “And it won’t be vespers in my mouth.”

An intake of breath, controlled. From her.

Is that the path, then, to further grace? Reverse the roles, make her watch?

A very interesting idea. But the discipline holds; the idea is not allowed to cascade into whispering need.

“The sorcerers babbled a lot,” he says, “and not all of it made sense. Love, what does being the Great Other mean? Mechanism-wise?”
Jaqen’s lips tighten.

They wait.

“Death changes,” He says eventually. Reluctant. “I reject men, instead of taking them into the nothingness of me.” The god’s mien is shadowed. “Every man that dies, does not. And I cannot heal—can’t even heal you, just kill the infections, the tumors.”

An image forms behind Varro’s eyes—a wight, wailing its thin, anguished scream.

She puts the image into words.

“A thousand, thousand Jon Snows,” she says. “And the death-wounds on each do not scar, or turn black like Jon’s did. Wound upon wound, with the wars to come. Wights, but with the consciousness to know exactly what it is that is happening to them, wights that can feel pain, and anguish, wights that know they had no soul, nor ever will.”

“Marching,” whispers Jaqen, staring straight ahead. “Marching upon my command, into the east. Against Asshai.”

Chapter End Notes

Alternate ending to chapter: duct-tape of love. Hopefully it holds through the next couple of chapters, we’ve got HBW opinions to change, wights to fight, soldiers, “Legion Commander Jaqen” and gods.

Thanks to gul, for helping make this chapter something less than 10000 words of fighting and wallowing. Yay!
JAQEN

The horses are on their last legs. But the road will end soon. The three alternate walking and riding to save what strength the horses have left in them; Varro walks beside him, leading his mare, Arya walks a half-pace in front.

“The definition of this ‘Great Other’,,” says Varro, as he moves to mount his horse, “if it does apply to you, it has changed to accommodate your will. R’hlloor didn’t give his adversary a Consort, let alone a Consort and a paramour, not unless Asshai has gotten strangely creative. And very Braavosi.”

Jaqen snorts.

He puts his feet in the stirrups, pulls himself up. His bride holds out her arms, and he lifts her into the saddle before him.

He closes his eyes, breathes deeply of her.

“Riders!”

His eyes snap open.

The Wind is drawing into herself, her eyes losing the film of white, her attention focused on the road in front of them.


“Copse a half-league back,” suggests Varro.

Jaqen shakes his head slightly. “This is Stark land, horizon to horizon. We do not need to hide.”

If they are brigands, they must be dealt with accordingly, their heads mounted beside the road as a warning to others.

“A Stark princess, a Stark king’s Rider, and…?” asks Varro.

“A Stark’s procurer of pastry,” she replies.

It takes another quarter league for the riders to enter his range of perception. All of them are dying—flickering pinpricks of power whisper across the snow to him. Thoughts are born; they slip into the nothing, in bursts with long, red tails.

He knows the patterns of those thoughts.

“Sigorn’s men,” he says. The Thenns ride at breakneck speed towards them. Towards Winterfell. Something is wrong.
Impossible to tell whether it is him or Varro that spurs their horse into a gallop first.

The horses’ hooves bite into the hard-packed snow of the road. The first wash of battle-ready alertness surges in him.

The riders have seen them. They carry torches; they slow.

Jaqen raises a fist into the sky. “Rider, ho!” His voice carries, despite the muffling of the snow.

The rider in the lead, he raises an answering fist in the air.

The exchange is brief, held a’horseback.

“Greenseer was right,” says Sigorn. “The herd is on the move. It grows.”

Jaqen closes his eyes, and in his vision he sees cold white-blue eyes, undead rising up out of the ground.

Moving south, and west.

*South and west. From where?*

“Karhold is overrun,” he extrapolates.

Sigorn’s eyes widen. He assumes it is another of Bran’s *warg - raven* visions. “We can turn back…”

He looks torn.

Sigorn rides now to take command of the legion that prepares for deployment outside Winterfell.

Jaqen’s legion has moved North without him; his men hold the land around the Nightfort, and the gate within it. Sandor’s legion holds the Last Hearth; no ground has been given there.

“We were heading to the Third Garrison,” says Jaqen. “We’ll make it the First—you head to Winterfell.”

One or two of Sigorn’s men shift in the saddle; the bloodthirsty types. They want to fight now.

“Jon’s legion will face the herd first,” says Sigorn to Jaqen, but for the benefit of his men. “The greenseer predicted it, and he was right about the move.”

*If. If. If.*

Too many “ifs” in predicting the motion of groups of wights. Bran has already been wrong twice.

“Tell your men to save themselves for the real battle,” says Jaqen. “Karhold is going to be naught but a skirmish.”

“How’s the road?” Sigorn asks.
“Wolves, growing bolder,” says Jaqen. “And a village—Rand’s Mill—it was overrun with wights. Frozen now, but they’re still there under the snow. We lost a mount.”

Sigorn’s brow furrows. “We know that place. The wight-marker—”

“Storm,” he says. “We missed all warnings.”

Sigorn looks at Arya, at Varro. “Close call?”

Jaqen nods.

“You’ll take two?” asks Sigorn.

*An escort that knows what has changed from here to the frontier.*

He nods. “And a horse.”

“Yocas, Fiorn,” commands Sigorn, “ride with Jaqen to the First. Valkas, your mount.”

Two of the more bloodthirsty-looking men grin, wheel their horses around. A third man dismounts without complaint, hands the reins of his piebald mare over to Varro.

**ARYA**

She carries a leather bottle, strapped to her stomach under the furs, and fills it with snow every time they stop. It melts with her body-heat, and she drinks. The body pisses away the Pearl, about as fast as she can get her heart to pump it out of her blood. It doesn’t stop the wanting, though—the mind is always harder to control than the body. She has to stop her hand from reaching into her bandolier by habit. It doesn’t always work; but the loop for the vial is empty.

The road ends at a covered wooden structure—not much more than a large shed. A relay station, unstaffed. Inside, there are stalls: for horses, buckets and straw for feeding. Four other horses are stabled here, but it looks like no one’s mucked out the stalls in a couple of days. The smell is overpowering.

“Whoever comes by takes care of the horses,” explains Jaqen. “Anyone heading back to Winterfell takes whichever horse is available.” His mouth twists. “Not many coming back now.”

It’s a problem of too many and not enough—too many soldiers to hold in a single group around Winterfell—they have to be deployed in batches up near Karhold. But not enough to launch an attack, not with the sheer number of wights reported around that place.

Fifty, maybe sixty thousand.

The number seems impossible. But Bran has seen them, Jaqen says.

“We will night here?” asks Yocas. “Long slide before.”

Jaqen exchanges a glance with her and Varro.

From this point on, they will have to exchange the horses for the strange, narrow, pieces of wood, planed flat and lacquered, hanging in pairs from the barn’s inner walls.

*Skis.*
A Freefolk invention from a few winters ago. No Faceless Man has a memory of such things; her and Varro will have to learn their use the hard way.

Consensus is reached.

“Night here,” says Jaqen.

She wrinkles her nose. “We need to get this shit shoveled.”

The manure is supposed to go into one of the large drums outside—it will be tamped down, and it will freeze, and someone will be by with a cart to take it back to Winterfell for fertilizing the plants in the glass houses.

Varro wields his shovel with his left hand, the right providing a counterbalance upon the haft.

“I remember this man,” says Varro. “He saved a Faceless Man’s life near Vaes Dothrak.”

She grins. A faceless story. They come in bits and pieces from her brothers. Their histories, skewed towards the amusing anecdote.

Jaqen’s stopped shovelling. He’s listening too; means He doesn’t know this one.

*Jaqen and I, both approaching the House of Black and White from two ends of time.*

“Hated horses, it turned out,” Varro continues. “Came all the way to Braavos on foot to ask for a herd of pigs in exchange for that coin. Didn’t understand the concept of assassination, or targeted vengeance: ‘but why not declare blood-feud upon your enemy and slaughter his male kin and take all his women for your own?’”

Jaqen sighs. “Dothraki.”

Varro nods, rueful. “So he got his herd of pigs. And one very lucky, very newly made Faceless-Man got to round up the livestock and deal with the pig-shit until the Dothraki had mastered the tasks of his new calling.” His voice is very dry.

“You were this lucky greenhorn?” she asks.

“Zural,” he says. A small smile. “His teacher had a *vile* sense of humor.”

Sorrow is not allowed. Regret is not allowed. There is a problem: renegades. The customary solution is not allowed.

*A new one will be found.*

She attacks the next pile of shit with a bit more fervor than it deserves.

**JAQEN**

The horses are fed and watered; it is their turn. They set to boiling water for baths. The Free Folk scoff at such activity—they’re going hunting for rabbits.

The vote looms over their heads. And it may not matter if they win or lose.

*Valar morghulis*, he thinks with some bitterness. *So very open to interpretation, is it not?*
“Valar morghulis, valar dohaeris,” she says, as she pours tepid water over her head. “They began as faceless sign and counter-sign in Valyria.”

She hands the dipper to Varro.

A field-bath, no sitting in tubs. Just a scrubbing with House soap to get rid of the filth, the stench of horse.

“We were revolutionaries then, not priests,” he says, pours water over his own shoulders, his arms.  

*Revolution was a false hope. There is only one hope that ever bears any fruit.*

Varro’s skin is almost pink from the rough scrubbing as he rinses the scorer, hands it to Jaqen.

“R’hllor’s priests defile our words,” says Varro. “Did they get them out the first one you recruited?”

*The first I manumitted with a coin so he could seek Faceless Men of his own free will.*

“Like they got my ciphers out of me?”

Jaqen shakes his head, closes his eyes as he lathers his hair. “Ambraysis knew the words before he came to us—long before Asshai took my brother.”

“Valar morghulis,” she hisses. “Asshai knows what we were, what we are. Asshai expects us to decimate our own House.”

Two more dipper-fulls of water, and the last of the soap is washed away. The others are already done, they hand him the thin, absorbent linen Faceless Men use as towels upon the road.

“Valar dohaeris,” he says, he cannot keep the pain from his voice. “We will lose all of them.”

Faceless Men are outnumbered by their renegades. Without the hunter in play, it will revert back to the old days of losing one or two Faceless Men for every renegade that was given the gift.

“Be Jaqen H’ghar,” she says. He looks to her, his gaze fixed upon her eyes, glowing with white fire. “Be Jaqen H’ghar—he is needed.” Her voice echoes, god and woman and the ice in his veins turning to resonant crystal. “He brought Valyria to its knees before he shattered it into pieces.”

He exhales. Closes his eyes. Hears the sounds of cloth being drawn over skin; they dress. He should do the same. But his thoughts are focused inwards.

*Be Jaqen H’ghar.*

“The enemy is a student of magic,” says Varro softly. “Of history, of blood.”

Jaqen opens his eyes. And he smiles at his Chosen, his bride, his renegade. “The House of Black and White teaches such things.”

The House needs to be reminded of this.

The Wind smiles, and the smile is a vicious thing, triumphant and savage in equal measure. “There is only one god,” she says. “And His name is Death.”
The god dreams.

He wanted to reach out to the nine. The nine, at least, must be made of a mind with Him; a starting point of change. But the Wind does not know the names or faces of all of them, nor who taught every one of the brothers she has met.

The first student He reached in the dreaming was the last He’d taught. Caught sleeping by chance.

A Braavosi.

A renegade.

Varro can do naught more now than keep watch as Jaqen attempts to reason past the rage in him who was once their brother of the sea-gate.

Arya studies the face of the god, intent, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

A distraction, perhaps.

He looks down at her. “You wore my face often?” he asks in Braavosi.

She turns away, stares into the heart of the fire. “You never learned how to count,” she says. “That’s what threw me off for the longest time, I couldn’t make sense of the things I needed to learn from you to play Councillor for the Sealord. I was lucky. Maester Luwin taught me how to read and write, figure some. You...you were the key to understanding everything if I could just figure out which end to put in the lock. But how does one go from summing ten numbers on a sheet of parchment to a place where the motion of the stars can be calculated without using a single number anywhere?”

The flames leap, chasing one another. A stringy rabbit, spitted on a stick, roasts over the firepit.

“Lived in you for months,” she says. “Stepped through your memories day by day, and I realized you did it all backwards. First you saw the moon rise and wax and wane outside a window, and you calculated its pattern and then you realized time was divided into days, and that the thing you had done with the moon could be simplified to something that resembles counting.” She laughs, a choked, sad thing, “I did not understand why the memory was so strange, until I stepped forward a few weeks, and I was crawling on the ground in the kitchens, and I saw a sack of flour, and I was trying to be useful because I had seen mother polishing black boots, and I took handfuls of flour and rubbed them all over everyone’s boots, and that was when I realized my perception was still so unformed that I did not know the difference between “white” and “shiny”, that putting white on something doesn’t make it polished. I hadn’t learned to walk properly yet. I hadn’t learned to talk.”

“Daorys knows how to count properly,” he offers.

“I speak in metaphors of coin,” she says, “because is the only part of you that I could grasp, because Zural Mobhai, he deciphered it for me.”

Old man should never have given Zural my name.

“‘Varro Massag’ constrained Zural, taught him to fear the state of namelessness.” He is surprised at the bitterness in his voice.

“Dead men do not fear,” she says.

“Do we not?” Jaqen asks.
She bends down to lay a kiss upon His forehead. The god tilts his head back—she misses His forehead, finds His mouth instead.

Varro feels the gazes of the Free Folk on her. Fiorn looks a bit disappointed. Or maybe it’s that Jocas hasn’t portioned out the rabbit fairly.

“He wakes now, though I know not where,” says Jaqen. “He does not recognize me, still he trusts me enough to ask questions.” A choked laugh. “Some things never change—I used to take contracts sometimes just to get away from the incessant questioning.”

“What questions, love?” she asks.

Jaqen sighs. “He keeps asking who the renegade is, in between the dream-murders.”

*Dream-murders?*

Jaqen closes his eyes. “He hallucinates very strongly; the House in the dreaming is littered with half-burnt corpses.”

*ARYA*

“Littered” is not quite the right word—he who was their brother of the sea-gate, he likes to hide his kills.

She levers out a charred corpse from behind a chest deep in the storeroom. A middle-aged man, like all the others; parts of his skin are coming away. She drops the body onto the waiting corpse-sheet, rolls it up, drags it up into the Temple.

Their brother of the knife-eyes—she doesn’t know his name—he’s bringing in another corpse, slung over his shoulder, from the direction of the kitchens.

This brother was the one who recruited the renegade. Jaqen pulled him in to tell him what had happened; he stayed in the dream after he was told.

The four of them have made a nice little mound of sheet-wrapped bodies in front of the corpse-door. The door is a small, square opening in the Temple’s outermost stone wall, in the large room set aside for preparing corpses. Once the body has been prepared, its face cut off, it is wrapped in a sheet and lowered, feet first, out of the corpse-door. In the real world she knows there is a stone conduit behind the door; the conduit leads to another corresponding square opening behind the House.

A cart waits there.

She’s driven the cart once, with a brother from Sothoros. The bodies are taken out to a private harbor with a strong riptide, and given to the sea.

*A VENTING MAN*

There is darkness. He likes darkness. He can hide things in it.

There is a warm rush of air, constant, blowing past him from the deep boilers below.

Salt encrusts the walls of the vent; boiler-men are stupid. They don’t wait for the seawater to be
properly desalinated before they push it into the steamers. The salt gets in the air.

He tried to explain it to them.

It’s maddening, how little they understand. They just do, do, do, they don’t wait. They don’t listen. Some of them kick.

So they die.

A memory; an unfamiliar face in the House, telling him things. Still a brother, the stranger wore gray.

Maybe it was a dream.

He has forgotten what a dream tastes like.

Dead men do not dream.

He climbs. Up and up, through the wide vent-shafts that go through the Sealord’s palace.

My brothers are in danger.

The rage in him simmers.

He reaches a wider part of the vent-system, with many branchings. He peers up and out through a grille set in a mosaic floor.

A man stands at a window.

Another boiler-man, with his large Braavosi eyes.

The venting-man’s lips curl into a sneer.

Needs a gift.

But he hesitates. There is a lot of light up top, and there is a second man in the room. It’ll make hiding the body difficult.

I know that man.

The second man in the room. He knows him. Through Arya Stark, his sister of the Wind. He smiles a bit. He likes Arya Stark. She listens. And when she tells him things, he listens as well. That is how it is supposed to work.

The second man in the room is the whoremaster.

Petyr Baelish.

The venting-man wants to snarl; he listens instead.

“…a lover. Sansa Stark is a far more respectable match,” Petyr Baelish is saying.

The boiler man turns to look at Petyr Baelish. “Sansa Stark is not safe,” he says.

Petyr Baelish smiles, thin. “Cersei wants her dead. Euron Greyjoy wants her dead--he tried to buy her name from your House of Black and White when he couldn’t buy her. So no, my daughter is not safe.”
The boiler-man remains silent.

“The secret died with Maester Luwin,” says Baelish. “And my poor Catelyn. The girl you know as ‘Arya Stark’ is a commoner with the right look, raised as one of the Starks. But Sansa is mine—her mother and I loved each other more than you can possibly know.” Baelish’s mouth twists. “Westeros forced dishonor onto us, when they dragged Catelyn Tully, screaming and weeping, to say her oaths to the impotent Eddard Stark.” He shakes his head. “I tried to protect my daughter, Lord Fregar. Cersei Lannister knew the truth—the Queen forced Sansa to marry the dwarf, spurned the alliance with Highgarden I’d so carefully cultivated.” Petyr rubs at his eyes. “Then…Ramsay. I rode out with the Knights of the Vale.” He shakes his head. “Too late.”

“Harrenhal,” says the boiler man. “The Vale. The North. And the Lannister lands, the Baratheon lands.”

“More. If you marry Sansa Stark,” says Petyr Baelish. “All that is mine will be hers. Once I die.”

The whoremaster tries to look very earnest. “I am not offering a kingdom to Tormo Fregar in exchange for protecting my daughter. I am offering seven to Tormo Fregar’s son.”

The boiler man turns then, raises an eyebrow. “Your chances of sitting on the Iron Throne are not…promising, Lord Baelish. Not with Daenerys and her dragons.”

Petyr Baelish smiles, bitter. “The Faceless Men think otherwise,” he says. “From each according to their ability…”

The boiler man turns away to look out the window again.

“Think on it,” says Petyr Baelish. And then he bows. “Sealord.”

The boiler-man gives the whoremaster an absent nod.

Petyr Baelish turns on his heel, and walks away.

The boiler-man is all alone now.

The venting-man smiles.

HIM OF THE MANY FACES

The dream has changed.

A dream within a dream; there are uncountable fractions of moments between any two heartbeats.

The corpse-cart rattles on the cobblestones; she can hear the sound of the sea, somewhere far away. The stack of sheet-wrapped bodies bounce with every rut in the road—she sits with Varro at the back of the cart; they keep the corpses from sliding off.

Jaqen drives.

Ambraysis Alayain sits beside him.

The blood-mage has no allegiance. He is one that others look to—the ones who know—as somewhat immune from the plague of renegacy. He joined the order and bargained for some unspecified future vengeance.
Ambraysis has not yet decided whom he wants killed.

There are things to his memories that make her think of Bran—time is less of a river to Ambraysis, more of a mountain-range, with valleys and heights.

The blood-mage exhales. “Gifts must be given, Jaqen,” he says in his high voice. “Given en masse, or the House is tainted forever.”

“…a dream,” Varro is saying to her. “Jaqen as the Many-Faced God. The day before you gave me my name, when I stood at the precipice of myself. Something in my subconscious, it knew I must not die, or I’d give tattered things to Him.”

Jaqen’s mouth is a thin line; He flicks the reins of the draft-horses that pull the cart behind them. “Two other renegades, I took back into me.”

*Attachment. To those He’d recruited, to those that were like Varro and me, god-touched, loved by Jaqen H’ghar, brother, teacher…*

Ambraysis catches the thoughts, of course. Ambraysis *sees*. “He who taught us the concept of brotherhood,” says Ambraysis. “Braavosi, Lorathi, the divisions came *after* he was taken in Asshai.”

*Fear*, says the Wind. *Fear of losing the self, when they tortured the god out of him so he could be fed to R’hllor.*

Jaqen took their lost brother’s fear back into Himself, mirrored it out to the rest of the Many-Faced God.

“I am not supposed to fear,” she says. “But I was terrified the first time Jaqen told me of our brother that was taken. The fear, it rose in me, made me a little bit mad—much of what I prompted Jaqen to do, did myself, to save Varro from Asshai, it was born in that moment of fear.” Her mouth twists. “I feared for me, and saw Varro in me—didn’t know his name, didn’t know I knew him. But in that moment of fear I resonated with him, and fell a little bit in love with him.”

The cart rattles on.

“Grace,” says Jaqen quietly, “your grace, beloved, that it transmuted fear into something else.”

*Your grace,* she says, “that it transmuted our forgotten brother’s fear into the Braavosi, that are so very terrified of losing ‘themselves’, and yet they serve, yet they are brothers, their perspectives are valuable, the defend, they build attachments.” She reaches out, then, clasps Varro’s hand in hers for a moment. “Varro, had I not been Braavosi I would have done with you what Jaqen did all these years—I would have taken that kernel of love and wrapped it in silence, weighed it down with regret. And I’d have told Jaqen to let you be, wherever you were.”


“You must have seen it coming, brother,” she says to Ambraysis. “When you gave me your face to wear. Else I could not have gone to Asshai. The god would have been trapped there.”

“I would have been trapped there,” says Varro. He gives Ambraysis a seated bow.

The blood-mage looks troubled.

“Our reaved brother’s grace,” she says to Varro, “that even in his renegacy, the fear that he felt
transmuted into something that protected you.” He looks up, at her. “Jaqen did not let go of him, kept him from R’hllor till you could give him mercy. Our lost brother repaid that mercy a thousandfold to you, Lei’anni. Repaid a thousandfold to me.”

Because Asshai would still have asked its questions and without Varro at Winterfell, by my side, I would have been a renegade.

The cart has come to a halt. There is no sea. Only darkness, and a seawall made of a thousand spiraling maze-like shells.

Her and Varro, they grasp a corpse by the shoulders and the feet, swing it over the seawall. Jaqen is tethering the horses to a nearby hitching-post.

The god turns to Ambraysis; the mages work to unload the cart of its solemnity. “Gratitude, brother-mine,” says Jaqen. “for the gift of your name. The Wind awoke.” He pauses, runs his fingers through the shroud of a young woman. “And to all who have been sundered from us, who kept her and I bound to each other.”

“The world was ending,” she says sadly. “My world--the construct the Braavosi call the House of Black and White, and the Lorathi call the Many-Faced God--it would have ended had I lost you.”

Ambraysis looks at Jaqen, his eyes wide. “But your body would have been resurrected,” he whispers.

“The Wind would have it no other way,” she agrees.

Ambraysis and Varro make short work of three more corpses.

Varro’s mouth twists, a dark, humorless smile. “What happens when a god is resurrected without a soul?”

She and Jaqen climb up into the cart for the bodies stacked near the back of it.

“You are unpracticed at manipulating Faceless Men, renegade,” Ambraysis observes. “And yet all men must serve, is that it? I did not forgive you, to have you intrude upon my mind.”

Two more bodies. She and Jaqen swing them into the sea right from the cart.

Varro grins at the blood-mage. Unrepentant. “Thought it was Jaqen’s mind I violated by being here.”

“I am not responsible for the mess Jaqen has made of His House,” says Ambraysis.

Ambraysis forms an opinion. He abides by it.

But I will not.

“Jaqen did make the mess all alone,” she says as she slides into the driver’s seat.

“If he hadn’t kept this renegade as a pet,” says Ambraysis, ignoring her sarcasm as he climbs into the cart beside her, “forgiven or not, the renegade—”

“No man can dream the future,” she interrupts. “A man can only touch the future through prophecy. A self-fulfilling spell. What spell is Jaqen responsible for, brother-mine? I would understand.”

You gave me your name, upon the docks. You said you had a dream. What prophecy did you make
The blood-mage twists around; her brother’s eyes bore into hers. And within his eyes she sees a shard of the red plague, she sees blood and fire and knives made of bone slicing through tendon and thought.

The Wind smiles.

Ambraysis is possibly one of her most favourite brothers.

“You think I am responsible?” he asks.

“I do not know,” she says. Truth. “Are you?”

His jaw clenches. He looks away. “I do not know,” he whispers. He closes his eyes, touches his breast. “I know fear.” He looks at Jaqen. “The House is tainted.”

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “By those we lost in Asshai.”

Ambraysis does not speak until they have clattered their way back to the House.

“Grace,” he whispers. “No man can dream a future. The future must be made. I am responsible—Him of the Many Faces is responsible, for making the future He will reach, inevitably.”

She bows her head before her brother of the blooded teeth. “Your grace, Ambraysis,” she says. “Make us a future where the god lives.”

“I will dream a dream,” her mage-brother promises. He looks to Varro, then. “Become more practiced at manipulation, renegade. Him of the Many Faces will have great need of you.”

It is, by definition, not a prediction.

It is a benediction.

Varro, for once, is taken aback. He bows his head as well. “Valar dohaeris,” he murmurs.

ARYA

She blinks; awakens. No cart. No sea. They still stand within the House, sheet-wrapped bodies waiting to be dealt with.

Varro drags in two behind him. “These might be the last, I think.”

Jaqen leans against a pillar, studies the ground. “One more,” He murmurs. “Somewhere…” He grimaces. “Inside the cistern.”

The god leaves the washing room.

“Arya Stark,” says the brother of the knife-eyes, “our forgiveness does not entitle the renegade to enter this House.”

“I paid the god for a dream,” says Varro.

The brother considers it. Nods. Then he helps her and Varro—they start lifting the bodies, one by one, pushing them out of the House.
The brother sighs. “I gave the renegade of the sea-gate my coin,” he says, shaking his head. “Jaqen taught him.” He looks to Arya: Do you know why he would try to excise the god?

She pushes a body down the chute; no answer is answer enough for a Lorathi.

The renegade, Braavosi and one of the nine, he’d returned to the House a year-and-a-half after she was made Faceless. He’d brought her a present--the hollow-tipped, poisoned sticks from Yi Ti. He’d mock-flirted with her; she’d grown her hair long.

Wore the hairpins to meet Jaqen in Oldtown.

“If he likes you, he likes you,” she says slowly. “If he doesn’t…”

The brother’s mouth pulls to one side. “The Fight.”

Faceless Men do not hate one another. Irritation, though, that happens; provides fuel for gossip. A small war, spanning three continents and a hundred years, that, also, has been known to happen.

She takes in both the knife-eyed brother and Varro. “Either of you know which Lorathi formed the other half of the feud?”

Varro bends over, hauls a wrapped corpse up to the door.

“Varro’s head snaps up; he takes in her distress, narrow-eyed. “Arya?”

She bows her head. “Only one Lorathi turned from Jaqen.”

A wind, blowing sand into his nose, his mouth, come home, Lorathi, come home.

There’s more corpses to do. She grabs one by the legs—irreverent, but the dead don’t care and right now she doesn’t give a fuck if dreams can die or not. She hauls it over to the corpse-door.

The brother of the knife-eyes, he sits down on the edge of a slab, draws his legs up under him. “Renegade,” he calls to Varro.

Varro looks up.

“You do this,” says the brother, gestures to the corpse. “You are not one of us anymore. Why?”

Varro shrugs. “I need to understand renegade Braavosi,” he says.

The brother raises an eyebrow.

Varro doesn’t look at him, just helps Arya handle the last of the corpses into the chute.

The brother waits.

“When I was nameless,” says Varro, “I thought Zural adopted the Braavosi street-cant because he was Pentos-born. You know the Braavosi jokes, ‘How many Pentoshi does it take…’” Varro comes closer to Arya, takes a seat upon the slab next to hers. “Thought he was trying to fit in. Never cared enough to ask, just…expected him to shed it along with his name, eventually.” His face bears no expression. “My teacher’s grace,” he says, “that I could control a renegade’s madness
enough to be useful. I don’t know how to teach control to a Braavosi. But Zural is Zural, and him I will teach. One way or another.”

She finds herself back, a desperate hope beating clawing its way out of her gullet.

*Can it be done?*


*Braavosi things.*

She gives the brother a twisted smile.

*I am no one.*

The brother’s expression clears. “You play Arya Stark very well,” he says.

She nods, rueful. “And the Wind—I woke to save Him of the Many Faces. His blood, in every Faceless Man, every Faceless Man is His mirror.” She shrugs. “Two of my faces. There are others. Each is accommodated.”

The brother nods, assimilating.

Each Lorathi is different, similar only in the state of namelessness. Like Jaqen H’ghar, Arya Stark will look very Braavosi from certain angles.

“Valar morghulis,” says the brother. He looks straight at Varro. “You deserve mercy. A gift must be given. To all that were once brothers.”

_Compassion for Varro’s suffering? Or that fastidiousness Varro extrapolated, a desire to keep the definition of Death, of Him of the Many Faces, “clean” of the influence of renegades?*_

“I do not know your name,” she says to the brother of the knife-eyes: _I do not know your context._

“I have no name,” he replies. “But I was the sixteenth to come out of Valyria.”

“All that came out of Valyria—” begins Varro.

The world fragments into thousand droplets of water. A dream _beside_ a dream. A splash of water.

**HIM OF THE MANY FACES**

The cistern is a large, rock-hewn space under the Hall of Faces. There is a draught in the dream—the water comes up to thigh-height. It is dark—the floor of the cistern is not level, there are deep bore-wells that go a hundred feet into the rock, to the brackish sweetwater springs that flow into the Narrow Sea.

Jaqen dives. Surfaces. The body has not been found yet.

Calum Vaye is a Braavosi, relatively new to the order. He knows the cistern inside out—his teacher had a vile sense of humor as well.

Calum Vaye’s hands shake; the lantern-light wobbles. “A gift must be given,” he whispers. “I cannot, Jaqen, I cannot see my teacher do things like this.”
“Corpses are one thing,” Varro agrees, “but fouling the House’s water-supply is a bit in poor taste."

Arya wades beside the Braavosi.

“I do not know his name,” she says sadly. “Else I would have known he was a renegade, I would have warned Jaqen. This desecration would never have happened.”

Both him and Arya catch Calum Vaye’s grimace.

“How was it done before we had lineages, Jaqen,” she asks, “if you had to be given a brother’s name for some reason, a mission?”

Jaqen casts her a look over His shoulder. “It wasn’t,” He says. “There are Lorathi names nobody knows, names of those that made their path to the deep discipline through destruction of memory.”

She wades faster. “But I knew Varro Massag.”

Jaqen nods, His face is wreathed in sorrow. “The sharing of names, teacher to student—a lineage has a certain right, a certain allowance. The sharing began after she who was my teacher was taken in Asshai.” He blinks. “I do not remember what she was called. Such was not her choice—she wore her name in defiance of Lorathi custom. Like you.”

“Fear of a name being ripped away,” says Arya. “You took up her fear into the Many-Faced God, Jaqen.”

Jaqen does not reply. He dives again into another one of the deep-bores.

Calum Vaye is listening.

Intent.

Varro judges it is time to speak. “The old man sent me your name, Arya Stark,” he says. “before I boarded the ship to Asshai.” He shakes his head. “After the Night of Ice I carried your lost sister’s face next to my skin. I had a duty. But it was not enough to hold me against the whispers telling me to drown myself, to stop eating, to curl up somewhere and wait to be killed. Your face was my last line of defense. And I could only be you because her fear created a mechanism for my teacher to give me ‘Arya Stark’.”

He is no one, but he finds he must lean against the cistern’s cold wall. “Her grace, that even in her renegacy, the fear that she felt transmuted into something that protected me.” He looks up, at her. “Jaqen’s grace, that he did not let go of her, that he kept her from R’hllor till I could give her mercy. She repaid that mercy a thousandfold to me.”

Jaqen surfaces, holding a blue-lipped corpse in His arms. It’s hands and legs have been burned off, it trails foulness behind it.

“His rage,” Jaqen whispers, staring down at the corpse. “It is in my blood.”

Arya lays a hand on His shoulder. “The Wind will drink it down for you.”

Callum Vaye is looking back and forth between Jaqen and Arya. God business, says the wildness in his eyes.

Varro laughs. “Not your business, eh, Braavosi? You are not the Many-Faced God.”
Callum Vaye staggers a bit. But Braavosi he is, so he is not unbalanced for long. “Give me the corpse, Jaqen,” he says. “I will deal with the cistern. My teacher has cleaned up enough of my messes.”

Jaqen nods. “A last service.”

“No!” says Callum Vaye. “No last anything.”

“There will be a vote,” says Jaqen gently. “The outcome is expected.”

“My teacher is still the Many-Faced God,” says Callum Vaye. “A broken part of the god, he cannot mirror Jaqen H’ghar. But he can still mirror the rest of us! He can still serve!” He points. “He served. For two centuries! I forgave him for lying to all of us because he served.” He is breathing hard, his eyes bloodshot.

“It falls to a vote,” says Jaqen again. “You know my stance on it. I have fought. My bride has fought. But it has come to nothing.”

Callum Vaye’s nostrils flare. “Then I will fight.” He glares at them. “Because I am Him of the Many Faces, whether the Lorathi like it or not.”


ARYA

She blinks awake.

“—are Lorathi,” finishes Varro.

Jaqen returns with a corpse in His arms. The sheet wound around it is wet, it trails along the ground, leaves behind a serpentine smear of water upon the gray stone floor. The god heaves the corpse into the chute.

The dream lingers. A sensation. The heavy swirl of water around her thighs. A memory of damp air, and wavering lantern-light.”

Varro turns to the brother of the knife-eyes. “Why do Lorathi fuck so much?” he asks.

The brother raises an eyebrow. “A Braavosi question. They do not understand that the body is still the body, pleasure is still pleasure. Nothing feels as good as sex does when you are no one.”

Varro sneers. “Good feelings have the power to touch one who is immersed in the deep discipline?” He snorts. “If it wasn’t for the renegade-making, if Lorathi didn’t restrain themselves from fucking each other all the time, your House wouldn’t be a guild of assassins, it would be a sex-cult of nymphomaniacs.”

He’s playing the Unrepentant to the hilt, she thinks. For more than one purpose. One of them: Jaqen is watching the renegade—His renegade—with narrowed eyes.

She contains her grin.

But what incites one Lorathi to want to fuck someone into submission, and amuses yet another, it can irritate a third.

“Make your point, renegade,” says the brother of the knife-eyes: you are not a Lorathi anymore, to expect your vagaries to be accommodated.
Varro looks to the god. “Tell me, Jaqen, why did you veto founding the House in Lorath? The first veto the god ever used, and Lorath was ideal, resonated with the philosophy, old man says there was a maze ready, secured. And then, suddenly, the order’s building a temple in Braavos.”

Jaqen’s jaw is clenched as He starts filling buckets from the water-tank to wash down the floors.

“I don’t know,” He says finally. “I don’t know why we didn’t want to go to Lorath.”

“You don’t remember,” corrects Varro.

“A renegade?” she mumbles. “The order didn’t have Lorathi and Braavosi then. So someone born of Lorath, or taken from Lorath and enslaved?”

She grabs two fistfuls of the caustic soap from the stone urn in the corner—she needs neither scoop nor gloves, not in the dreaming, nothing can harm her here.

“The first renegade,” says Varro. “I extrapolate: the god doesn’t know what’s going on. Doesn’t know any better--He doesn’t withdraw His favor. A gift is given. The memories don’t cascade since the bond is broken. But the god wants to keep His people—He takes what he can get. He drinks in the black blood spilled upon the ground. Drinks in a soul that remembers nothing but the imprint of the mindless patterns of a renegade.”

She walks across the floor, sprinkling the white powder in long lines.

The brother is thoughtful. He rises, collects two scrubbing brushes. He walks within arms-reach of Varro. “You want it?” he asks, holding out one of the implements.

Varro reaches.

The brother pulls the brush back. “Convince me,” he says. “Convince me we have a renegade in us.”

Varro’s face is impassive. “There is a loose pattern--maybe just statistical probability,” he says. “But a renegade is made once every two decades or so. Sometimes there’s two at once--Dance of Dragons was a bad time; there were four. Turmoil in the world outside always reflects within the House. But the first hundred years of the order, the House was growing madly, two became eight became twenty. Valyria had just fallen, the Century of Blood washed up on the most distant shores--and the order had no renegades at all? Not a single one? No names missing?” He shakes his head. “There had to have been. The name is forgotten, the face is forgotten.”

All the arrogance, the playacting, it has drained away from Varro’s posture. His eyes are focused upon the stiff bristles of the brush held in the brother’s hand, just out of Varro’s reach.

“Why do Lorathi fuck so much?” Varro asks again. His gaze flicks to the god momentarily. “You did not allow the discipline to lapse for more than four centuries, Jaqen. But the moment your standard was met—” he points to Arya, “the moment you relaxed your control, you took to fucking so compulsively that I mistook it for addiction.”

She can feel Jaqen’s agitation as the god refills the bucket of water.

“It circles my mind,” says Varro. “Sex, and blood. A lust, for death in all its forms. A hunger.”

A hunger.

I always want more. When Jaqen is near me, when Varro looks at me, my breasts ache, they need
to be touched, my cunt hungers to be filled.

Jaqen sluices a bucket of water across the floor.

“If it is fed,” she murmurs, as she grasps her own scrub-brush, bends to her task, “it is not sated. It grows.”

“Classic definition of a renegade pattern,” says Varro. “It always escalates.”

_Depraved Lorathi appetites._

She scours the patch of floor she has claimed as hers.

The Wind waits.

“A renegade destroys himself as much as his victims,” says the brother of the knife-eyes. “I have never seen any harm born out of our so-called depravity.”

“Grace,” says Varro.

_Our brothers’ grace, the god’s grace. Much is accommodated. We control ourselves. It is not allowed to harm, to spill over outside the boundaries of the self._

The Wind raises her head. Varro and Jaqen are looking at each other.

“I’ve never looked a nameless one in the eye while I fucked them,” says Varro. His mouth twists. “Irony—I did not indulge in renegade-making activities.” Varro looks to her then. “But you’ve subjected yourself to it,” he says.

The Wind smiles. She made the creature with the god but once, before the Heart Tree, before they found Bran Stark’s voice in the Weirwood of Shadows. Before they rode for the Wall. The Wind and Death, they made a creature and when it parted, the god wept.

The Wind did not.

She _feeds_ upon sorrow; grieving is glee in her mouth.

“I taste it in you, renegade, every time we couple,” says the Wind.

A sudden shift of perspective in the brother of the knife-eyes: _if she couples with the renegade, then Jaqen does as well._

She ignores him.

Consciousness is an emergent sensation; an _event_.

Only the nameless can make a creature. No boundary of thought or skin to act as barrier between two parts of a soul coming together.

The event: the Many-Faced God becomes aware of Himself. He _experiences_ consciousness in the Lorathi—a fractional mirroring of the consciousness the Many-Faced God experiences as the multitudes-in-one that is Jaqen H’ghar.

When the creature parts from itself, the event concludes.

Consciousness dies.
A renegade’s thought-patterns wake in the wake of the god’s passing; the sound of keening, at a god’s wake.

_The desolation._

“We know what it is like to be a renegade, brother,” she whispers. “We all have one in us. It weeps. It knows who it lost.”

Varro grins at her. “You know a clean renegade, Vaz’anni. A broken mirror, not a tainted one like me.”

The Wind narrows her eyes at him: I have tasted you. You are vile and transcendent by turns; what is there to shirk from in it?

“Near the end of the Dance of Dragons,” says Varro, “I gave a gift to a renegade. My first.” His gaze upon her is troubled, far too troubled—he is nameless, he should not show concern.

“Children, for that one,” he continues. “He’d set himself up at an orphanage of the Weeping Lady. Hallowed ground—it was part of a larger temple-complex. I took the face off his next target, reached him, gave a gift. Thought it was done. Turned around to leave. And the thing that rose behind me,” Varro scrubs at his face with his hand. “It rose, and it wanted me, and there was naught I could do but run. Made it outside somehow, the walls weeping screams behind me, every child he’d killed rising out of the ground, crawling out of cracks in the stones. Hallucination, magic, I do not know.”

_A hungry man; all the images of the children the child-eater sacrificed to his broken altar. The memories of their last moments, twisted into horrors._

Varro falls silent.

“Then?” she prompts, impatient.

“Set a fire to one side of the temple,” he says. “He, _it_ , whatever it was it was, it was in the walls and the ground and the air itself. The fire burned for four days, till there was nothing left but ash and charr.”

“Valar dohaeris,” whispers their brother of the knife-eyes. “No renegade must die on hallowed ground—the renegade’s corruption is in its soul, it taints _everything_.”

Nodding, Varro reaches out, plucks the brush from the brother’s unresisting hands. “ _This_ is not for me anymore,” he says, “Not since Jaqen set me to hunting my own kind.”

The brother of the knife-eyes is looking at the god with something very akin to accusation.

_A gift should have been given._

Varro grins at the god. “For peerless assassins, your Lorathi spend a lot of time staring at the ground.”

Both the Wind and the brother of the knife-eyes, they look _up_.

Instead of the vaulted stone ceilings of the Temple, there is a roiling red-tainted mass of _something_ hanging far overhead…not flesh, not darkness, but some twisted mating of the two.

The Wind grins.
Varro is a hungry man, after all.

Faces appear and disappear within the taint upon the House’s stone; rainbow-hued patterns in a slick of oil, slithering across the sky.

Like the child-eater, Varro reflects his kills within himself. The ones he sacrificed upon his own broken altar.

And this is a dream, but a hallowed one.

Varro spills over. Rises, like a miasma.

There are hungry men splayed upon the ceiling, all the twisted horrors of them that arose as they were eaten by the hunter. And within each of them there lie the memories of every woman and every man they ate in turn, twisted into a mass of malevolence.

_Him of the Many Faces._

Varro’s soul contains a recursion of renegades, one in each shard he broke into with every hungry man he consumed.

“Dead men do not fear,” whispers the brother of the knife-eyes; in his mouth it is a prayer to ward off evil.

The Wind raises her hand, her fingers straining to touch the thing writhing above them, the warped remains of her god’s blood, her lover’s soul.

_Mine._

She feels Jaqen move.

Varro reaches her first. He grabs her wrist, forces her hand down.

“No,” he says. “It is not allowed.”

The Wind _laughs_ as she dreams her wrist out of his grasp. “Allowed? There are no rules, renegade,” she says. “Impose what trades and balances you want onto your environment; I will not be constrained so.”

“You can play with him later,” says Jaqen, conciliatory.

She glares at Him: _you’ve been playing with him all this time._

The brother of the knife-eyes is watching, wary now. _God-business_, his gaze says.

“Are you not Him of the Many Faces?” she mocks. “Is this not your business?”

The brother falls silent—he looks inwards. She knows because she knows _Jaqen_ —it is a Jaqen expression the brother wears now.

Her words have found a home.

_He mirrors the god._

They wait.
“The House must be cleansed,” the brother finally murmurs.

Jaqen seats himself onto a slab. “Tell us how, brother,” he says.

“To cleanse,” says the brother. “A definition: to absolve of sin.” He looks up, at Varro. His eyes are dark pools of thought. “Forgetting a sin does not absolve me of it. Making a sin-eater eat my sin does not absolve me of it.”

Varro bows his head. “Valar dohaeris,” he whispers.

“All renegades,” says the brother of the knife-eyes, “were the Many-Faced God the moment they turned; the god turned from Himself. Sin and sinner—there is no distinction.”

“There is only one god,” she says.

The brother nods. “And His name is Death.”

TORMO FREGAR

The Sealord of Braavos hears a very small sound. Metal, being set down on tile. He turns, and sees a shadow climb out of the large heating-vent.

The shadow advances upon him.

Tormo raises a hand, pulls on a rope near the chairs. It will ring a bell in the corridor outside. The door opens. A young page sticks his head in. “Ser?” he asks.

Tormo considers the man that has climbed out of the vents; his clothes are black, beslimed and streaked with white. His face—his eyes—they hold in them a familiar, dark promise: all men must die.

“Valar morghulis,” says the Sealord of Braavos.

Has someone bought my name?

The shadow hesitates. Then, “Valar dohaeris,” it whispers.

The Sealord of Braavos smiles. “Two teas, I think, at this hour.” The page nods, and scurries off, closing the door behind him.

The Faceless Man is dirty, and his eyes are dark, hooded, but there is a glimmer of mania to them. Fervor?

Tormo Fregar is not exactly a believing man. He is, however, a superstitious man—one cannot rule Braavos otherwise, for what is superstition but custom born of men’s irrationalities? In the Free Cities, one ignores custom at one’s peril.

His superstition notes that the Faceless Man did not bow.

Does the House of Black and White honor the Sealord with an ecclesiastical emissary? A priest-assassin, in truth?

The rumors of dead men serving the Many-Faced God, not just drowned and revived like Ironborn
priests, but dead—the rumors seem suddenly more credible in the face of this man that has climbed into Tormo Fregar’s private audience room through the supposedly impassable vents.

The Sealord ignores the chill sweat that breaks out along his spine. He gestures to the chairs. “I was hoping you might pay me a visit outside of Council.” He has taken to his predecessor’s superstition of treating all Faceless Men as a single entity. It is a reminder—their names are false; their faces are false, you could be dealing with the same one, over and over again, and never know it. Don’t try to set one against the other; make sure the face you show the House is always consistent. “Please, have a seat.”

The Faceless Man does not nod. But he does fold himself into the indicated chair. A tall man, the Sealord notes. And a flicker of something passes over the assassin’s face—a weighing. A measuring.

Against what standard?

Tormo smiles a bit. He likes tests.

“What do you do here?” asks the Faceless Man, a look of confusion blooming on his face—clearly feigned.

Tormo discards the false answer: I rule this city. Any man who thinks Braavos can be ruled is a fool.

He discards the flippant answer: I eat, I shit, I sleep.

“I do as little as I possibly can,” he says. I’m a bit tired today, he realizes. He is still young enough, but his fortieth year looms before him; Tormo Fregar will not see the end of the Long Night. He shrugs. “I try to get others to do what they should be doing. The moment the Sealord starts scurrying here and there, doing things…” he shakes his head.

The Faceless Man has relaxed.

I passed. Whatever the test was.

“Do, do, do,” says the Faceless Man. He sighs.

“Exhausting,” agrees Tormo.

The tea comes. It is poured.

There can only be one topic of conversation that requires the presence of one of the god’s priest-assassins, here, tonight.

“Is Arya Stark well?” asks Tormo.

“She serves.”

His wife-to-be is a Faceless Man—woman. No emotion, no personal vendettas; trained to deceive. Her word will be inviolable. The connection to Westeros—the sheer acreage of land that comes to him as her dowry; for a man born and bred to the canals and isles that Braavos is built upon, where every scrap of land is jealously guarded from the neighbors, from erosion, from sinks…land means something, snowbound though it may be.

“The Sealord is not used to being served by Faceless Men,” points out Tormo. The House never
meddles in politics. There is something more to it, this sudden partisanship.

“Arya Stark,” says the Faceless Man. And, wonder of wonders, the impassive assassin smiles.

She wants this?

Tormo raises an eyebrow. “Not for the Sealord’s charming good looks, I think.”

The Faceless Man cocks his head to a side, considering. “Stark blood.”

So Baelish was full of shit, as expected. Eddard Stark was neither impotent, nor prone to kidnapping farmers’ children to call his own. A man out of his element. He should have saved himself to face the winter his House words heralded.

Not that her blood matters, Tormo reminds himself. All blood is red, when it is spilled. All the familial trappings that come with it—the dowry, the name, the overtures from the King in the North—all of these are a deception perpetrated upon the Starks.

A useful deception.

But Tormo Fregar is entering this marriage with open eyes. “Braavosi know no blood-tie holds those that enter the House of Black and White,” he murmurs.

The Faceless Man’s nods. “Brothers,” he says.

Stark blood. There is another meaning to it. Honor. Duty. Loyalty.

Why would Arya Stark want to be loyal to me, not just the city?

Loyalty breeds loyalty. His mind races; he leans back in his chair. “Syrio Forel,” he says.

“Meryn Trant,” replies the Faceless Man.

Tormo grins. So the rumors got it right for once. What else do they get right?

“I hear she’s taken a lover,” he says. “A Lorathi?”

“ There is only one god,” says the Faceless Man. “And his name is death.”

Tormo Fregar stills. That was a telling tone.

I interfere in the business of Faceless Men.

He backtracks.

“I have two mistresses at the moment,” he says, “a bastard by another, and a lover I need to break with somehow, without having him cause a scene.”

Cartel votes or no, audiences with the Sealord of Braavos will not to be traded like lovers’ tokens, not for the likes of Westerosi slime like Baelish.

“A virginal assassin for a wife is a bit too much responsibility, I think,” the Sealord adds.

Dangerous as well: fidelity would require reciprocity to some measure, even for a Faceless Man. A woman. A wife.

“Boiler-men are stupid,” says the Faceless Man, suddenly.
Tormo blinks. Waits for an explanation.

“The salt gets in the air,” says the assassin. “Corrodes the pipes. There will be no vents and no heat in a decade.”

An entirely unexpected form of helpfulness. And Tormo is not entirely sure he likes this form of the dowry—it makes him uneasy, assassin-priests offering observations on city infrastructure. On the other hand, Tormo Fregar likes anticipating problems, so he doesn’t have to solve them.

“Maintenance is far cheaper than repair,” he says. “Please, if you would have any suggestions—I would listen.”

Chapter End Notes

so, some of the reveals a few people had been looking for, expanding upon the hints--"oneness" sex, Braavosi, Lorathi. Some major perspective-shifting within the HBW.

And we meet Tormo Fregar for the first time :)

I like Tormo...more of him further down the Braavos arc. Next chapter: God Touched-wights, our first run-in with what the Night's King is, Arya gives a speech. And Daenerys is back! And her flotilla :)
God Touched

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

Moving with the skis takes effort, the use of muscles that are not used to such a form of repetitive motion. Jaqen’s familiarity with the implements shows—the god’s outpaced them; He scouts the ground over the next ridge. Herself and Varro, they move slowly, side-by-side, barely more than walking pace.

Her feet drag the strips of wood; they feel a thousand times heavier than they did when she started out.

This would be easier if I could wear someone with longer legs, she grouses. But the presence of the two Free Folk men constrains her.

She makes a face at their backs.

“They know where the dead people are,” Varro reminds her.

“What, right behind them, ready to stick knives in their kidneys?” she asks.

Fucking long-legs all around me, all happily gliding away.

“A trade?” asks Varro.

He offers her his face in exchange for hers, so she can have long legs for a while.

She shakes her head: I’d have to learn to move in you.

He glances at her, sidelong: Haven’t done that yet.

They share a fleeting, promise-laden grin; it tingles, down to her fingertips.

Something unknots, at the base of her skull. She unfurls into the air, she tastes the snowflakes falling softly from the sky and as they melt upon her tongue, her irritation melts with them.

Skill grows, mile upon mile. With skill comes grace.

Eventually she glides, a whisper over the white, compacted powder.

———

Her heartbeat rises; the Pearl is demanding its price.

She surveys the area—scrub, sticking out of the snow. A small copse of trees, wretched in their nakedness, just over to their left.

With all the control she can muster, she goes down on a knee, unlaces one ski, then another. Lifts the wood, stacks it under her arm—her boots break the crust over the snow, she sinks ankle-deep.
But there’s enough purchase to stomp on over to the tree she’s chosen, stand the skis against its trunk.

The dark speck against the snow up ahead stops moving; the darkness in her writhes as Jaqen doubles back.

She sits; Varro wraps his cloak around her, draws her in, to lean on his shoulder. Her heart flutters, arrhythmic. She focuses on his heartbeat. Slow. She struggles to match it. It works, though not entirely--the flutter comes and goes.

“Jaqen’s found something interesting,” Varro observes, his eyes trained on the god’s form in the distance, growing larger as He nears.

She nods. Jaqen feels intent, focused.

The Free Folk men are falling back as well; they’re making for the copse she’s chosen.

She draws her awareness inwards. Deep into her lungs; from their it cascades out, through her blood, through her muscles. She turns to the harder task of finding the fucking Pearl, accelerating its synthesis.

*Not just the heart.*

It’s in her nerves.

It arcs across her nerve-endings like splinters of pain. She smiles at it; it freezes, shatters. She’s only been able to do her stomach—the nausea, the cutting pain—by the time Jaqen is in earshot.

He’s in a good mood. It resonates between between the three of them. Faceless Men will not be caught grinning at each other like fools out in the open, but a certain warmth to the eyes is allowed.

“The herd has moved,” says Jaqen.

“*That* makes you smile?” asks Varro.

Jaqen unstraps His own skis, takes a seat upon a corner of His cloak. “Because at last,” He says, “we come to the reason I was going to ask you to take back your name.”

**JON**

His mind is divided these days—a thousand problems, each with no clear solution. Just *options*.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

Sometimes he can grin at the memory. Sometimes not.

Today is not a grinning day. He just hopes Daorys is as gifted as Jaqen claims him to be.

Jon looks out over the practice yard. Green-uniformed women raise staves with varying degrees of competence.

“Blades,” he says to Sandor. “Staves will do nothing against wights other than pissing them off.”

Sandor shakes his head. “*You* tell her that—she thinks the women are going to chop their own hands off if they start with swords.”
“So give them long-knives, or axes,” says Jon, and some of his frustration bleeding into his voice. Four hundred willing fighters should not be thrown away. “They’ve chopped meat before, they’ve chopped wood. No missing hands that I can see.”

“She’s a good fighter,” says Sandor. “Knows what she’s doing--give it another day or so.”

“Maybe someone should have a word with her,” Jon says.

“The little bird is inviting the little bear for a visit,” says Sandor. “Have her tell Brienne how the women should be trained.”

Lyanna is not Sansa, to try to cajole cooperation out of Brienne of Tarth. It could go very wrong. Or right.

Either way, it’ll be good to see her again.

Jon looks to Sandor--he knows the man is wary of magic. “Lyanna, four others--Bran’s going to start training all of us wargs properly.”

Sandor’s jaw tightens. But he nods. “It should be done.”

The wartime applications are endless, from raven-scouts to messages to establishing perimeters. Jon wants at least one warg with each of the six legions.

ARYA

They hide behind a rocky, snow-scoured rise. A hundred feet below them there unfurls a vast plain, leading all the way to the hills around Karhold.

Wights. Deathless, blue-eyed corpses. Men, women, children, their faces rotted, their death-wounds black with frost.

Thousands of them.

They mill about upon the plain. Some snarl, snap at empty air. Some shamble in circles. Others seem somehow more cognizant of where they are. Some form groups.

Many are armed.

Varro sits on top of the rise, his gray cloak offering some camouflage. He watches the movement below.

He has not spoken for a watch.

The Free Folk men have pulled back; they have disappeared over the next rise.

They say that if the herd catches sight of a living man…

Varro’s gray cloak blends into the gray shadows of the rocks, the snow. He offers no movement to attract attention. He does not smell of anything save the cold.

Jaqen is drawing a small map upon the ground in the snow.
“Here, and here,” he says, circling two spots. Then he points. She looks up, follows his finger; gets her bearings. A valley-like gorge, leading out of the plain, and into a frozen riverbed. “The whole approach is mined—there’s two other options, but since the herd’s come this way, the gorge is the best place to trim it down to a manageable size.”

“Karhold is overrun,” she says. “Not just wildling armor a lot of the armed ones are wearing.”

Jaqen nods, grim.

*Karstarks thought they were so canny, inviting death to play politics on their behalf.*

Death sides with the Starks.

“Sigorn's going to have to scour that keep very carefully once we retake it—wights hide.”

“So what’s the plan with the mines?” she asks. *What kind of mines are we dealing with?*

He smirks. “Maester Samwell did something bad.”

“Pate is a terrible influence,” she says. And her mind races along the pathways.


Her eyes widen. “Wildfire?”

Jaqen tut-tuts her. “*Healing potions*, Arya, healing potions. Smuggled across the crownlands on grounds of compassion.”

*To relieve the undead of their terrible state of existence?*

Jaqen grins. “Cersei Lannister’s Hand is very helpful—he’s the one that ‘persuaded’ cooperation out of the alchemists for us.”

She blinks at Him.

“Qyburn’s good friends with our Maester now,” says Jaqen. “All part of the same magic-and-forbidden-knowledge faction, after all.”

“That’s *insane*.”

Jaqen shrugs. “Maesters have been playing politics like this for thousands of years. Why would they stop now? The factions inside the Citadel have far more meaning than what lords the Maesters serve outside. Kings are pawns—dangerous pawns, but pawns nonetheless.”

*Jon doesn’t know.*

“Jon knows we are in contact with some Maesters that use...questionable methods in their quest for knowledge.”

*Which, to Jon, means mucking around with dead bodies and Citadel-forbidden potions, not kidnapping and “experimenting” upon living folk like Qyburn does.*

She decides upon a shrug. Him of the Many Faces--and Arya Stark is a part of Him--no matter what attachments the man may form, the god doesn’t get too worked up over people dying. Nor does He meddle in a torturer's work, not before it’s time.
Valar morghulis.

She studies Jaqen. “Vinegar Vallyn,” she says. “His name was bought. We didn’t just give him the gift because he was suspicious of Pate.”

Jaqen has a twinkle in his eye. “We are professionals, Arya,” He says, “do try to remember that.”

She ducks her head. “Yes guildmaster. Honest wages for an honest day’s work.”

Healing potions.

“We three are going to bait the wights,” she says slowly. “Reckless, like you said—running through a minefield, avoiding the mines, a river of undead on our heels.”

Lorathi can pull it off. Some Braavosi, too.

“Need to look at the gorge,” she says. Map out where all the mines are, how the ground lies. “Practice runs?”

He considers it. “At least two,” He murmurs, eyes fixed upon the horizon.

“Good thing the Free Folk are gone,” she says. “They’d shit their pants.”

“Brave as bears, the Free Folk,” says Jaqen. “When there’s an enemy in front they can hack apart. They’ll charge, armed with nothing but rage and teeth, if the battle’s hot enough. But give them too much time to think —”

A whisper of movement.

Varro has lowered himself to a prone position; slow, hand-over-hand, he slithers backwards till he is entirely behind the rise, hidden from the undead.

There is no pattern to the actions of wights that Bran or Jaqen or any of the other Riders have ever been able to pick out. Wights are uncanny. They’ll lie in wait, it almost seems like some of them think. Others are mindless. They move in groups; they move alone.

Is it intelligence? Animal-instinct?

The man who sees order in chaos, the man who teases apart the reason behind the movements of the tides and the stars…he could not be given time, to “think on it” beforehand, to bias observation with presupposition.

But the shape of the North’s war depends upon Varro Massag’s observation of pattern.

Jaqen raises an eyebrow. “So, mathematician—what are we dealing with?”

Varro’s eyes are bloodshot, his irises mere pinpoints of black. “Corpses,” he says, “with a warg riding in them.”

BRONN

The room is an oak-panelled, somber affair. A part of the Hand’s Tower, the furnishings were commissioned by Tywin Lannister himself.

“Is it wrong,” says Qyburn, in his half-oil, half-hiss of a voice, “that I feel loyalty?” He touches his breast. “Because I do, my Lords. I do. I will not abandon her.”
“She abandons us,” says a man, a sharp-bearded Lord of the Crownlands. “We supported her, we cleaned up her mess after the Sept. And now we are barred from her very presence?”

Supported her? You mean you cowered before her.

“She reminds me of my mother,” says another.

If your mother was a shark that eats its young, sure.

The speaker is a young man, with some of the Lannister look about him. Very young—his foster-sister, a bastard-girl by the name of Joy Hill, sits beside him.

Sharks are good to have around, if you don’t attract their attention too closely.

But this shark has beached out of the water, a pirate’s harpoon in her. She swells with his child and loses herself in crooning lullabies to the wind.

Qyburn is shaking his head. “We must bide our time. Daenerys Targaryen is coming. She will take care of Euron Greyjoy for us.”

Bronn raises an eyebrow. “And then what?”

“And then I present an alliance,” says Qyburn.

Everyone in the room sits up.

“Cersei will never stand for it!” says the Lord with the sharp beard.

“The Queen will find her way to seeing what is in her best interest,” says Qyburn. He looks amused. “An army of undead, frozen corpses—they are in nobody’s interest.”

“It’s real?” asks Bronn, skeptical. He has not believed in tall tales since he was seven, no reason to start now.

“Oh, very real,” says Qyburn. “I’ve been sent a… gift… by a friend.” He gestures to a large, carved wooden box upon the table. It is locked, a heavy iron padlock on the latch.

Qyburn unlocks the padlock, throws back the lid. People lean forward. And then, simultaneous, panic breaks out.

A head sits upon padded velvet. Its eyes are blue, rimmed with frost. It’s mouth gapes; its palate is a vivid crimson-red, surrounded by gums and teeth and tongue black with frost-rot.

It is watching them.

ARYA

They make camp a half-day’s glide away from the plain.

Varro says each wight has specialized tasks. It may depend on the state of the corpse—the ones that are too decayed to move well, they act in concert to overwhelm slow-moving targets. The ones that are fresh, they reave and attack, aggressive, like soldier-ants.

The undead are not a herd. They are an army.

They have a purpose.
One mind, Varro has extrapolated.

*The Night’s King is a warg. He wargs the corpses awake.*

Individually, or in small groups of two or three, wights are dangerous.

As a horde, they are *terrifying*.

The Night’s King’s attention is limited to some extent, Varro says, fragmented amongst the corpses he animates—no single wight shows the intelligence of a living man. But that is no reassurance, not when distant parts of the swarm will *know*, instantly, what happens to wights that are leagues away.

An advantage no living army can ever hope to match.

“…can only use the mine-trick once,” Jaqen is saying. “Then he’ll learn about the Wildfire. Not worth it, just to thin this swarm down *now*, when we cannot press the advantage.”

The other implications of an enemy-warg of such power—

“The Night’s King can cross the Wall,” she says. “Jon couldn’t, even with his bond to Ghost. Night’s King is a greenseer, like Bran.”

“Or something else,” says Jaqen.

Jaqen has been very thoughtful the entire glide here.

“Another god?” she asks. “An Other god?”

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “Guess we’ll find out in a moon or so—dragons will be here by then.”

**MISSANDEI**

She runs lightly across the planks laid between ships. The armada has become a floating city, slow and lumbering, ships connected to ships.

Life adapts.

A Dothraki wedding took place a day ago.

She jumps, lands hard on her feet. Runs again.

“Mhysa!” she shouts. “Mhysa!”

Daenerys has come onto the deck by the time Missandei reaches it. The Queen’s breath heaves.

“I found them!” she says. “Drogon—he burns Dothraki mares. Milk-giving mares.”

Daenerys’s jaw is clenched. “I need to take them hunting,” she says.

*You need to train them.*

Like unruly children, Daenerys’s dragons are running amok. Viserion has taken a liking to fish—he dives, he pulls up full-grown *sharks* in his talons and deposits them on deck from up in the air. He finds it good sport when the people on deck scatter.

Rhaegal is more somber. So far he abides the roasted meats Daenerys feeds him. But for how
long?

The Queen gathers her divided skirts in one hand. “Show me where Drogon was last—he needs something to do. I’m going to fly with him.”

“It is a risk, my Queen,” she says, suddenly wary. “We can take the loss of horses. We cannot take the loss of you.”

*You disappeared for moons and moons the last time you flew off on him.*

“Have no fear,” says the Queen. “I will return within a few watches.”

**ARYA**

The Long Lake and the First Garrison is a few leagues away; the ground is gentle rolling hills, deceptively plain from a distance. The deception is revealed as they glide between the features—there are pits under the snow, and drifts hide sharp-branched trees lying to a side, encrusted with ice.

Another cold-snap is upon them—a sudden freeze that descends from the high passes.

“I take back what I said,” says Varro into the wind. “Fucking *love* the cold.” He looks to her around Jaqen. “Thank you, for the immunity.”

If they were anyone else, every inch of skin would have to be covered, faces and eyes shielded, or they’d have gone black with frostbite.

The Wind smirks. “I am *in* you.”

Varro blinks at her. “I thought it was the keepsake.”


Varro looks a tiny bit sheepish. “Still not giving it back,” he mutters.

“Backwards,” says Jaqen to her. “Depravity is supposed to be *my* domain. He should have gotten the coin.”

“You want to trade?” she asks, arch.

“No ,” says Jaqen. He turns His head slightly; His eyes rake over her form. Heat rises beneath her skin. “But some measure of redress will be required.”

She flushes; her gaze drops away. Through the tendrils of awareness each has wrapped around the other, she senses Varro’s slight surprise.

*Amused* surprise.

*Pay you back for that, make Jaqen make you blush.*

Varro grins: *try.*

She decides she doesn’t need a distraction of that nature at the moment; she *hates* losing. And so she focuses upon the body.

It labours. Though the gentle draw and release of breath is smooth, her heartbeat is irregular.
sometimes. When her control falters, Jaqen, sometimes Varro, they intervene.

They all breathe smoothly; a seeming impossibility in this cold.

Varro’s left leg does not draw as far as the right; old injuries, along with the new, they make their presence known as he pushes one foot after the other upon the skis.

Jaqen bleeds. Ginger and cloves; the scent sublimates out of the ends of the broken bonds He holds on to. Invisible to all but their senses, attuned to His blood.

——

Yocas and Fiorn wait for them at the ruins of a small lookout tower. They slap Jaqen on the back—apparently they had no doubt he would return. “Jaqen’s woman” and the “man with southern witchy talents” get nods.

Varro goes with them to hunt rabbit. He meets some trouble. Small—he’s not even breathing hard.

Preparation is everything. He didn’t leave his sword behind.

“There’s dead people a ways away outside,” says Varro as the three return, sans rabbit, and Jaqen readies for sleep. “Well, dead people inside too, but the ones out there are more traditionally dead. I can tell because they’re not quite as pretty as the three of us.”

The god’s mouth twitches.

“How many?” she asks.

“There were four. Now there are eleven.” Varro scratches his head. Shrugs. “Apparently the body doesn’t need a head? Head itself is not much threat by itself, but the eyes follow you around, the mouth’s moving. So I’m counting the head as a separate entity. Also the severed limbs. They twitch. Thrust to the heart didn’t do anything.”

Jaqen yawns. “Need to go put Valyrian steel into them,” He says as He lies down upon the bedroll, pulls the blanket over Himself.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” says Varro. “They look like they’d bite.”

Jaqen’s eyes remain closed. “That habit of hers, chucking knives at your head—I see the allure.”

She smiles. “Want me to do it for you?”

“Mmm.”

She moves to sit beside Him, strokes His hair till His breathing slows, till He relaxes into slumber. Fiorn is giving her longing looks; Yocas snores.

———

The time for rest is coming to an end; she wakes to an interesting conversation.

“…self-sacrifice,” Varro is saying “I’d say a god only wakes in the one that is sacrificed. From what Bran’s saying, from the wights, Night’s King doesn’t sound like the self-sacrificing type.”

The material and the symbolic.
“Gates,” she says. “A material sacrifice opens a gate in the material body. A symbolic sacrifice opens a gate in the abstract force.”

Desire-- prayer is but one form of it--it creates the mechanism, the structure the god is poured into. Union.

A force becomes material. A man becomes a symbol.

“Conjecture of disposition aside,” says Jaqen, “there is nothing stopping him from being a god.” Varro snorts. “A lizard could be a god if it fulfilled the conditions.”

She replays the vision of Valyria she saw as Jaqen H’ghar.

“A material and a symbolic sacrifice when you drew the knife over your own throat,” she says to the ruins of the tower’s roof. “Death had touched you long ago, Jaqen; you just opened a gate into it. Your desire to grant mercy. The slaves’ desire to receive it. It created the structure the god poured Himself into; a god doesn’t need worship--all worship did was create pre-existing molds for your mind to fill.”

“I don’t remember the killing myself part,” says Jaqen.

She nods. “Mind goes wifty around death. I don’t remember dying either. But I extrapolated what you’d done from the blood-splatter on the ground. Cutting that priestess’s face off couldn’t account for it.”

Varro is nodding, very thoughtful. He hadn’t made the link. He saw Jaqen’s Valyria what, once?

Two hundred years ago.

She’s experienced those memories in herself over and over again.

“The Wind,” says Varro. “A material and symbolic sacrifice--your blood, your maidenhead, your innocence, all the warmth you had in you sacrificed onto a corpse.”

“Onto my lizard’s corpse,” she says with some satisfaction.

“Dangerously incestuous,” says Jaqen, “but it needs to be said—its lovers are now their lizard’s favorite theologians.”

“You’re casting aside the Blind God?” asks Varro.

Jaqen sighs. “Boash is shit in bed.”

“It’s the hair-shirts,” Varro supplies.

The Long Lake is a sliver of smooth ice, glimmering between the skeletal trees.

_Dark Sister_ rises. Cuts. Limbs are separated from torsos with less effort than it takes to split a cord of wood.

Harsh breaths that puff out in white mist in front of her.

A corpse falls to the ground.
The First Garrison’s outer perimeter has been breached.

There were no sentries to challenge them, just shouts and the sound of steel through the trees. The three of them had broken into a run, the Free-Folk men at their heels, and they’d found a group of two-score or so soldiers holding back a surging wall of undead.

Arya’s first kill was a woman—a Northern woman, by her dress—her mouth bloodied; she had just finished ripping out a soldier’s throat.

Arya has determined there is an order in which you should deal with a wight.

*Weapons first, then go for the wits. Then you win.*

Slice through the arms—then it can’t swing, it can’t grab. Cut off the legs. Then it can’t kick. Or run. And when the wight is deprived of the last of its weapons, its legs, it always drops to chest-height before falling over. *That* is the moment you cut off its head.

A part of her feels split in three. Jaqen, to the left of her, His greatsword slices through bone and sinew and the strength in Him feels like the strength in the pillars of the House, the vast cavernous space that drinks in all but the deepest of notes. Varro, to His left, the sharp, precise hum of him, it plays, a descant to her rhythmic, repetitive strikes.

*The arms. The legs. The head.*

Over and over again.

*The arms. The leg. Where is the head?*

She looks around. There are no more heads she can take.

Her arms are screaming in protest; the last of the undead surge lies twitching upon the ground. Jaqen is far away now. Varro is crouched; he is looking into the blue eyes of one of the decapitated wights.

It is watching him.

She allows her stance to sag, just a little.

The world feels like it is a thing spun into being from the mist that is creeping in from the Long Lake. *Battle-shock,* she tells herself. But she cannot focus on anything except the sudden silence around her. The pristine white snow is churned into a sty of blood and guts. Tattered cloth, and fur, and dismembered limbs. Grim men walking around, harvesting weapons from the slain.

There are corpses that still have their heads. Those the soldiers are lifting up from the ground, carrying off somewhere.

She follows them.

Jaqen emerges from the trees; Varro rises. They come together. They flank her.

Slowly, slowly, the sounds of the world return.

“What’re you then?” asks one of the soldiers.

Jaqen draws back his hood further. “Your eyesight is failing you, Sendar.”
The soldier chokes. Comes to attention. “Commander Jaqen, Sir. Um.” He deflates. “You’ll be wanting to go to the garrison, Sir? Thank you. Um. For the help. But we had it under control, Sir. It happens every few days.”

“Burn the fallen,” Jaqen commands.

A few of the soldiers exchange glances. She interprets it as “fuel is scarce”. They want to save it for the living.

“Be cold for a few nights,” says Jaqen. “Better than your bunk-mate coming back as a wight.”

She cleans Dark Sister with a rag. Kisses the blade before sheathing it.

“You took thirteen of them,” says Yocas to her, gruff.

*Fourteen. You pushing it over doesn’t make it your kill.*

“Can’t keep calling you ‘Jaqen’s Woman’ all through the next fight,” he says. “What’s your name, gel?”

“Arya Stark,” she replies.

“Stark, like the White Wolf?” he asks.

“Sister,” she says.

Yocas peers at her. “Your hair is supposed to be red.”

“The other sister.”

“King’s got a lot of sisters?”

“Only the two.”

Yocas nods. “Two is good.”

Jaqen, Varro and Fiorn join them. Jaqen is very pointedly watching the soldiers stack the corpses, make a pyre from the woodpile beside the outpost-hut.

“Can’t trust southerners,” mutters Yocas. He glances at the three of them. “Most southerners.”

Jaqen smiles, wry. “First Legion is Jon’s command,” he explains to her and Varro. “But Jon can’t be out here when he has the entire war to coordinate from Winterfell. These men don’t know their commander. The rest of us rotate so the soldiers have some measure of cohesion—Sigorn was here last. But the men are on their own for large stretches of time.”

*Discipline problems*, Jon had said. *Logic problems, it looks like—shouldn’t have needed Jaqen to tell them how to stay alive.*

*I could be useful. I could command.*

She checks the thought. Analyzes her own movements during the skirmish.

*Found the next target. Killed it.*

Jaqen moved differently. She closes her eyes, maps his movements in her memory.
Jaqen found the next soldier that needed help, positioned himself, timed his strikes to subtly control the movement of the men.

Including her.

“I’d make a terrible commander,” she says slowly. In Braavosi.

“A one-woman army doesn’t bother with niceties like coordination,” Jaqen agrees. “Better than the Chaos-Brigade here though,” he says, tilting his head at Varro.

“Optimized,” Varro mutters. “Hacking one entirely to bits is not efficient when you can disable multiple wights with a similar number of strokes.”

“That was the reasoning?” Jaqen asks. “And here I thought you wanted to create a headless dance troupe, with you piping a jig in the midst of them.”

Varro pretends to look hurt.

“I could learn,” she offers.

Jaqen’s eyes are narrow as he considers her. Very carefully. “Would the Wind care for the lives of men she has no relation to?”

She lapses into silence.

She thinks about it for a very long time, even as thick black smoke rises from the pyres and she is assailed by the smell of burning meat.

She’s finished thinking by the time the five move out—along with an escort of some ten men from the outpost, all needing aid—towards the main garrison.

“Arya Stark is Eddard Stark’s daughter,” she says quietly, eyes on the ground. “She would care about the soldiers under her command. The Wind—the Wind could pretend. Really, really hard.”

“Practice run?” Jaqen asks.

She purses her lips. “At least two.”

**TYRION**

Daenerys has returned from her flight with Drogon with fire in her eyes.

Both dragons needed their airing, it seems.

She’s greeted by over-enthusiastic relief by those that serve her, though of course none of the four—him, or Varys, or the two ex-slaves, will show it too much.

There’s something off between Missandei and Grey Worm.

Some sort of lovers’ falling out.

They still work together, they still attend on Daenerys with all the conscientiousness they used to, but Grey Worm watches the young translator, wary. She, in turn, ignores him as if he doesn’t exist.

Pity.
He smiles a little at himself.

*Matchmaking, now, Hand? Is this what you will be doing in your dotage, like a meddling grandmother sitting beside the fire?*

He turns his attention to the map upon the table.

Daenerys is shaking her head. “I have you, Tyrion.”

He nods. “And others. Nevertheless.”

Strategy. Tactics. He is trying to teach her what he knows; she is a quick study. But it takes patience. And she balks sometimes, especially on a day like today where her heart is still amongst the clouds and her veins burn with dragonfury.

“You cannot afford to be lesser, Daenerys,” says Varys in his careful, cultivated voice. “History is full of women that surrendered power, piece by piece, without meaning to—men respect war, and those that make it well.”

She sighs. Nods.

“You already have the thing most commanders can never hope to achieve,” says Tyrion. “You are loved …”

**ARYA**

There is an indifference to her name as they are announced to the camp. Hostility towards the two Free-Folk. There is respect for Jaqen, though a lot of it is wary respect. Varro slides off to a side, playing his game of “no one, don’t mind me at all”. Collecting information.

The men are a mish-mash of hard-eyed fighters, and drunks, and green boys. Chosen for skill. No Free Folk—those go to Sigorn or Tormund’s legions.

She watches the soldiers from the outpost disperse, tag their replacements.

Half-hearted motions.

Training builds the identity of men through the filter of their perception as someone’s army. Stark men, Lannister men. The wars and the winter, they’ve eroded a lot of that sense of unity. And it is that unity, that sense of purpose, that imparts the discipline, the will, that differentiates an army from a rabble of well-armed thugs.

She looks down at the paper she’s been studying for her “practice run” as Varro circles back to her and Jaqen.

“This speech is no use,” she says. “Sam’s written it with Sansa in mind.”

“They don’t know you,” says Jaqen. “They know Sansa. At least, they know of her.”

“Heard a couple of mutters,” says Varro, walking up to them. “Your reputation has made it out here. The Lightskirt Princess. But even if you had been Sansa, ‘Stark’ is not a currency worth using out here.”

*Jon leads from the front--a thousand armed fighters at his back.*

“And not a tenth of them loyal to his name,” says Varro.
Jaqen’s jaw is tight. “And Arya Stark is his proxy.”

“They respect you, Jaqen,” says Varro. “Baseborn. Fighter. One of them, risen high. But a Stark will never be one of them. The reality of Jon’s history aside, a Stark is not risen high, a Stark is born high.”

Her eyes are hard, focused on the campfires.

“Then I must fall,” she says.

The soldiers take the night-meal in shifts. She’s waited for the largest one—she sits at the front of the longhouse, sipping tea. Jaqen has retreated to the back. He lounges against the wall, nonchalant, Varro on the bench next to him.

The soldiers enter. Their eyes focus on her. Some give her sidelong glances. Inside, without the furs, dressed in leather and fleece, she is very clearly a woman but dressed like a baseborn fighter.

“Fucking princess playing soldier?”

“She’s good with the blade, better than you pinkeye. Took down two before my eyes.”

“She fights like Commander Jaqen, no shield, no buckler.”

“Jaqen’s woman.”

“What, really?”

She gives it time to spread.

“I know what highborn come to do out here. She’s going to give a speech. One of the Mormont riders came by from the Third Legion, didn’t he? Honor and glorious death. Loyalty to the Starks.”

“Surprise his tongue didn’t shrivel up and die in his mouth. King’s an oathbreaker.”

“Good fighter.”

That speaker she makes a special note of—a man that has fought with Jon, given his tone. He has a forked beard. He dresses carefully. One of the few “good ones” left?

The Wind things any that are alive are good enough. Don’t need loyalty to lift a blade.

“Good fighter maybe, but still an oathbreaker. What honor are we supposed to die for?”

“I’d die for a night between her legs.”

“Careful, Bjorn, she’s Commander Jaqen’s woman.”

“Princess slumming it with a merc?”

“That’s the word.”

“But he rides at the King’s right hand. King knows it?”

“Every other man near Winterfell knows it.”
“So much for Stark honor.”

“Oathbreaker and whore, and I’ll take either of them at my back with the wights out there. You can keep your stuffed-shirt knights and virgins.”

“Pah. Not about the fighting. It galls a man, hearing speeches about honor and loyalty, and thems that set above us, like her, not any better than the worst of us, is all I’m saying. What’s to speech about? Just fight and be done with it.”

“Lies, when the truth’s plain in sight.”

*It’s time.*

She gets up off the bench, hops up onto the table. Sits on it. Not much more than a head above them, but high enough so all can see her.

Most of the eyes trained on her are dead.

But she is not the Wind here, she is Arya Stark.

And Arya Stark learned the means for resurrecting dead men through a spell.

She doesn’t wait for the hubbub to die down, just raises her voice to be heard over it. “Jaqen didn’t bring me out here to give a speech, to inspire you to fight harder.” She grins. “That’s an excuse to get me out of the eyes of the highborn.” She raises her hand, holds it out in front of her.

The shakes are worse than normal; she’s relaxed her control.

“I’ve been in the drink.”

Silence.

“Life’s shit,” she says. “Sun doesn’t fucking shine, my family’s dead or raped or crippled, and the one brother that always did the right thing, gave me my first sword, he’s an oathbreaker.” She shrugs. “A person takes to drink. When he stops, he gets the shakes. Could have been in front of a fire right now, but it’s that fucking Stark pride, begged Jaqen to let me come out with him, so as I could get the vomiting and the weeping and the begging for just one more cup of wine over with without anyone seeing.”

She’s thrown them entirely off guard.

“So,” she says, “life’s shit, and I’m not here to tell you to fight for anyone. But it’s a long way to come, forty leagues over the snow and crawling through wights and then not say anything. So I’ll talk some, you listen. Or not, as it pleases you.”

She bites into the ration bar she’s been issued as “dinner”, then gives it a disgusted look.

“These are just as shit as I remember,” she says. Snorts. “The first time I ever ate one of these—” she shifts herself, draws a leg up under her, as if she’s settling in to tell a story. Men are turning around, away from their own meals—the rations are tasteless and dry. Entertainment will make them a little easier to swallow.

“So they’d cut off my father’s head in the great square in King’s Landing, I was watching, out in the crowd, this wandering crow—Yoren. Northman, a good one. He said he’d take me all the way to the Wall, to my brother, and Jon’d look after me. After that Yoren cut off my hair--I had long
hair, upto here —”she gestures, palm down, to indicate a spot halfway down her upper-arm. “He cut it off with a dagger and put me in boy’s clothes.”

There’s interest. Real interest. This has all the elements of a good story—a beheading, a princess, a girl playing a boy.

And the moment of transition, in their minds, from what a princess is supposed to be—long hair, someone that needs looking after—to the creature sitting in front of them with a tattered reputation and a ration bar in her hand.

“So we were in this company—mostly criminals, exiled to the Wall, about two-score men, some of them in cages. Some boys looking for glory. Or maybe just the next meal—but this shit was the next meal.” She holds up the half-chewed bar. “This shit was every meal.”

Laughter, rueful, here and there--the rations are a ubiquitous, much-lamented part of a soldier’s life. A common experience.

“And I didn’t always get my share—had to go off into the woods, to hide that I had to piss sitting down. You know what happens to girls in company like that. And the others, they’d fall upon the rations and there wasn’t always enough to go around for the latecomer.”

Protective instincts from some of the older ones, ones that have children, maybe, or ones that still remember what a Stark is supposed to be.

She grins. “But I made a good boy. One of the real boys tried to take my sword from me, the sword Jon gave me. Good castle-forged steel, my blade. I beat the shit out of him.” She shakes her head. “So of course Yoren had to tan my backside. I couldn’t sit down for a sevenday.”

A couple of winces, rueful grins from the younger ones, from others that remember similar hidings.

“Then a man died, right next to me, coughed his lungs out half the night, and then he just...stopped. I got some sleep then, good sleep, hard to come by on the march. Paid for it, though, because guess which idiot volunteered for grave-digging duty the next day?” She shakes her head. “Fucking Stark pride. Gots to do right by the men.” Her tone is disgusted. “Got mocked a lot—eleven year old girl with spindly arms trying to drag a corpse into a hole in the ground. Hole had to be deep to keep the wolves out.”


Somewhere, deep down, they all know what it means to have a Stark beside you—which is sometimes just a grave, but a Stark will make sure it’s deep so you don’t come back.

She lowers her voice a little, as if speaking mostly for herself.

“And all the while, there was an image in my head, the thing I was going towards—the North. The North. Where men weren’t the type to rape a girl-child just because they could.” She looks up. “Proved that wrong, didn’t we? Boltons were Northmen.”

The turn to the darker still—it grips some of them.

“I had to leave King’s Landing in the first place because Lannisters have a habit of murdering children. The North, I said to Yoren, where men fight, but they fight other men, they kill, but it’s from the front, they die but it’s with a blade in their hands.” She snorts. “Proved that wrong, didn’t we? Umbers were Northmen. And they made sure Rickon Stark died running, like a scared little child, pissed his pants when the arrow took him in the back.” She looks down. “Suppose it wasn’t
his fault. He was ten.”

Is there any righteousness left in any of you?

She shrugs. “But I was going to the Wall, the last bulwark, to the men in black that defended all of the seven kingdoms, all of Westeros from the horrors that lie beyond. Doesn’t matter if the men of the south get fat in their pretty palaces and forget their duties, the North holds. The North remembers!” A dark chuckle. “Proved that wrong too, didn’t we? Karstarks were Northmen. Eight thousand years of holding back the dead—no Wildlings the Wall was built for, was it? Eight thousand years, and Northmen let the horrors loose.”

Some of you were Karstark men.

Most northerners know Arya Stark was “away”. They don’t know where, or what she was doing until she came back.

“When the Lannisters slaughtered Yoren and the rest, and that one boy, looking for glory, got stuck in the belly with a spear but I escaped,” she says to the room, “I escaped to Braavos. And all I had on me was one single coin, and Jon’s sword. I had a choice there—I could earn a living in a brothel, or I could learn the blade.” She grins. “I learned the blade. Grew up. Joined Jaqen’s company.” She tilts her chin towards Him.

Comprehension. Not universal, but enough that it will settle in the telling and the re-telling.

Jaqen’s woman.

Not a bedwarmer, or at least, not just a bedwarmer.

“The pay was good,” she says. “Couldn’t get better. Had a commander that didn’t waste his men, didn’t steal their glory, rewarded kills.”

Jaqen’s woman like Howland Reed was Eddard Stark’s man. Like Greatjon Umber was Robb Stark’s man.

“I was too old by then to pass as a boy, but there were other women in the company. Fierce fighters.”

Jaqen’s woman like Lyanna Mormont is Jon Stark’s woman.

She raises her eyes to the back of the room. “So what did I drag you out here for?” she asks Jaqen.

There’s a couple of over-the-shoulder looks towards Jaqen.

Jaqen is impassive.

“North’s dead, isn’t it? Why am I here?”

There is unease in the room. Her words are an echo of the insidious whispers in each of their minds.

What am I doing out here?

The man with the forked beard, he can’t help but respond. “You are a Stark. You came back because you are a Stark.”

“The Stark pride?” she asks. “Some of that, I suppose.” She looks down to her hands, clasped
tightly together against the tremor.

“Vengeance, for Rickon Stark,” says one of the older men in the back.

“Some of that,” she agrees. “But what good will spitting Umbers do for baby Rickon?” She raises her head.

Every man is watching her.

Curiosity has taken a hold of them. Despair has a hold on them. And hope, on some faces, that the answer they did not know they wanted is the answer that will save them.

The finding of these men is done.

Now for the binding.

“I came back for Jon the Oathbreaker,” she says. “And not as princess Arya, to be married off to some lord somewhere, but because I know how to use a blade.” She looks around. “Same reason as all of you are here.”

She lets that sink in as she bites into another portion of the ration-bar, chews.

Silence.

“He was Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, he warned Stannis Baratheon of the dead, warned Roose fucking Bolton, but they were too busy fighting for crowns to listen.” She raises her voice to cut through all whispers, sharp, like the edge on Dark Sister. “And so he broke oath. Because there was shit he could do about the undead from Castle Black.”

 Doesn’t matter how much the obvious is staring you in the face, and how much of that “obvious” is a wight, monikers like “The Oathbreaker King” are hard to counter.

Didn’t break the spirit of the oath, he left Castle Black to take the fight to where it was needed.

“I wouldn’t have come back for Jon Snow of the Night’s Watch,” she says, shrugs. “A woman that’s been a merc, she knows who to follow, and that’s the man that as can keep you alive—a Night’s Watchman can’t keep a fighter in armor and supplies, replace broken blades, not for more than a hundred men, let alone six thousand.”

Couldn’t raise armies without breaking his oath!

She grins. “But Jon Stark, the King in the North, now that was a man I could bend knee to.”

Nods, from around the room. Actual agreement.

She grins.

“Ah, I’ll bitch and complain about the cold and I’ll dream of a hearth, and a warm bowl of stew—and wine. A lot of wine.” A few scattered chuckles. “I’ll sleep on a bedroll in the snow and and I’ll wish, bitterly, that I was under a real roof, and my man wasn’t out there somewhere waiting to get killed. But the next day I’ll rise, and eat the fucking dried oats and wash them down with snowmelt and the shakes will be less than the day before and I will go out to the front line and I will fight.”

I am you.

“I fought earlier today,” she says, “realized sometimes it’s hard to tell who’s dead and who’s alive
—a lot of them are dressed like us, can’t always see the eyes with snow blowing everywhere.” She snorts. “Figured it out though.”

She smiles a little crooked smile.

“Only the living lift a blade for Jon Stark.”

*Every time you go out to fight, you do it for Jon Stark.*

“Umber or Bolton or Karstark,” she says, “those are just names. They mean *nothing*. Highborn, smallfolk or wildlings—means *nothing*. What means something is the difference between the living, and the dead.”

Indisputable fact. More nods, even from the hard-bitten men.

“*We* are the living.”

*And the living lift a blade for Jon Stark.*

“The North that we have now, this hard wasteland of hard men, this North dies only when every last one of us is a frost-eyed walking corpse.”

Soldiers are thumbing the hilts of their blades, even the hard-eyed men’s eyes are brighter than the drink can account for.

She softens her gaze; lets it brim.

“The North of my childhood,” she says, “when the sun still shone and there were meadows filled with flowers, that North is a memory. What it means to be a Stark, what it means to have honor—*I* don’t remember it.”

She looks around, meets their eyes. And in *that* moment, they are bound to one another, Arya Stark and the soldiers of Jon Stark’s army—sorrow, sorrow, nothing but sorrow between them for the parts of their souls they have lost.

“But the King in the North,” she says softly, “he remembers. *Jon Stark* is the North I was coming towards all those years ago.”

*The North remembers.*

She lets her eyes blaze a little, just a little, lifts some of the deadness from her gaze. “And as long as the King in the North is alive, and he can lift a blade, the North is not dead.”

The fork-bearded man raises his tankard. “The King in the North!”

A few others follow.

Here and there, men loft their tankards at *her* --the ones that fought the surge today.

“As long as any *one* of you is alive,” she says raising her voice to cut through the tumult, “and he can lift a blade, the North. Is. Not. *Dead*!”

Thumping, on the tables; men make noise, not *cheers*, not from these men, but a concerted growl.

“Because the living!” she calls, “lift blades for Jon Stark!”
“Jon Stark!” Jaqen’s voice.

It starts a wave, from the rear of the room. “Jon Stark!”

“Jon Stark!”

“The King in the North!”

She waits for silence. It comes, eventually.

“The Lords of the North that raped and murdered children,” she says, her voice lowering to a hiss, “the lords that were betrayed and lords that betrayed others— they are all dead.” She tilts her head to a side. “The men that are left are the bastards, and the baseborn, and women that don’t know their place.” A slow, dark smile blooms upon her face. “The North is ours now,” she says. “And we will burn the dead and bury their bones deep beneath the earth, that they never rise again.”

The greenhorns make as if to rise from the table, should she give the word. Swords, half-unsheathed, fists raised in the air—the noise this time gives no sign of letting up.

An error. She grits her teeth.

I’ve misjudged the timing again.

“But waiting’s hard!” she shouts. A few startled glances, some of the men subside.

There’s more she has to say.

It spreads. And what she gets is not silence, but it’s enough for her words to be heard. “Waiting’s hard! Harder sometimes than the fighting, because at least with the fighting you’re either done with it or dead by the end of the day.”

Snorts, here and there. A slight deflating of the over-eager ones.

“North only lives,” she says with a grin, “if it remembers there’s a few thousand more men coming in a moon or so. With hundreds of barrels of pitch, and saltpetre, and oil—there’s more than one way to set a dead man on fire.”

Looks are exchanged, some chuckles.

It will have to be done again, and again, and again. The fire in the blood won’t last, outside the warm longhouse and the full belly. It needs to be a memory, a warm ember to hold on to when the wind rises. A memory, to keep them to their formations, to make sure Jon Stark lives, no matter what the cost.

Enough for now.

“And in the meantime,” she says, “there’s good sleep to be had, warm, at least for tonight.”

She hops off the table, signaling the end of the speech—that-wasn’t-a-speech. She looks, longingly, at the mug of ale set out for her.

Trapped myself with that one, didn’t I?

She sighs regretfully; she can feel the eyes on her. Then she gives the room an absent sort of half-wave, half-salute, and heads on out to the barracks.
VARRO

Him and Jaqen make their way back to the barracks across the flat-packed now.

“So,” he says, “We’re almost of a size. I could borrow one of your Direwolf hauberks.”

“Itching to join the ranks of the living, are you?” Jaqen asks, with a razor-edged smile.

“My teacher did suggest it,” Varro reminds Him.

And there—a slight narrowing of Jaqen’s eyes.

Possessive god.

Varro subsides, satisfied.

“A lot of Izembaro’s influence there,” says Jaqen. “It will need smoothing--she forgot she was supposed to boost morale, there near the end, not inspire a charge.” The god grins. “But sweet death, she can resurrect.”

Varro snorts. “Your reputation will shift,” he observes. “You’ll lose some of that ‘one of us’ you’ve cultivated--many will have this image in their heads now, of you surrounded by your harem of dangerous, sword-wielding women.”

“Means I can sleep in her bed,” says Jaqen, “now and during the campaign, with no loss of face for either of us, not with the infantry at least.” He smirks at Varro. “Had you worn a sister, I could have taken you both to bed, swords and all.”

Varro frowns. “A bit of advance warning would be nice next time around.” He glances sidelong at Jaqen. “You’re enjoying this far too much.”

“What, the brush with machismo?” The god gives Varro a strange look. “It was a jest, love.”

“No, the theatrics,” says Varro, “the size of the audience you’re playing to.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow: what’s irritating you?

Varro sighs. “Slept across the hall from the two of you for a moon.”

Not mine then.

Jaqen looks straight ahead as they walk. “Has all the blood gone entirely to your cock?” the god asks. “Or is it love that’s making you stupid? Heard it takes some that way.”

Varro blinks. Tries not to flush with embarrassment. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a small smile flit across Jaqen’s lips.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“Just...curiosity,” Jaqen replies.

Jaqen’s awareness has shifted; it diffuses in very familiar way; it laps at Varro’s skin.

Most curious.

“A burden shared…” suggests Varro.
“Faceless memories,” says Jaqen, “I think it does impose a certain voyeuristic tinge to one’s leaning.”

Varro considers this. “You said you’d push her into my bed yourself if it ‘magically cures’ me of all that ails me,” he says thoughtfully. “Much still needs curing. Perhaps you and I can be of assistance to one another—what would you like to see?”

Jaqen’s gaze is distant. “I know so many of the expressions of her when we make love,” He says. “But one has eluded me so far--I want to watch her face with your mouth between her legs.”

Varro exhales.

*Jaqen has the best ideas.*

“Much is accommodated, for curiosity’s sake,” he says. “What else?”

“Mmm. The other is generosity, not curiosity,” says Jaqen. “She needs to wear Jaqen H’ghar with you.”

“Incredible, I believe, was the comment,” he murmurs.

“There is theory and skill and passion and intent,” says Jaqen, “and then there is you .”

Varro smirks. “Seems the one-song bard has found his niche audience.”

She’s waiting outside the door, chewing on a hunk of bread.

“What are you two plotting?” she asks.

“Discussing,” Jaqen corrects.

Varro grins. “Discussing the depraved things Jaqen wants me to do to you.”

“That deflection doesn’t work with me anymore,” she says. “If you say it’s about sex, it’s not about sex.”

Varro accepts his portion of the bread without comment.

Jaqen and Arya disappear into the commander’s quarters.

Varro goes to “his” room, the sergeant’s sliver of a space two doors down. He locks the door from the inside, then climbs out the window into the snow. He circles around the building, enters from the direction of the privy, wearing Arya’s face as he does. A man stumbles past, drunk, gives her a lopsided bow. She nods her head at him, then opens the door to the commander’s quarters and slips inside.

The window is shuttered, the door is locked--he lets Arya’s face slip back into the darkness. She’s half-sitting on the bed, her limbs illuminated by soft candlelight. Jaqen’s got his arm over her, his hand on her chest.

Varro walks up to the bed, nudges her--the both of them shift aside. And then he climbs in under the blankets next to them.

“Our watch,” says Jaqen.

She shakes her head. “I always take first watch--I want to do my fair share.”
“Like I did?” asks Varro quietly.

When you stood guard over my dreams for moons?

She looks at him, sees something in his face, because she slides down to a prone position, and her eyes close, albeit reluctantly.

Varro lays his hand on her chest, next to Jaqen’s. Her heart flaps, like the wings of a moth trapped against a glass lantern. Together, they match their rhythms to hers; bit by bit they take her down off the edge.

Finally, finally she relaxes.

He considers the lines of her face, the aquiline profile of Jaqen’s.

Gods, amongst men.

“God-touched,” he says. “Could either of you have met this Night’s King, somehow?”

Arya shakes her head--she doesn’t know.

The god considers Varro in turn. Speculative. “I was drawn to Arya like a moth to flame from the first. You had never laid eyes on me before, but you tracked me down, city after city, each time I gave a gift.”

A small pang of sadness-- there had been something in me I destroyed, somehow, along with my bond to Him.

“Well,” Varro says as he wears a smirk, “do let us know if your cock starts tugging you north of the Wall.”

Jaqen gives him a look . “There was naught of the ‘lover’ in it when I met you.” He nuzzles Arya’s neck. “Nor you,” He murmurs, “Harrenhal bath fantasies notwithstanding--those came after we were wed.”

Harrenhal bath fantasies? Bad, bad Many-Faced God.

“Arya,” says Jaqen, “Saint Varro is judging us again.”

She giggles, and stretches, arches her back like a cat before falling back to the bed.

The sound of your laughter, sweet Arya, I had best be no one at all or the sleep you need will be much curtailed.

Jaqen seems to be having a similar thought. The god’s gaze upon her face grows somewhat distant; expression seeps from His face.

I am no one.

It comes, as easily as he draws breath. The churn of riotous thought, the seething of it, subsides.

Relief .

“The Wind says she touched a lot of people,” Arya murmurs. “Winter was coming.”

No one does not react; the god holds Himself very still.
She does not speak further.

“Wind touched a lot of people, my heart?” asks Jaqen; a quiet murmur. The Wind is temperamental, prone to withholding that which is wanted most desperately. So Jaqen makes idle conversation, is all, no need to not share.

She nods, eyes still closed. “All the Stark children. Cruelty after cruelty branded onto them.” She sighs. “There was a girl-child, much like me. But she got burned at the stake in the name of some other god. Didn’t care for him or I’d have taken her. And mother—I tried to take her, Jaqen, it didn’t work. The false priest took my mother from me.” Jaqen’s eyes are wide, but He says nothing. “There was another man.” She reaches out towards Jaqen, her fingers raking down His chest, down further until she holds his manhood in her hand. It swells under her touch; Death rises, when the Wind calls. “But I awakened as your bride, Defiant, because I have always loved you.”

“What are you, my storm?” He asks. “The Wind is a name you chose for yourself.”

She smiles. “You know what I am.”

Winter is coming.

“Valar morghulis,” says Jaqen.

Her eyes open, white-in-white, and storms surge within them.

Varro lays his head upon her chest.


I need balance nothing with her. I need repent of nothing. I need control nothing.

“I am Varro Massag,” he murmurs into her skin.

And the thoughts awaken. Writhe.

She knows them.

“Mine,” she hisses, and there is a very feral quality to her voice.

He smiles as he rises over her, lust and rage and need coiling through him like serpents, flicking their tongues over her flesh, over Jaqen’s where their legs touch.

“The Wind should be more careful of what she claims,” he says. Because I’m going to fuck you now and Jaqen is going to watch me, and when I have reduced you to a quivering, continually orgasming mass of a god, I’m going to turn on Jaqen and put my cock in Him, and I’m going to make you watch every moment of it as I make Him come for me, again and again and again.

The god’s gaze is unreadable. “What touched him, my storm, this one we’ve claimed?” He asks.

Sweat breaks out on the inside of Varro’s wrists; the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

She sighs. “The thing he tries to keep at bay with all his trading and his balancing and his ’allowed’ and ’not allowed’.”

The renegade’s compulsions are terrified into silence.

“Asshai made a mistake, took me for you,” he whispers.
Nothing but death and breath in me now.

She turns a sneer upon Jaqen. “You indulge him. I’d have made him rip his heart out of his chest for me a long time ago.”

Jaqen leans over her to kiss the corner of her mouth. “I think you like his heart exactly where it is.”

“I will not be distracted,” she pouts. Her body gives lie to the words, it’s turning, molding itself to Varro even as she rubs her breasts against Jaqen’s chest. She gasps, as Jaqen finds a nipple, tweaks it.

“Not my doing, the face of Jaqen H’ghar on every idol in the House,” says the god thoughtfully. “Nor the Wind’s, I think, she had my face right where she wanted it.”

“Saint Varro the Sculptor?” she asks. She turns to him, and the half-born denial upon his lips dies a soundless death. “Asshai is in ruins,” she says. “No trade, no rule of law. Shadowbinders snarl, rip each other apart in the streets.” She grabs his hand, drags it to her stomach. “Touch me. You promised!”

He trembles; the pit flashes before his eyes. The chains. Blood, pooling on the stone floor.

“You opened one gate,” she says as she twists against his hand, spreads her legs, lewd, for him.

There is a scar on his wrist; it itches in the cold.

“I brought something out of Asshai,” he whispers.

“The force is material now,” she agrees. “It flows out of your fingertips; you salt the ground with it where you walk. The House of Black and White lies in ruins for you.”

She smiles, then.

He grinds his teeth. “How do I close the gate?”

She throws her head back; the Wind howls with laughter.

Jaqen’s eyes are black-in-black. “Too late,” He says. “Chaos cannot be controlled by anything other than its god.”

He subsides, half in relief.

Opening a material gate is worth nothing at all. I didn’t have anything symbolic to sacrifice in Asshai, not even my name.

She grows still. Sympathetic. She caresses his arm. “Don’t worry, my Varro, my love,” she says, and her voice drips kindness. “You didn’t want it—others do. They’ll awaken the god you couldn’t.”

PETYR BAELISH

He stands in an arched window, looking down. The work of the Iron Bank continues around him—hushed voices, quills scribbling on paper. Three stories below, the street seethes with fury. Shouts penetrate even the thick stone walls of the Bank’s main building.
It is unfortunate that most of Braavos is stone.

Stone does not burn for anything less than dragonfire, but a riot feels rather incomplete without arson. Still, what this riot lacks in fire it makes up in blood. Braavos against guilds, nobles against merchants.

Everyone against the Sealord. And his bride-to-be.

Petyr Baelish sneers.

Look at what I have wrought, o mighty, and despair.

Another man gets pushed into the canal. The ice-sheet over the dark water cracks under the impact; the man scrabbles for purchase, leaving dark trails—blood—upon the too-slick surface.

His head disappears underwater.

“Winter has come,” Petyr whispers, his inner eye travelling to the towers of Winterfell, to House Stark. A part of him sorrows—he loves Sansa. Perhaps even as much as he loved Catelyn. And even know he knows all he has to do is reach across the Narrow Sea; accept her terms.

But Sorrowful Men give discounts if you buy in bulk.


Four names, for the gold-price of one at the House of Black and White.

Let it be some sort of symbolic sacrifice, he thinks. Red Priests go on and on about meaningful sacrifice. The sacrifice of all hope, of all that I thought I could have loved.

A sudden flare—something has been set on fire a few streets away.

At last.

The crowd surges; people fall, only to be trampled. Each death, each maiming, it will be laid at the doorstep of Arya Stark, one way or another. He chafes against them, the bonds that wolf-bitch has bound around him, a gossamer net, of plots and suppositions. He does not know the nature of it, he does not know the how. But then, knowing the how is not necessary when you know who your enemy is.

I will make her name anathema; salt the ground wherever she may find root with lye and bitterness, until all she knows, all she is, is turned to ash and dust.

The screams suddenly increase in volume.

Now even the sober Iron Bank clerks are taking note—they are rushing to the window.

Petyr side-steps the tide of black-robed men and women. Chaos is a ladder. Ladders to the top multiply, proliferate, if you find the keys to amplifying them. In Westeros, the keys to chaos were the sins of the Great Houses.

He feels the approach of a somber, black-robed man.

“Lord Baelish,” says the man, respectfully, “the Keeper of the Key will see you now.”

Petyr nods, turns to follow the clerk.
VARRO

The storm rages; wind flings snow against the wooden walls of the barracks. Unheeding, uncloaked, he stands, his bare feet buried to the ankles in cold.

The gods rise behind him.

“What did you desire, Varro,” asks Him of the Many Faces, “when you opened your vein in Asshai?”

_The thing that would have shaped the mechanism of a god nobody worships._

“I wanted to give…” he clenches his teeth. _I wanted to give the gift: a lie._

“Death was not enough,” says the Wind, her voice a crystal-chime in his lungs. “They tried to chain your god.”

White. The world had turned white with rage.

“I wanted to destroy the patterns they’d woven into the fabric of you,” he whispers. “I wanted to fragment the thing that tried to enslave you—that thing they call a prophecy—into a thousand shards and drive the shards through each of R’hllor’s eyes, one by one.”

_I wanted to reave the spaces between his thoughts, scatter every syllable of his name through time, burn it, bury it, salt his grave with my blood that even the memory of the Lord of Light…_

He exhales.

“Thorough,” comments Him of the Many Faces.

Varro snorts. “In hindsight,” he says, “I wish I had something symbolic to offer.”

Euron

The mother of his unborn child writhes under him.

“Legions,” he murmurs into her ear as he moves in her. “You will birth legions for me.”

_The Mother._

The shade-of-the-evening has shown it to him. She escaped that trap, offered up her own son as a sacrifice so she could.

That is why he chose her. Her strength she will give to his sons.

“Euron,” she whispers. “I feel it. I will not wear the crown for much longer.”

“All curses,” he says, savage, “can be broken. Yours. Mine. The Curse of Valyria--and that was laid upon the dragonlords by a god--even that could not hold me.”

A lie.

He can hear the curse whispering in his mind, as it has since he escaped the smoking ruin of Valyria-that-was: _die, die._
The whisper mirrors the shouting beneath their window. The people gathered outside the Red Keep say they are starving. To his mind, men that are starving do not have the energy to riot.

These are merely hungry.

“A mortal witch’s curse will not hold you, my love,” he says. “Already we undo it.” He caresses the bulge of her midsection. “No shrouds.”

Jaime Lannister is still alive somewhere. He can feel it in his bones.

But there are many interpretations to “Valonqar”.

The room is warm, its appointments very much to his liking.

_Blood and gold._

They have similar tastes, him and his queen. He looks down at her, the shorn hair, the features that make the breath catch in his throat.

_Is this love_, he wonders. _Or am I mad, as Aeron says I am?_

No.

It is the world that is mad—the god whose face Euron has seen in Valyria, this god disorders the lives of men at whim; fear of death turns men into puppets. Slavery is _honest_ in that a man at least knows he is a slave.

The curse whispers: _die._

The Undying Ones offer Euron vision upon vision. If they offer him a vision he does not like, he cuts off their legs, sacrifices them like he sacrifices a priest.

A thousand priests, by now. And he will sacrifice a thousand more.

From the Shadowlands to the islands West of Westeros, his ships reave, and burn those that dare call themselves holy.

“All prophecies will be made into lies,” he promises Cersei. “All curses will be scattered to the winds. The god of death will bend knee, and when he does we will tear his head off his body…” _and fuck the bleeding stump left behind we will spit on his corpse and bury it in fire and salt that he never awaken again._

**MOQORRO**

Daario Naharis is a respectful man. Victarion Greyjoy was respectful. Neither man has the blood of fire.

“Dragon false and bright and a terrible light in his eyes to come, he comes, Daario Naharis.”

“What else do you see, Black Flame?” asks the sellsword-turned-viceroy.

“Ages cascading one upon the other mazes chase merfolk and dragons chase spiders and time chases its own tail and the sun dies and cannot be reborn without sacrifice.”

Daario Naharis raises an eyebrow. “The Long Night has come again, hasn’t it? This winter will not end for a generation.”
“But it will end,” says Moqorro.

Fire will burn and banish all night, all ignorance.

The Age of Man is over.

It is time for the awakening of R’hllor.

Daario Naharis leans back, a small smile on his face. “The Age of Heroes.” He strokes his immaculate beard, his eyes aglow.

Moqorro steps away from the brazier.

No, Daario Naharis, not the Age of Heroes.

It is not time for heroes yet—the Age of Gods has barely begun.

Chapter End Notes

Did you like it? Huh, huh? All the setup, Arya's Speech, the Night's King, the way gods are made (still one piece missing, coming next chapter), the potential gods, Euron's madness, explained (sorta), Baelish...did you like it? Huh? Huh?

*grin*

Next Chapter--"Feint"--Winterfell happenings, Renegade happenings, A Naval Battle is planned, and...the family is told about the triad. How *will* they react?
A VENTING MAN

He sleeps, curled up on a grate in front of the Moon Pool. The water in the fountain is all gone, turned to ice. He cannot go to the House of Black and White--Lorathi are waiting for him there.

Sadness. Lorathi were supposed to be brothers, too.

Where are my brothers?

-----

He waits, until there is no movement in the distillery, and the lights are dimmed.

Then he quietly lowers himself into the building through a window.

It smells good --barley-grain and hops and rust from long-forgotten metal. There is no light; but what kind of venting-man would he be if he could not make light to see his way through cramped places?

He unshutters the small storm-lantern he carries at his side. In its glow he walks forward, and sees the rows upon rows of beds.

His eyes widen.

My brothers.

He recognizes those faces. They are not dead. They are asleep.

Movement. Another light. A figure, sitting upright on one of the beds.

The venting man comes closer. He sees the man’s face. His mouth distorts in a snarl. “You!”

The man chuckles. “Figures it would be you, of all people.”

“You are not a boiler-man,” he hisses, “but I’m going to kill you anyway.”

The man looks at him. “The Venting-Man is dead,” he says.

The response is reflexive; the face he wears slips back into the darkness.

He staggers. Reaches out; his hand finds empty space. He falls to his knees, swaying.

“What is wrong with me?” he whispers.

The man--the Rhoynar, he chuckles again. “Closer to Lorathi as a renegade than you were as a Faceless Man. Your teacher must be so proud.”

Renegade?
He rises to his feet, rage running through his veins like the most potent of spirits.

“Renegades,” says the Rhoynar. “All of us.” And he raises his lantern, casting shadows and light to the far corners of the space.

It is a warehouse. Seventy beds. More than half of them are occupied.

He closes his eyes. Tears, unbidden.

_I am a renegade? Where is...I had a teacher. I had to have._

“Brother,” he says, his voice broken, “brother I have forgotten, I…” he chokes.


_The Wind._

“Wear her face, Braavosi.”

He closes his eyes. A prayer. _Arya Stark._

A cascade of memories. Some familiar. Some not.

“A cage,” says the Rhoynar. “Remember the cage.”

_This man has the honour to be Jaqen H’ghar, once of the Free City of Lorath._

“Jaqen H’ghar,” he whispers. “My teacher’s name is Jaqen H’ghar.” He knows it in his bones, he knows it as he knows every crack, every depression in the floors of the House of Black and White.

“You’ll forget,” says the Rhoynar. “Until you engrave it into you again as a new memory. Even dead men can make new memories. Remember Arya Stark--_she_ remembers Jaqen H’ghar for us. The only one who knew His name before she became faceless.”

The Braavosi walks, slowly, to the bedside of the Rhoynar. “What happened?” he asks quietly.

“Braavosi stupidity,” says the Rhoynar, bitter.

He raises an eyebrow. “So how did an all-knowing, all-perfect Lorathi like you get caught up in it?”

The Rhoynar shrugs. “Curiosity. And…” he gives the Braavosi a strange look. “You.”

**GENDRY**

His day is filling up to more hours than a day truly has--illiteracy is not enough excuse to back out of impossible tasks, not at Winterfell.

The watch after lunch, he joins four others in the Great Hall.

A young girl of twelve or so, a deaf-mute.

King Jon’s cripples must earn their keep—they will be provided with the means to do so. She is training to be a messenger; she can already read lips.
A fearsome-looking Wildling, his eyes ready to pop out of his head—he is not learning to read books, he’s learning how to read maps and dispatch orders.

*Legion-Commander Tormund Giantsbane.*

King Jon’s commanders are not allowed to rely on another’s reading of important messages.

The other two are kitchen staff.

They are taught by a dark-eyed woman—the keep’s charwoman. Where she learned to read and write and figure, Gendry hasn’t asked. There is a shadowed sorrow in her eyes, her fingers are gnarled before their time. Still, she is a good teacher.

Patient.

Gendry wrote his own name today.

He tried to imitate the curling, jointed script he’s seen in books. It was a bit wobbly, but the charwoman said it was ‘very legible’.

He heads to the smithy with a bit of bounce in his step. There’s two there, waiting for him before the door.

A gangly woman, and a cripple-boy, leaning on crutches.

*The first apprentices Maester Samwell promised me.*

He is not downhearted.

He has learned the secret to Winterfell’s prosperity.

The Starks use everyone.

People other places would throw away, leave to die out in the cold, the Starks draw forth from them things no one would have thought possible. Women, and cripples, children from the age of ten. Wildlings. Men that were once brigands.

The ones that would have been left to die by others when the food ran short—those ones seem to be very cognizant of their luck. “Stark” is akin to a holy word on their lips. The others…there is gossip. Some—mostly the maids, it seems—don’t like being paid the same as someone with one arm, no matter that the limb was lost in King Robb’s war. Gossip is rampant in the kitchens, and Gendry has stopped listening to it.

*I mean, those four say Lady Arya is the ‘Lightskirt Princess’, sleeping with a foreign sellsword. But the cook says no, she’s already married to the ‘sellsword’ who is the Sealord of Braavos, and he’s the Legion-Commander.*

Why the ruler of another city would come to Winterfell to serve under King Jon…

Gendry shakes his head.

*All lies. Like the stories about Princess Sansa and Sandor Clegane.*

The Princess Sansa is poised, and proper. A real Princess. And Sandor Clegane is the Hound but it’s clear he worships the ground she walks on, keeps the watch on the stairwell below her suite himself on some nights. It is impossible to give credence to the rumors. The only one he’d have
paid half a ear to is the one with Princess Arya and some foreign prince, Prince Daorys. Her foster-
kin from Essos.

*Is he a Lorathi? Her man at the crossroads had said she was in love with a Lorathi ‘priest’. What
if I misheard, it was ‘Prince’ not ‘priest’?*

It feels far-fetched.

As he crosses the courtyard to the smithy, he assesses the two waiting for him by the door. The
woman is stringy. If she were a lad, Gendry’d have no problem taking her on—the stringy ones
have a hidden strength to them, he’s often found.

The cripple has *arms* on him. Impressive, for a boy his age.

*Good choices*. There may be whole men available and willing to do the work, but these ones may
actually be best suited for it.

*Put in a sliding stool for the boy at the right height, he can push himself around with a stick.*

So decided, Gendry lengthens his stride.

He extends his arm as he reaches them. “Smith Waters,” he says. “You are my new assistants?”

“Dacey Glover,” says the woman. She has a strong grip.

“Bran,” says the boy. Young man, really, the fuzz is starting to come in on his chin. No family
name. *Likely Snow, then.*

He wracks his brain for the long-ago testing he’d had, a child of ten, with Mastersmith Mott.

“So you’d like to be smiths,” he says, omitting the ‘when you grow up’.

Dacey nods. “Would like to make Journeyman, Smith Waters.”

A clear goal, that’s good. She’ll work hard, and if she puts her heart into it, a position will be found
for her, woman or not. Princess Sansa champions women doing men’s work, that much is clear—
she’s set Brienne of Tarth to teaching women weapons-work.

“I’d like to do swords,” she adds.

He turns to the young man. “And you, Bran?” he asks.

“I’m afraid I have another calling,” Bran replies. “But I can get about under my own power now,
no point in maintaining the muscle-tone hefting cords of wood when a blacksmith’s hammer will
do just as well, and be *useful.*”

Gendry is taken aback by the boy’s speech.

*A son, taught to speak proper. An accident? Some lord disowning him, Starks took him in?*

“And I’m afraid I can only work the afternoons,” Bran says, apologetic. “Mornings I have other
duties.”

*That* Gendry does not like. Half-time means half-heart. Shoddy work. And highborn expectations
along with it.
“Perhaps you should stay with your other calling,” he tells the boy.

Bran gives him a hesitant smile. “I would appreciate the opportunity to be useful, Smith Waters,” he says.

Gendry sighs. “A trial, then,” he says. “You work hard, I’ll keep you on.”

Bran smiles. “Thank you.”

Gendry sets them to sorting the scrap first. Quick learners, they pick up the trick of finding good metal amongst the rusting heaps. Bran cuts himself once, doesn’t complain, just sucks the blood off his finger and returns to work.

It is exhausting work. But they’re making good progress.

*I’ll ask the Maester who to ask for a cart*, he thinks. *Take all the rejects to the midden or out to the field somewhere in a sevenday*. He remembers his own such outings from King’s Landing—it used to be a treat to be out of the city. These two are too old for such things, perhaps, but a break is a break.

It is impossible to tell the time in the darkness, save for the chiming of a clock somewhere far away.


Gendry blinks. Counts the last few chimes left on the clock; he’s lost track of time, that’s for certain. He hopes the darkness hides his flush--Mastersmith Mott never forgot what time it was.

“Yes,” he says, “I think this is enough for today.”

Dacey helps Bran get upright, balance upon the crutches.

“Ser?” asks Bran.

He is pleased to note the highborn boy asked for Gendry’s permission before rushing off; proper discipline in an apprentice makes him a proper smith in the end.

He nods. “Dismissed.”

Jaqen

They have stopped for a watch’s worth of rest, but a day’s hard riding from Winterfell. Yocas and Fiorn parted ways from them after Arya’s speech at the Third Garrison.

Jaqen lofts his mug in the air, gesturing at the buxom woman behind the bar.

A Wildling with the knowing of the brews, and mercantile acumen that would put half of Braavos to shame, Jocasta has made her stout alehouse exactly halfway between Winterfell and the Long Lake.

“…leave as soon as we get back,” Varro is saying. “I can make the ride to White Harbor in five days.”

Jaqen has tried, each time he sleeps, to find Zural in the dreaming. All to no avail. It seems almost
impossible—Zural’s teacher, Zural’s student, both of them are Jaqen’s recruits, they are his Chosen, the mirrors of his soul.

How did we grow so very apart Zural, that there is not even a shred of you that resonates with me?

The Wind has found Zural’s breath; he does not listen.

“Strategy?” Arya asks Varro, her hand upon Jaqen’s knee.

“Truth,” says Varro, his voice dark. “I’m going to make Zural fucking drown in it till he approximates a Lorathi.”

A man doesn’t tell another how to handle his student. But Jaqen cannot keep a small smile off his face.

Oh, to be a fly on that wall.

His and Varro’s mugs are refilled. Jocasta directs a sympathetic look at Arya—his bride sips from a cup of tea.

When she can manage to do it without being seen by the soldiers thronging the other tables, Arya sneaks large gulps of dark, bitter ale from both his and Varro’s mugs.

Varro mock-glares at her as she slides his re-filled mug off the table. And then he reaches forward, grabs Jaqen’s mug, drinks from it. Rotates it, drinks again before putting it on the table.

“Subtle,” says Jaqen, dry.

“Balanced,” corrects Varro. His face is expressionless, his hair tied back in a severe fighter’s braid. “It does suggest a new variant to the Drinking Game.”

“I’ve heard of the Lorathi Drinking Game,” says Arya, “nobody bothered to explain it to a Braavosi.”

Varro snorts. “Jaqen’s idea.”

“Varro’s rules,” counters Jaqen.

“Figures,” she says. “How does it work?”

Varro drinks—from his own mug this time. “One recites a short passage from a text in shared memory,” he says. “Can be anything—jurisprudence, theology, logic. And everyone that can identify a logical fallacy in the recitation gets to take a drink.”

“Good training, that,” says Jaqen.

“Gets one blisteringly drunk,” adds Varro. “Confuses the fuck out of most Braavosi.”

Jaqen grins. “Since we all know the books, we don’t need to recite anything, just give a pointer to the text. So Braavosi see us sitting around with wine, or ale, or spirits, and then one Lorathi says ‘Lavatch thirty-three’ and all the other Lorathi chime in with ‘ad hoc’.”

“Or ‘excluded middle’,” says Varro, “page thirty-three has a bit of that.”

Jaqen nods. “Or ‘excluded middle’, as to your taste in logical fallacy. And then everyone drinks.” He reaches for Varro’s mug, even as Arya slips his off the table for a surreptitious swallow.
There’s a very eager light in her eyes. “New rules,” she says. “We three play, and everyone just takes off their clothes.”

Varro grins at her. “It’s devolved to that, once or twice,” he says.

_No, because that I would have remembered, blisteringly drunk or not._

His renegade’s gaze flicks up. “In your absence,” he says. “Never with you even on the same continent, I think.”

Jaqen feels his face heating slightly; he allows it. “What games you’ve played with my students…”

_Are never to be mentioned again, yes?

“Figured that out, did you?” murmurs Varro.

Jaqen looks up to see Arya very carefully _not_ smirking at him.

He sighs. “Pervert perfectly good training, very well, why not.”

His renegade quirks an eyebrow. “_Now_ who’s the ‘perfect fucking Faceless Man’?”

“Holier than _thou_, Saint Varro.” Jaqen sighs. “Never even saw an orgy in person until you two dragged me into one.”

“You poor, virginal god,” she says, and stretches. His attention snaps to the curve of her throat, the lines of her leading his gaze downward. “A proper orgy needs at _least_ five.”

_Evil girl._

“Holier than _thou_,” she reminds him.

_You awakened upon my cock, beloved. Play this game, and you will lose._

She smiles: _Promise?_

He strokes the inside of her thigh.

“The awakening of a god is a heavy thing,” she says as she returns to less-provocative position. “It can destroy the body. Jaqen H’ghar, Arya Stark—dragonkin, otherkin. Power enough in _their_ blood for the body to sustain the transition.”

_R’hallor, given the dragons sniffing around him…_

“I think you’re _almost_ right,” she says to Varro. “A lizard _could_ be a god, if it met the conditions. But it would only _survive_ godhood if it had a steady supply of, say, Stark blood pumped into it.”

_The blood of gods in him. It’ll do._

“Survivorship bias,” says Varro thoughtfully. “The only two gods we know of survived the process, so let’s ignore all the others that fell short, didn’t have the chances line up. All the ones that _almost_ became gods, but it was the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong sacrifice. We don’t see those; they pass beneath notice.”


_Cersei Lannister should have sacrificed herself for her son._
Varro is grinning. “There is a certain tragic cache to it, don’t you think? A failed god.”

Jaqen’s gaze crosses Arya’s; holds. The glint of amusement in him is echoed by the Wind’s more acidic humor.

“Be careful, Varro,” she says, her eyes still locked on Jaqen. “Get any more tragic and you’ll be reduced to naught but a sex object by the two of us.”

Varro reaches for her teacup. “And how does one go about hastening this dolorous fate?”

“A god once told me,” she says, “Focus on taking each moment as it comes. There will be a time for sorrow, and a time for joy, and a time for all the things in between. There will be a time for decision-making as well, and when that moment comes it will not catch you unaware.”

Varro looks to Jaqen. “Better than what I got,” he says. “‘Put one foot in front of the other, Lorathi, you’ll know when you run out of road.’”

“Good advice, that,” says Jaqen.

Their lover is a fairly competent theologian, belief in magical cock-rings aside; he’ll figure it out.

_Hopefully before Winterfell tears itself apart from the inside-out._

**SANSA**

Sansa sits at a narrow table in one of the highest towers of the Keep, and tries to stifle her amusement. A grizzled ship-captain, previously one of Davos’s men, is on the verge of coming to blows with a girl of ten-and-five. And she’s holding her ground.

The man is the captain of the Ice-Breaker Corps, better known as “Sansa’s Saboteurs”. They’re also known as the “underminers”, the “siege breakers”, the “onion brigade”. They smuggle supplies and informants and refugees from the rest of Westeros into the North, they train in underhanded tactics to take fortified keeps.

Sansa’s Saboteurs work in very close collaboration with the corps of amateur-alchemists and rangers known as “Samwell’s Sappers”. Also known as the “corps of madmen” and “the one-handers”. Samwell’s Sappers have focused down to a single speciality--incendiary devices. Mines, and grenades, and flaming ballistas. The Sappers need to be fast and light on their feet, dextrous with their hands and fearless around things that tend to explode. They are led--and proud of it--by the girl of ten-and-five that sits across the table now.

“...never carry Wildfire!” Sansa’s captain is adamant about it. The Saboteurs may smuggle the substance North in lead-lined containers on the open sea, but they will not carry mines and incendiaries upon the Ice-Breaker ships. “One mistake, gel, one mistake, and we lose scores of men, undermine the ice that is supposed to carry us to Karhold.”

The problem is that the approach to the Long Lake needs to be mined with Wildfire, and it needs to be done quickly--the potential to lose legions, not scores, looms ahead of them. The Ice-Breakers can move fast, they can carry large loads up to the Long Lake within a day. Sleigh, and ski, and horse--all of these are much, much slower.

“Time doesn’t grow on trees, old man,” snarls the girl.
The man raises a fist. “You will speak to your father with respect, Catherine Sallian Hornblower, or you will not speak--”

“Enough,” says Sansa.

Both of them turn to look at Sansa.

It’s Maester Samwell’s turn to suppress a grin.

Father and daughter are cut from near-identical cloth. The story Davos has told her is that the captain ran away from home when he was twelve, enrolled with the artificers’ guild in Braavos, and was summarily kicked out two years later for lying about his age. His daughter waited till she was ten-and-four, then she ran away to join the army, masquerading as a boy. Successfully, until the day she had the misfortune of running across her commander, Sandor Clegane, who has had experience dealing with a ferocious young girl in boy’s clothing.

“Both of you are in the right,” says Sansa. “But which one of you is right, that is yet to be determined--our scout will return in a day or two, with an estimate to the movement of the largest groups of the undead. If there is time, the mines will be carried by sleigh over the snow. If we are out of time, the mines will be carried by the Saboteurs over the ice.”

A raven’s vision is not the same as a man’s; nor is a bird’s brain capable of certain types of calculation, Bran has said. So Bran can spot wights upon the ground when he flies in a raven, he can estimate their numbers, but everything to do with predicting their movement, with seeing how they move with the terrain--that is guesswork. After two errors that cost them almost two-score men and a supply train, it was concluded that precise estimation needs men on the ground--the wights’ movements need to be evaluated with a man’s intelligence, not a bird’s. An intelligent man’s, at that.

Jaqen, please don’t let Arya goad you into doing something reckless.

Jaqen--and Daorys--they are careful. Considered. Arya, Faceless Man or not, has not lost her impetuousness.

She’d probably demand they bait the wights then run through the minefield with a horde of undead behind her, just to see if the tactic works.

But the immediate problem has been solved--the two leaders of the Stark “fifth column” have subsided, content to shoot angry looks at each other across the table.

“Anything else?” asks Sansa.

Maester Samwell glances at the notes before him. “Ah. Hmm. Yes. The detachment at the Last Hearth is--”

Light footsteps, running up the tower’s spiral staircase. Beron, her page, bursts in the door, panting.

“Deep breaths, Beron,” says Sansa. “We must never lose our composure.”

The boy gulps, swallows. Tries to regain his breath. “Fight,” he pants. “Commander...Clegane...is-”

Sansa does not wait for him to finish. She rises, moves swiftly over to the window.
Can’t see anything from here, she snarls silently. Then she turns, gathers her skirts, and rushes down the stairwell.

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She bursts into the large courtyard before the keep—a throng of men are barring her path, and they are watching something. The sound of steel, of cheers.

She pushes through the soldiers, heedless of decorum.

Men turn to upbraid whoever it is that is elbowing them out of the way, see her, blanch. Her presence spreads like a wave, and by the time she is near the front of the throng, there is a path open before her.

Fear flutters in her throat.

Brienne of Tarth is attacking Sandor.

Sansa grits her teeth, gathers to herself every shard of control she has learned in the past two years.

She bested him the last time. Almost killed him.

Anger.

What do they think they are doing?

Brienne is pushing hard, her sword—not the Valyrian Steel, this is a common greatsword—rings out against Sandor’s shorter blade. His left leg is braced against the ground as Brienne tries to push him back.

Both fighters strain; they are matched, strength-for-strength.

Sansa’s eyes are fixed on Sandor’s left leg.

A tremble.

No. No!

His leg buckles. He goes down, and Brienne’s sword pushes past his guard. The knight head-butts Sandor, raises her blade in the air for a strike.

She’s going to kill him.

“Enough!” screams Sansa, and she steps out into the circle. Brienne falters. Turns.

Sansa doesn’t know what Brienne sees in her face, but the knight steps back. One step. Then another. She lowers her blade.

Sansa stalks to the two combatants.

Sandor is hurt.

There’s blood on his sleeve, a slash across the midriff of the padded leather jerkin he wears during training.

Brienne of Tarth is in full plate armor.
“What is the *meaning* of this?” Sansa hisses.

“*Commander* Clegane’s men have discipline problems,” says Brienne of Tarth. “As the women’s commander, I issued a challenge, as is right and proper, to defend the honor of my troops.”

Sansa grits her teeth. Sandor puts his hand on the ground, rises slowly to his feet.

“And you *accepted* this misguided ‘challenge’?” Sansa asks her shield.

Brienne’s eyes widen. “I--”

“I am not speaking to you. I asked Commander Clegane a question.”

“I did,” says Sandor quietly. His eyes upon her are...calm.

*There is more to it.*

Sansa’s nostrils flare.

“This is done. Disperse your troops, the both of you, Sandor, attend me in my bower.”

She does not wait for compliance, she turns, and walks away.

It is one of the hardest things she has ever done of late--turning her back on the two fighters.

Death comes for all men. She has resigned herself to the chances on the battlefield, against the wights, against assassins. But not like this. Not in her own home, not at the hands of a woman that should be on their side.

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“...not even *close*,” Sandor is saying. “She wasn’t aiming to kill, just maybe...maim a little.”

The doors are closed. It is just the two of them. She’s managed to divest Sandor of his jerkin, and now she cleans the edges of the wound to his torso. Shallow, but it should still be stitched.

“I will not wait for Arya,” says Sansa. “I will slit Brienne’s throat myself if she tries anything like this again.”

Sandor’s mouth twitches.

Sansa leans back. “*Do not* tell me issuing personal challenges was the right way to handle this.”

The incident: four of Sandor’s new recruits harassed a group of the women fighters, catcalling that may or may not have lead to something worse. It is inevitable--give green boys a sword in their hand, and suddenly they think they are the gods’ gift to womankind. Put them into groups, and it leads to things like this.

“It’s not like it hasn’t happened before,” she says.

There was *one* rape, a brutal one, when Jon and the others rode to the Wall. Perhaps the man was emboldened because the King and the Maester were away. Perhaps it was nothing but opportunity. The perpetrator was caught. And the entire keep was made to watch as the Hounds’ Mistress earned her name anew.
It has never happened again.

“She knows the protocol,” says Sansa. One of the first things Brienne was briefed upon when she took command of the Women’s Auxiliary. The fight right to discipline belongs to the one who is in charge of the perpetrator.

Any offence by one of Sandor’s trainees, the Hound deals with himself. Days in the stocks, days of marching and forced apologies, a whipping if it is warranted—punishments don’t correct attitudes, perhaps, but they curtail a repeat of such incidents. They send a message.

Sandor runs a hand through hair. “It was minor,” he says, almost reluctant. “I haven’t gotten a chance to question anyone before she fell upon me, but from what I can determine it was insults and a couple of wolf-whistles. A week’s worth of extra patrols, and public apologies, would’ve sorted it out.”

Sansa leans back, reaches for the bandage. “So why,” she asks softly, “did you accept the challenge?”

Sandor looks up. “She made it thrice. And she made it about me—said some things.” His lips are a thin line; his scars pull. “Would have lost a lot of face if I’d turned the last one down.”

Sansa’s nostrils flare. “You knew you would lose. You lose face either way.”

He smiles, bitter. “Lost less this way.”

She exhales.

“The officers,” he adds. “You know there is bias. The North remembers.”

Her mind works furiously.

“So,” she says. “You’ve lost face because you were beaten by a woman.” Her mouth twists. “And you allowed it to happen in the first place because it would have been worse if you’d let the ‘Lannister dog’ pass without a response.”

He nods. “This batch will deploy to my legion in less than a sevenday. It’ll spread, it’ll taint.”

My sister rides through storm and death to correct problems like this, and here we are, right at home, making more of them?

Sansa almost growls.

“I did have a chance,” he says, hesitant, “I’ve been training with Jaqen, it’s--”

She cuts off his words by the simple expedient of putting her hand on his mouth. “Not angry at you, Sandor,” she says. Then she puts the bowl of water and bandages aside, rises to her feet. Grabs his wrist, draws him along with her to her bedchamber.

“Take off your clothes,” she says.

“Um.” His eyes are wide. He’s backing away.

She doesn’t sigh. “You can leave the britches on. But take off the rest, get into bed.”

Wary, but obedient, her shield complies. She moves to pose him. “Like so,” she mutters as she musses his hair, tosses a pillow onto the floor.
“May I ask…”

“Machismo,” she says. “It’s there, amongst the men, and it will never disappear, not entirely. So be it.”

_Sometimes principle has to be sacrificed for survival._

“You didn’t _lose_ to a woman,” she says as she begins to undress. “You _threw_ the fight the moment I arrived.”

_and ‘Lannister Dog’ will never be a problem for you again, not after my agents are done with the day._ “The Hound” will gain a new meaning, one it has been skirting in the past, but one that has never truly solidified.

She steps out of her dress. She is still wearing two layers of thin shifts underneath.

_Sandor_ looks away.

Now she _does_ sigh. “You’ve seen me in much less,” she says.

He clears his throat. “When you were wounded and were being cut into. Not like...not like this.”

_Ah, Sandor._

She puts on a diaphanous dressing gown, opens out her braids, scatters her hair.

She pulls on the bell-cord beside her dresser. Then she waits by the door for the sound of footsteps. _Beron_, by the tread.

_Good_.

_Beron’s_ usefulness as a page is overshadowed by his usefulness as a carrier of information.

_Beron_ talks.

A knock. She waits a few breaths, then opens the door, just a little bit.

_Beron’s_ eyes widen at her state of _deshabille_. She opens the door a little bit wider. Just enough for him to get a glimpse of _Sandor_, on her bed, nude for all anyone can tell. Just wide enough for her to pass an empty bowl through.

“Warm water,” she says, “and bandages.”

_Beron_ bows, jerky, takes the bowl from her hand and backs away.

She closes the door.

_Sandor_ is staring down at his hands.

“You did everything short of pushing me into Zural’s bed to avoid this fate,” she observes.

“No _fate_ here,” he says, not looking up. “Just lies and rumor.”

“I thought you wanted to preserve my ‘honor’?” she asks.

He sighs. “I read somewhere, a long time ago--honor is what you know about yourself. Reputation is what others _think_ they know about you.”
The distinctions between “honor” and “reputation” are well defined in books of philosophy, but when a man has to meet the eyes of people that think the two are one and the same?

Brienne of Tarth will hear about this.

And Sandor Clegane will have to meet the knight’s eyes.

*I will not lose you, not to a blade and not to despair. Not when I have found you in the dregs of the man you used to be.*

She closes her eyes.

Something Jaqen had once said to her—*fear is a tool. A man afraid, if he understands his fear, he makes good decisions.*

She is afraid. And *this* fear, at least, she understands.

There is a power that righteousness imparts to some men--men like Jon and Jaqen. Other men are different--Zural, and Maester Samwell--they use power drawn from secrets and shadows. Daorys, she doesn’t understand.

But Sandor is one of the former. A righteous man.

*If* he is allowed to be.

“Ugly bird,” she says, “I will ask you a question. And I want you to think very, very carefully before you answer it.”

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She pulls on the bell-cord again. Beron is gone, which means little Sara will answer. And Sara, Sara is useful for her in ability to speak.

Sansa starts dressing; she’s almost done by the time Sara knocks.

“Find Prince Bran,” says Sansa, forming the words very carefully--Sara’s eyes are fixed on Sansa’s lips. “He will be in the smithy, I think. Convey to him that I need his help.”

Sara curteys, then leaves. Her gaze has not drifted away from Sansa’s face, nor has she peeped through the door.

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It is not uncommon to find people praying at the godswood at this hour. It is also not uncommon for the crippled Crown Prince to find his way there at all hours; sometimes his family comes out with him. And if it is Princess Sansa that comes with him, used to be that Sandor Clegane would be at her heels. It’s changed, with the war looming so close, but Sandor Clegane is still seen at her side from time to time.

Nothing unusual.

“*Nobody,*” she says to Bran as Sandor lowers her brother onto the ground in front of the heart tree. “*Not Jon, not Jaqen. And definitely not Arya.*”

“They’ll be happy,” protests Bran.
“They will think I am being rash.”

Sandor snorts. “You are.”

“You said ‘yes’,” she snaps. “Don’t speak unless you want to change that to a ‘no’.”

He raises an eyebrow. “So that’s how it’s going to be from now on?” The man has the gall to sound amused.

She realizes she’s shaking. And Sandor puts an arm around her, draws her close. It’s the closest they’ve been since he stopped carrying her around everywhere when she couldn’t walk. “Little bird,” he murmurs, “you don’t have to do this.”

“She wants to,” says Bran softly. Her brother’s eyes, her younger brother’s eyes, they unsettle her; his gaze looks through her, as if she is a scrap of linen through which some strange light shines.

*The greenseer.*

“We will tell them,” says Sandor. He gives her a sidelong glance. “After Jon’s wedding.”

Too many potential allies coming with Daenerys Targaryen, hoping for an alliance of their own with a Stark—it is a lever that cannot be surrendered too quickly.

“If you want to keep this a secret,” says Bran, “we’d better do it now.”

Sansa’s teeth are chattering.

“Give me your hands,” says Bran, extending his own hands upwards towards them.

There is a warmth to her brother’s touch, a calmness that lends her fortitude. It quells the rising tide of panic, and bile at the back of her throat. And Sandor’s arm is around her waist, holding her upright.

_You will have to help me stand_, she had said in her chambers, after the “yes”. _Every nightmare I have begins in the godswood._

It is not Ramsay beside her this time. But it is hard to make her fears understand that.

Sandor does not misinterpret her fear. He knows it--_second battle’s always harder than the first, third’s harder still -- you’ve cheated death twice now, death’s coming for you. Grown men piss their pants, waiting in formation, for the third battle to start._

His voice is steady as he answers Bran’s question.

And to her utter surprise, so is hers.

Bran is grinning when they’re done. “Welcome, brother,” he says to Sandor.

“I’ll have my kiss now,” says Sansa; the relief that it is _over_ has made her break out in a sweat.

Sandor turns to her, draws her closer still. Her heart hammers under her chest.

“Wartime brides,” mutters Sandor. “Feisty creatures.” And then he lowers his head. She closes her eyes. The smell of him, leather and sweat and metal, some blood, it is utterly unlike anyone else’s smell.
A pressure upon her lips. Chaste. And then he draws away.

She exhales.

Done.

**ZURAL**

He does not sleep for more than a quarter-watch at a time. He checks every shadow, every alleyway he passes.

*The hunter will come for me, eventually.*

He makes plans for that eventuality. He oscillates, between wanting the hunter to come for him and wanting his teacher to care enough about him to stay away.

*All renegades run, eventually.*

He does not dare to sleep more than a quarter-watch at a time. The hallucinations are getting worse; he sees _words_ everywhere, carved into stones, into wood. He closes his eyes against them—he doesn’t want to read the messages his mind is sending him to try to break him.

*The mind is the enemy.*

All matters pertaining to the Starks, he passes through the hands of Davos Seaworth.

Sorrow mates with guilt under his breast; it births monsters of thought. They spill over into the world—every time he vomits he vomits red wine, laced with the bitterness of heartsbane.

He wonders why he hasn’t forgotten Jaqen, like other renegades do. What hidden seed of memory there could be that bridges Zural Mobhai to the god, that Jaqen’s face is still imprinted upon Zural Mobhai’s living memory, though there is naught but desert in the memory of his soul.

Jaqen made him an ambassador. Gave a renegade a purpose.

He sends ravens to the House of Black and White. He doesn’t know what ciphers to use, so he uses the ones he was given when he was a Faceless Man.

**THE CHARWOMAN**

She has taken over from the woman that cleans the grates in the barracks. She listens as she scoops out the ashes. She moves slowly—men don’t mind that, she is gnarled and stooped. Sometimes some of the soldiers even help, the ones that were raised right.

“You’re in a fucking good mood.”

“...bested by that fucking she-giant?”

“Tell me, how’s a woman supposed to hold up against the Hound? He was winning, right up until Princess Sansa rushed into the yard, leastwise. Then he threw the fight.”

“Why?”
“...ended up in her bed, didn’t he?”

“...didn’t even wait to dress his wounds before she…”

“Clever man, Commander Clegane.”

“...sympathy?”

“Hounds’ Mistress got no sympathy, boy.”

“Hounds’ Mistress. Hound. ‘Nuff said.”

“Rumors go all around. Don’t listen to rumor.”

“He gave us the afternoon off. Know the last time we got an afternoon off? When the Crown Prince came home safe.”

“Hard man.”

Some groans, at the word-play. Mostly chuckles.

“Came out on top, he did.”

“...page saw it with his own eyes--she was on top.”

“...throw a dozen fights to ten-year-old girls if it got me in bed with one of the princesses.”

“Princesses’ tastes don’t run to farm-boys.”

“They go for dangerous men, Sven. The fucking Hound. And Commander Jaqen? Fuck.”

“So why’s throwing a fight suddenly going to let him into her bed?”

“A dangerous man suddenly needing help? That calls out the woman in ‘em.”

“...never take a Lannister to bed.”

“Joffrey Lannister had him kicked out of the Red Keep, because he wouldn’t stand for her being treated badly.”

“Stark man, from the first he came North, I’m telling you. Solan’s ma, she saw it with her own eyes--Dwarf slapped Joffrey Lannister before the Hound, Hound did nothing.”

“Direwolf, Hound, close enough I say.”

“He’s a canny man, Commander Clegane. No honor at all--he’ll do anything to get what he wants. Won’t waste his men on the field like some of them highborn do, ‘last stand’ this and ‘charge the enemy’ that.”

“...feel bad for the women. Some of them’s good, better than you lot. ‘Honor and Duty’ will get ‘em killed.”

“She-giant’s all show--one of those holy knights of the seven.”

“She’s so proud she’s never had a cock between her legs, like that makes her a better fighter.”

“She’ll think it even more now, though, won’t she?”
“So fucking what? *We* know better. Canny man, Commander Clegane.”

**ARYA**

She’s drunk. Not *blisteringly* drunk, but drunk enough that the floor spins a little. She controls it long enough to leave the common room at the alehouse and walk to the longhouse across the courtyard.

The longhouse is twice the size of the alehouse itself. The inside of it is unornamented wood, not much more than a barracks with four stout walls and a door around each bed. But each divided space affords privacy, and it’s clean—by soldier standards. So it’s called a “room”. And Jocasta rents rooms by the watch—it looks like a meagre amount to pay, to sleep under a roof on a real bed, but it adds up if a soldier wants a full night’s rest.

The soldiers have caught on—they pool their money, get one room, and cram six or seven men in there for some shut-eye.

Jocasta objected to this, till a certain legion commander made her a deal: let the soldiers do what they want, as long as they’re no fights and no destruction of property. And the King will make his military relay-station *right* next to your alehouse.

Jocasta is doing very well for herself—there’s a second longhouse under construction behind the first.

The three will spend half the night here, then pick up fresh horses at the relay station; if they ride hard, they can reach Winterfell within the day.

Varro closes and bolts the door behind them.

Jaqen kisses her neck. There is ale on His breath, like Varro’s. “We have to be very, very quiet,” the god murmurs.

She grins. “I can be quiet,” she whispers.

“Mmm. Or I can gag you.”

She nods. She likes that game.

“You yield?” asks Varro. “Despite the Wind?” He’s too far away—he’s taken a seat by their packs, on a rough-finished wooden chair. It’s quite possible he actually thought they were going to rest.

“The body yields,” she says. She demonstrates it, her pliancy, as Jaqen twists her arms behind her back, holds her wrists; He moves to unlace the ties at her throat. “Jaqen’s just as bad when *He* wears Arya Stark.”

“I don’t beg as much as you,” says Jaqen.

She cranes her neck back, presents Him with her throat. “Because I *always* gag you,” she replies.

She can feel Varro’s gaze upon them; he *hungered*. “I’m going to die,” he whispers.

Jaqen raises His head. “Not if you’re all the way over there.”

“Death by sexual overstimulation,” says Varro. He rises, comes towards the bed. Climbs onto it.
“What a fantastic way for a renegade Lorathi to go.”

She lies, boneless, staring up at the thatched roof.

“…namelessness,” Jaqen is saying. “Never known a Braavosi that wanted it, till Arya.”

“Truth,” says Varro. “How did you make the transition, Vaz’anni?”

“I needed to be Lorathi, or the Braavosi in me would have died.”

Silence greets her words.

This is really the Wind’s answer to give, she decides.

“I wept the Tears of Lys for Jon Snow,” says the Wind.

Even the god is a bit taken aback.

“I did not understand brotherhood,” she agrees. “Sansa Stark taught me what it means to weep for a brother. But the tears always belonged to you. To the Weeping Lady of Lys. God I may be, able to mirror your godhood in me, but only Lorathi can mirror you perfectly enough to understand compassion.” The Wind shrugs. “I became Lorathi.”

Jaqen’s got a very thoughtful expression on His face. “Arya Stark just got dragged along with you,” He says, and then he grins a little. “That part maybe had something to do with her and Jaqen H’ghar’s perversions.”

“I will ask you, one day,” she says to the god, “what it was in you that let go of fear that night.”

The god bows His head in her direction.

“The tears were real,” Varro murmurs. “But I was not a brother.”

She nods. “The god knew you were a renegade all along.”

Poison still sits curled deep within Varro Massag’s bones; the god’s favor cannot heal him. There is a thing that can, but its hold on Varro is not what it can be, even now. For now the Wind watches. Waits.

“It’s no use then,” sighs Varro. “A renegade can’t mirror the god, god’s not in him anymore. Zural will not become a Lorathi. But control is another story. It was effortless for Daorys, didn’t start fraying until Asshai’s blood-and-curse onslaught.” Varro shifts; the cheap mattress shifts with him, though thankfully the bed doesn’t creak. “Didn’t lose it entirely until I got my name back,” he says.

The Wind makes a blade out of itself, wedges it under his chin, drags Varro’s face around to meet hers. “Would you undo it, if you could?” she asks.

“I can,” he offers. “Splinter the memories again, no order.” He smiles at little, inwards. “Fucking arrogance —stupidest key in the universe, my own name. No key this time—it’ll be as if it never happened, apart from what the two of you know.”

The Wind whispers to her, she rises, cold and savage with glee. The agitation mounts under Jaqen’s skin as the moments pass.
Varro’s eyes are warm.

The renegade *plays* with Death; he pleases the Wind. “Won’t,” he says. “Not for anything. My world is far too good to give up for something as nebulous as control.”

She remembers his words to her and Jaqen, from the night-before-last, when the three of them stood in the biting cold and watched the moon set.

*You are my world.*

She rises, crawls over to his lap. Immediately, his arms come around her; he starts groping her tits. Jaqen’s cock hardens.

“*Focus*,” she says to the both of them. Varro’s hands pause, return to just holding her to him. “The Wind could take the renegades,” she says.

“A new compact?” asks Varro. “Jaqen doesn’t need to withdraw His favor? Wind shares?"  

“Only with Him,” she says.

Jaqen looks *into* her. He sees the eager waiting in her.

“Wind can bind breath to someone’s body,” He says to Varro. “A resurrection like R’hllo’s, with some added howling somewhere deep in them that approximates the memory of sorrow. If she actually forms a *compact* with a man, *takes* him, he turns into some sort of plague that rides on her, like Nymeria does. Or a storm, a standing pattern in the air; it will never dissipate.”

“That sounds nice,” offers Varro.

“*Nice ?*” asks Jaqen, flat.

Varro sighs. “We were not talking about *me*, love. I’m reasonably sure Zural won’t be happy with it, but it’s an option. And I meant what I said—it sounds quite nice.”

She moves her hips, undulates on his lap. “Nicer than this?” she murmurs. She knows by the sudden stillness of his posture, by Jaqen’s gaze, a little too dark, a little too rapt on them, she’s made her point.

The god is upon her. “*Fuck, *” He says, mouth on her, His hands cupping her breasts, entirely too warm; the fire rages in His blood. “Just saying ‘focus’ doesn’t make it work, Arya,” He growls. “Not if you do *that* .”

“Oh good,” says Varro, “means I’m not the only one that’s *completely* out of control.”

It is a reversal of the dream—this time she’s on Varro, and Jaqen is in her.

Short, sharp cries she tries to stifle; her nails dig into His arms.

Varro’s fingers circle her left nipple. She sees Jaqen’s gaze fixate upon the spot—the god leans down, kisses her skin. Varro’s finger moves. Jaqen’s mouth follows in the wake of Varro’s touch, sucking, licking a trail upon her skin, around her breast, up to her collarbone, then down again.

Varro’s finger does not go further down than her navel; it ends at her right breast.

“Jaqen,” she warns. She pushes forward, tilts her hips to take Him in deeper, but Varro holds her tight to him.
“Patience really is not your strong suit, is it?” he murmurs into her ear. She feels his head rise as he looks to the god. “How have you not taught it to her yet?”

Jaqen smirks. “Let me demonstrate,” he says. And he thrusts, hard, deep into her.

Again and again and again he fills her; pleasure, at the tip of his cock, deep inside her. Her eyes roll back in her head.

“Jaqen,” she whispers.

“What else do you want, lovely girl?” he asks, His hands clamped around her upper arms, His voice a dark throb between her legs. “Who else do you want in you?”

“Varro.”

She finds herself pulled backwards; in the next breath, she is on all fours, Varro is buried to the hilt in her, the cold band of wind at the base of his cock whispering at the mouth of her stretched cunt.

“Well done,” says the god. “That’s an excellent tactic to teach a person patience. Now give me my wife back.”

“No.”

Varro’s going to regret inciting Jaqen like that.

That’s the whole point, possibly.

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They’re naked, on the floor somehow, bedclothes strewn everywhere.

“You think someone heard us?” she asks.

“Don’t fucking care,” says Jaqen. The god is slumped in Varro’s arms, His legs over her.

“It’s all about the sex,” says Varro thoughtfully.

“What is?”

“It’s always about the sex,” says Varro.

She giggles. “Except when it’s about the Red God. And the Others. And giant walls of ice. And dragons.”

“It’s all going to be about the sex in the end, somehow,” mutters Varro. “There’s nothing except sex in the world.”

“I think you’re projecting wildly,” says Jaqen.

Varro sighs. “Possible. My whole world is about the sex right now. Got nothing else for you. I screwed up, handed over my ciphers to Asshai, and I don’t even remember it. I broke.”

“Had to happen sooner or later,” says Jaqen. His fingers caressing the inside of Varro’s wrist. “Every man has a breaking point.”
JAIME

He stands at the arched window—a whorehouse, in Flea Bottom. The smell of despair—piss, and shit and pain. Nothing rotting. Food is not allowed to rot, and if it does, it is still consumed.

Fires, near the Red Keep—blue-and-green flames that dance in the air and do not stop.

Handfuls of Wildfire, to burn the rioters into compliance.

“Come away from the window, my lord,” says Bronn. “You are still recognizable.”

*Not to myself*.

But he listens to his sword. Bronn plays a dangerous game—he pretends he is in Castle Stokeworth, but his missives to the Red Keep are written right here, in this well-appointed room. Qyburn is in on it—Qyburn has stopped doing whatever it is he used to do at night, in the deep dungeons below the Keep. Now he spends the time here, carrying out the Hand’s duties.

Truth, after truth, after truth from Qyburn’s mouth. The Sept. Tommen.


Jaime walks up to the table—the council has left. Inexperienced, all of them. Master of Coin—a boy of ten-and-six, whose only claim to the position is that he’s ended up inheriting Kevan Lannister’s personal, non-entailed wealth. Master of Whispers—a braggart and a thief, but he knows the ins and outs of smuggling things into, and outside of, King’s Landing.

The government away from the government.

*A shadow of what it used to be.*

Both Bronn and Qyburn have begged Jaime, over and over, to join them. He has refused.

Now a last try, it seems—a chest sits on the table, a heavy iron padlock upon it.

“Baaa aaaa…” he trails off with a hiss. But Bronn understand him: *what is this?*

“Winter has come, my lord,” says Bronn quietly. The newest Lord Stokeworth pulls open the padlock, throws back the lid.

A head. *Alive.*

“From beyond the Wall,” says Bronn. “Undead horrors. They move south, Qyburn’s source says.”

Something in Jaime... *snaps*.

He gestures. Hurriedly, Bronn reaches for a quill, a piece of parchment.

Jaime writes. *“Old friend, thank you. One last service—a horse, and supplies for a long journey.”*

“Where will you go?” The tone of Bronn’s question holds in it all the things the sellsword-turned-peer will never say outright: *I worry. Stay with us. Break free.*

“*Where I should have gone twenty years ago.*”

Bronn’s jaw clenches. “You are recovered. We need you here.”
“I cannot.”

He cannot kill her and he cannot see her alive. He *cannot*.

Bronn sighs. “You’ll never make it on a horse--road’s a hundred times worse than it was before, brigands and soldiers and factions vying for land that’s going to be frozen soon.”

“I must try.”

“Qyburn’s tight with the smugglers,” says Bronn. “They’ll get you to White Harbor.”

Jaime nods slightly. “Thank you.”

“You are a Lannister,” says Bronn, “Starks find you, they’ll kill you. Think, think hard before you act.”

*I have spent far too long thinking already, Bronn.*


*It always is, in the end.*

The man who was Jaime Lannister, he is... *gone*. There is no forgiveness--not for him, not on this side of the veil. Whatever shadow of him is left, it will ride to the Wall. It will take the black, and it will die with a blade in its hand.

Chapter End Notes

So, I guess I lied. The "telling the family about triad" had to happen next chapter, I needed some things to happen in this one, just thematic grouping of POVs.

My apologies for spelling/grammar and other errors, this one is unedited, as my poor beta is a bit overwhelmed at the moment...she'll be back after Feb. 1st, though (can't wait) :)

So...Sansa makes a decision, muahahahah, our gods are on the way back to Winterfell, and Jaime, and Bran's all buff now :)
SANSA

Her hands move by themselves, writing out orders, smoothing the fabric of her skirt.

In the nightmares, the godswood is always followed by a dark chamber, by pressure upon her chest, by the thrumming of fear behind her eyes.

The well-lit bower, the mess of maps and lists on the table before her, the pages running in and out, carrying messages--*that* has never been part of a nightmare.

And yet the godswood happened.

The world feels like a dream; nothing is as it is supposed to be. And that is a good thing--there is chaos in her heart, in her mind; it drowns out any fear that is supposed to be there.

Sandor has taken up his old seat--the stiff-backed chair, with its lines-of-sight to all corners of the room. His sword is drawn, held across his knees.

From time to time she looks up, meets Sandor’s gaze. Sometimes he looks as lost as she does, as if he is afraid he will wake up. Other times, she finds her mouth widening--a grin, a smile, it coaxes an answering one out of him. Turnabout--sometimes he coaxes a smile out of *her*.

Hooves, pounding upon the flagstones under the gate. Shouts.

She rises, rushes to the balcony that overlooks the gate, Sandor right at her heels.

Riders, three of them. No visible injuries, no shadows upon their faces.

She sags against the casement for a moment before calling out.

———

The three Faceless Men are in a hurry--they simply hand their reins to the waiting stable-boy, and run up the front steps of the keep. A pause, as she presents the Horn of Welcome.

“We need to speak to the inner circle,” says Jaqen, his gaze dark, his customary humor entirely absent from it. He hands the horn to Arya.

“Spyroom,” Sansa decides. The room in the library, for the so-called “council of spies”, it is secure; no chance of listeners.

“I’ll get the Maester,” says Sandor, turns on his heel.

“Bran?” asks Arya. “Godswood?”

“Your smith is here,” says Sansa. “Bran’s working with him.”
“Two birds,” mutters Arya as she hands the horn to Daorys. “Meet you in the spyroom.” And she rushes off.

Jaqen runs a hand through his hair, looking after Arya’s departing form. Then he shakes his head. “Jon’s in the war-room?”

She nods. “With a knot of his Riders and lords—Wyman Manderly is here.”

Jaqen gives her a small grin. “Jon’s probably itching to get away. I’ll go fetch him.”

She smiles in gratitude—Wyman takes a certain type of patience to handle, a patience she doesn’t have at the moment.

And then it’s just her and Daorys. He hands her back the empty horn. “Forget furs,” he says. “Export northern ales. And mead. You’ll be richer than the Prince of Pentos within three years.”

Was that a joke?

Daorys’s mien is unreadable.

“The Wildling stuff,” he adds, as they start walking towards the library tower.

“You know why theirs are better than the southern ales?” she asks.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Yak urine. They say it adds body.”

A small twitch. “Fascinating.”

Two maids are walking down the corridor, their hair styled in a very southern way. Sansa keeps her frown to herself.

Emulating me, or something else?

Sansa’s dress, gold and white today, feels stiflingly warm; a dress of her grandmother’s, from a few winters ago—she had liked the cut of it when she saw it in the trunks. But the reason the style went out of fashion is not hard to explain, now that she’s worn it for a half-day.

“Speaking of rivers of gold,” he says, once the maids have moved beyond earshot, “are you up to taking a ride?”

“Where to?”

“The Iron Bank’s Factor House in White Harbor. To recover what we can of the Stark gold.”

The man with secrets is willing to use them?

Some men hold their secrets and convictions so close to their chest that nothing—not politics, not need—will move them. But bring them face-to-face with a snarling wight... Sansa has commanded the use of the technique herself in the past.

“Was it the army of the walking dead?” she asks quietly.

Daorys considers it. “Partly,” he says. Hesitates. “No, that is a lie,” he says, almost to himself. He looks to her. “Arya drew it out of me.”
Sansa smiles a little. “How did she manage that?”

A flicker of a smile at the corner of his mouth, come then gone. A fond memory—a very fond memory.

She exhales, and such a wave of emotion rises in her she doesn’t know what to do with it.

Grief. Fury.

*What were the words? “How could you believe I would betray Jaqen just to get my cock wet?”*

“I wish I had known *that* was the way to gain your cooperation,” says Sansa.

Daorys’s head whips around—and now, now his face shows something. *Panic.*

“You misunderstand,” he says. “I *love* your sister, Sansa Stark. If I could have yielded up what I know before, I would have, I swear it, with naught more needed than her simply telling me to do it.”

*And how would you have fallen in “love” with her without her leading you there by your cock?*

The chicken and egg problem.

*The things we do to keep our people alive...*

Right from the beginning, Sansa’s sister has meticulously led Daorys to this moment. The final piece of the puzzle—bedding him—it seems it was handed to her on this journey.

*Everything is a trade with this man,* she thinks bitterly. A secret for a secret. A favor for a favor. In the next breath, *don’t be ungrateful,* she tells herself, stern. Jaqen and Arya are family; *other* Faceless Men are under no obligation to assist the Starks with anything more than assassination.

Factors and drapers and cheesemongers, they accept promises, accept that the alliance with Braavos will bring the coin that is sorely needed. They mark down what is owed by the Starks in the merchantman ledgers, with red ink.

Soldiers have no ledgers; the red they spill is blood, not ink.

Six thousand men have to be paid—there will be no coin for them within a moon.

*What is a marriage oath when balanced against survival?*

Sansa would have done it herself if she would have been an acceptable to Daorys.

*Arya has sacrificed her story for this. Don’t waste the sacrifice; accept it.*

“And Jaqen?” she asks, keeping her voice very, very neutral.

“I am Jaqen’s man—have always been,” says Daorys, looking straight ahead. “In *all* ways. The role of ‘lover’ is allowed to me now.”

Sansa stumbles.

Daorys reaches out a hand, steadies her. She shakes it off.

*Does he actually believe that Jaqen would allow something like this?* That Jaqen could be even a
“Little bit *dornish* , to tolerate his wife’s paramour in the open?

“Jaqen loves Arya.” Her voice is cold.

_He would not abide her presence in your bed, not for gold, not for anything._

“Without reserve,” says Daorys. “But Jaqen has great capacity for love, and he is not constrained by ideas of what love *should* be.” His voice is gentle. _Fond_. “He also has great capacity for isolation. And deceit. Self-sacrifice, ruthlessness...Jaqen H’ghar is a complex creature.” He snorts. “I live and die upon his words-- *don’t* tell him that, he’ll take it _exactly_ the wrong way.”

_Dear gods, does he hear what is coming out of his mouth?_

*Lorathi practice a very strange form of self-delusion*--Zural’s words. Whatever lies Sansa’s sister has fed Daorys, it seems his magic-enforced loyalties are still in place.

Jaqen...the poetry-reading, hopelessly romantic Jaqen is going to get his heart broken. The mocking, sardonic liar Jaqen...how will _he_ handle it if he finds out?

_A man has only one heart to break._

“Jaqen is a _brother_ to me,” she says, some of the rage leaking into her voice at the last. “I just...I _don’t_ want to know.”

Daorys’s expression is unreadable. “But you understand.”

_Oh, yes._ “You will keep your ... interference...to yourself. You will do _everything_ in your power _not_ to let it get out.”

His mouth twists. Bitterness. “What’s another secret between friends?”

_We are not friends, Daorys._

Arya will have a plan to break with him.

_Best set it in motion now._

“My sister is impetuous,” she says.

“She is.”

“Her and Jaqen--there is no separating them.”

“No. Nor _should_ there be. But I have a place by their side.”

She keeps her anger leashed.

“A comet streaks across the sky,” she says. “It delights the eye and the heart at its zenith. But it is burning, and when it is all burnt up, it passes into nothing.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You think I am a comet?”

“You burn brightly,” she says. Then she smiles, sickly-sweet. “So. White Harbour?”

“White Harbour,” he says.

_Just like dousing a candle_, she thinks. The coolly efficient, expressionless Daorys seeps back into
his expression, not a single trace of the man she saw but a moment ago.

“The sleigh will make it there in a tenday,” she says.

“The road’s clear and well-salted,” he replies. “We’ll do forty miles a day on a horse, seventy if we sleep four watches and switch mounts at each relay station. I can brief you on the way—it will need to be played carefully.”

“Five days there, five back,” murmurs Sansa.

“Three in White Harbor.”

_A fortnight._

Sansa purses her lips. “Daenerys’s fleet has still not reached dragonstone.” _Still time before the war begins._ She nods. “I will be ready to ride tomorrow afternoon.”

“Ask Jon to send Ghost along,” he says. “He’ll warn of wights, keep the wolves away.”

_An escort._

Sandor, and a small group he has chosen? But Sandor is needed here.

_Please this is a good time to test— truly test—Brienne of Tarth._

**GENDRY**

A rush of cold wind as the door is dragged open. He is about to admonish the newcomer: _be easy on the hinges there!_ Instead his mouth parts; he freezes in place, half-twisted away from the anvil.

_Arya._

She is _beautiful._ Grown. Dressed as a man, with a sword at her belt. Exactly as he has always imagined her.

“Gendry!” she says, starts forward.

“Arry!” he replies. _Arry? Really? Stupid. Stupid._

Too late. She is upon him, she’s dragged up his arm, shaking it vigorously. “It’s good to have you here! You’re looking well, the North suits you!”

He smiles like a fool, nods.

She turns.

“Bran! Sansa said you’re _smithing!_”

The apprentice gets a _hug, _with her kneeling on the floor in front of him. Charity to cripples, or some such. He hugs her back. Brotherly, it looks like. The boy is hightborn, no doubt, if the princess treats him so.

“An eventful trip,” says Bran, raising an eyebrow.

She sighs. “Daerys has some information for you.”
Bran grins. “Knew he’d be back.” Then he narrows his eyes at her. “Oranges on you. And bergamot.”

She smiles, something that makes Gendry feel very uneasy, like the way she used to smile sometimes after reciting her ‘list’. “A recent development.”

The boy shudders. “I don’t want to know.”

“Don’t sniff around, then,” she says.

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” asks Bran, snide in a way Gendry has never seen him be.

“You’re picking up bad habits,” she observes.

Bran smirks up at Arya. “Like master, like servant.”

Arya pauses. And then her smile becomes positively malicious. “Don’t sniff him either.”

Bran’s eyes widen a bit. Then he groans, half-turns, slams his forehead against the stone wall, once, twice. “Too much information,” he mutters, “too much information.”

What in the seven hells are they talking about?

One does not demand answers from a Princess. He’ll interrogate Bran later.

Arya turns to Dacey. “We have not been introduced,” she says. Holds out a hand. “Arya Stark.”

“Dacey Glover,” she says.

“Ah!” says Arya. “Lyanna was singing your praises the last time I saw her.”

Dacey sighs. “She still had hopes for me as a warrior when she spoke to you, I think.”

A woman-warrior’s apprentice first, didn’t work, so she got sent here?

Gendry is not in the habit of asking too much about the background of the people he works with—they might ask him for his. The Starks haven’t spread the news, so there’s not annoying questions he has to answer, and he’d like to keep it that way.

Arya chuckles. “I sympathize. The Little Bear is very focused. And you are named for her sister.”

Dacey nods. Sighs.

“But we have six thousand warriors, at last count,” says Arya. “Got only one smith worth the name.” She throws Gendry a smile over her shoulder.

His knees feel rubbery.

“I need to steal Bran away for some time,” she says.

Gendry bows his head. “Of course.”

“We’ll meet tomorrow, go over some things,” she says; a seriousness seems to come over her.

Valyrian Steel.

He nods, tight.
JAQEN

He walks into the large council chamber at the base of Jon’s tower—he is greeted with a round of cheers, some hearty slaps on the back.

_Ah, Northerners._

He clasps forearms as he moves through the throng—Riders, Mormonts, Manderlys. Tormund’s second-in-command, “Growl Spearson”. Sigorn Thenn.

_Nobody from Cerwyn._

He will have to ask Sansa what Lady Cerwyn is up to.

Jon is waiting at the map. He raises an eyebrow—Jaqen gestures: _urgent_. Jon’s mien darkens. “Urgent” means “bad news”.

Jaqen studies the circular table of war. And then he starts moving markers. Wight markers. He adds more of the blue-colored stones to the board; a handful. Then another.

The room is falling silent. Someone helps Wyman Manderly waddle over to the board.

“You should not have gone alone,” says Gunter, a Mormont knight, as he calculates the route Jaqen would have ridden to gather this information.

“Not alone,” Jaqen murmurs as he places the last handful of blue stones to mark the edges of the undead “horde”—not a simple herd, not anymore. “Had Arya and Daorys.” His gaze flicks up at Sigorn, a small smile. “And the Thenn lent me two of his.”

Gunter shakes his head. “Four men. In the midst of _that_.”

“Five,” corrects Jaqen mildly.

“So it’s true?” asks Wyman Manderly, Lord of White Harbor. “The Princess fought on the front line.”

Jaqen grins. “I don’t hire incompetent warriors for my company, Wyman, no matter what their birth.”

“We cannot let the Sealord of _Braavos_ steal a Stark away from the North.” Wyman raises a fat hand, points a sausage-like finger at Jaqen. “ _You_ need to make an honest woman out of her.”

Jaqen looks away, back at the map on the table. “Followed her all the way out here to this frozen wasteland,” he murmurs.

“So it’s like that, is it?” The Warden of the White Knife sighs. “My granddaughters are singing the same tune,” he mutters. “Pah. Time was, a gel would do as she was told.”

The grousing is all for show. Wyman has been _very_ clever in the promises he’s extracted from Jon in exchange for White Harbor’s support. Wynafryd and Wylla Manderly will be Lords in their own right.

Jaqen looks up, a sly grin on his face. “Shall I beg a favor of the King then, Wyman, that Jon command Arya to marry me?”

_That_ teases a grin out of The King in the North. “Wyman likes my head where it is, Jaqen. And
yours.”

A chuckle from Lord Manderly, that inflates to full-fledged laughter. Wyman’s girth shakes, up and down, undulations like waves upon the sea passing through his frame.

Gunter leans over, looks at the light-blue markers. “You are sure they will move this way?” he asks. “Did the greenseer…”

Jaqen shakes his head. “Nowhere else for them to go, if they want to move against the First.”

Wyman’s jowls lose all trace of jocularity. “The White Knife is two days…”

The conversation moves to the geographical; geography is the mother of all war.

Jaqen lets the debates wash over him; his strengths do not lie in defending ground, they lie in controlling the perceptions of men.

God or warg, no matter how uncanny his blood, the Night’s King is still a man.

The “council” hardly notices when the King and his First Rider slip out of the tower.

VARRO

Silence reigns, all the way to the library, and in silence him and Sansa Stark take their seats.

She does not know Arya, nor Jaqen, as I do. I am not a thing to be discarded, to be burnt up.

The voices whisper: you are a thing to be used, are you not? Jaqen used you for two hundred years. Arya uses you now.

He breathes, quiet.

I belong to Arya Stark. I belong to Jaqen H’ghar.

I am no one.

It does not hold; the doubts still writhe somewhere deep within him.

A towering darkness in his mind’s eye, spreading like black ink towards him.

The god comes.

Varro controls his relief.

The god wears Arya Stark; she has Bran Stark hoisted over her back, the greenseer’s arms around her neck.

Caught up to Arya, changed faces, he extrapolates. Because she was heading to the smithy? God still doesn’t have the jealousy under control or what?

At the moment the god has eyes only for him; She reads the agitation under Varro’s skin.

Varro gives Her a flicker of a smile, a deliberate sinking-into the darkness within him: it is done. All is well.
Bran gives Varro a very assessing look as the boy is strapped into a chair.

The god told him.

Brandon Stark had not liked the idea of Daorys falling in love with Arya, long before no one allowed himself such a thing. How will Bran react now, to both his sister and his god entangling themselves with Daorys?

Varro gives his “student” a wary, seated bow.

Bran returns the bow to the extent he can--a dip of his head. And then the greenseer surprises Varro--the boy grins. “Ezza,” he says, “Inavva yeri orzo.”

The god chokes.

Bran is learning dothraki?

A very quick study.

The learning makes sense--the thirty thousand dothraki berserkers coming with Daenerys Targaryen will become a Stark problem, and soon. Bran’s dothraki is broken, unpracticed, but understandable: Teacher, sister you trap. The tone of it, though, conveys rueful commiseration: my sister has trapped you.

“You want to say ‘Tih inavva zhilaq yeri’,” corrects Varro.

The god smirks. “One could also say, ‘Vojjor qorasosh Daorys’.”

Varro’s turn to choke, to fix a somewhat disbelieving gaze upon the god.

“I don’t…” Bran looks back and forth between Varro and “Arya”. “I know Vojjor--god, or gods, plural. What is the other one?”

“Daorys will tell you,” says the god, “he likes helping people learn.”


Qorasolat means “to take”, as in “to rape”, or in this case, “to fuck with ownership”.

Bran nods. “Thank you. That makes sense. So since Sandor is Sansa’s shield, it would be ‘Sansa qorasoe Sandor’.”

No, no, no it wouldn’t please stop conjugating that verb.

“Arya” has a hand clamped over her mouth.

I hope you choke on your laughter.

Sansa Stark is watching all of this, disapproval radiating off her. She catches Varro’s gaze, gives him a very cold glare.

No innocent acceptance there.

All noble families have tawdry secrets, don’t they? To her Daorys is just another one of those. To be discarded when he no longer ‘delights the heart and eye’.
The Wind enters, wearing Jaqen H’ghar. He has Jon in tow. Sandor and Maester Samwell arrive a few breaths after. Everyone has barely taken a seat when “Arya” rests her elbows on the table.

“The Night’s King,” says the god, “is a greenseer.”

Silence. Thoughtful silence, in Bran’s case.

“I...suspected something like this,” he says, “when he invaded my weirwood dreams.”

“He wargs the corpses awake,” adds the Wind.

Jon’s brows are furrowed. “How so many ?”

“May be a god,” says Varro. “Doesn’t change the mechanism of his control over the wights--and there are a few ways it works to our advantage…”

A drawing in of focus--it echoes amongst the three, it influences even the others in the room. Sansa Stark’s disapproval, “qorasolat”, it is not the time to think about these things.

ARYA

The three move ahead of the others leaving the library at the end of the session. They have converged on a plan--many plans, that will come to fruition in tandem.

A change in a small alcove, out-of-sight, and she wears again the face she was born with.

Varro is pensive. She reaches for his shoulder. “Love?”

“Don’t…” he sighs. “Qorasolat?” he asks Jaqen.

What?

He doesn’t look at her. “Don’t invite me to your bed tonight.”

Her eyes widen.

“Did I err?” asks Jaqen, hesitant. “‘Varro qorasoe Vojjor’ would have been just as accurate. Should I have used that?”

Varro turns. His eyes are shuttered, his awareness is furled around himself. “No, the levity was appreciated. Also the very unequivocal claiming.” A tired leer. “I just need to think some things through, is all.”

“Your bed,” says Arya. “You are welcome not to sleep in it if that pleases you.”

Varro nods; he is relieved. “I’l just go...find a bath or something,” he says. Then he turns on his heel, leaves towards the former embassy wing, where they’d moved all their things before leaving.

“What’s going on his head, beloved?” the god asks, looking down after their lover’s retreating back.

“I can’t read him,” she says, a little stunned at her failure. “What happened ?”

“Sansa,” says Jaqen. “She must have said something--she was wroth with him, before you came.”
Varro listens to every ill thought he can pluck out of the world around him.

“I’m cursed,” she murmurs, watching him disappear into the darkness. “To fall in love with pathologically insecure men.”

“So it’s my fault?”

She rounds on Jaqen. “It was supposed to be the both of you telling her. But you left him alone with Sansa because of Gendry.”

The god’s eyes are dark. “You are cursed,” He says.

She blinks; her thoughts are wrenched to the problem He presents to her now.

“Gendry Waters is in love with you,” says Jaqen. His arms come around her, hold her to Him.

“He doesn’t know me from a hole in the wall,” she murmurs. “He is in love with the idea of me.”

“Prophecy doesn’t care about truth,” says Jaqen. “It is a sickness in his blood. A man’s body responds very differently when it is faced with the reality of an idea he is in love with.”

*It should have broken, it should have broken when I died.*

Jaqen shakes his head. “It shifted. What is the difference between a Targaryen and a Valyrian to a prophecy?” He shrugs. “If the shoe fits…”

*It didn’t break when Rhaegar wedded Lyanna. Robert Baratheon still pursued his war.*

“Gendry has no armies,” she says. “He does not desire power. I am not, was never, betrothed to him. You are not the heir to the Seven Kingdoms. Varro is not defenceless, weighed down with children and expectations. We will fight free of it.”

She feels him lay a kiss upon her head. “It is my fault,” He says. “Varro--Daorys--he handled Sansa well after Zural turned, better than I could have. Forthright. Factual. Fearless. Thought it would work again.”

*It should have...but...perhaps he played “Varro”, not Daorys, showed her the face of his that claimed me and Jaqen?*

“It took Sansa some time to accept that I enjoyed sex,” she muses, “let alone that I pursued it with an ardor that matches yours.”

“Mmm. Matches, you say? At the moment?”

She smacks Him lightly on the arm. “Focus.”

“And what did we say about that word?”

*It is now officially classified as “foreplay”.*

She hides her grin in His shoulder.

“A woman enjoying her ‘wifely duties’,” she says, “I mean mother, five children, her and father did not have separate chambers like most lords and ladies do. There was context, in Sansa’s mind, for me and you. But there will be no context for Varro.”
Jaqen sighs. “The outsider? The interloper?”

Arya shrugs. “If she was wroth with him and not you or me...and she showed it ...”

*It was meant to cut, whatever it was she said.*

“Cut him away from us ,” she murmurs. *If his reaction is anything to go by.*

“Sansa might just be asking for a gift,” mutters Jaqen.

“Give it to Sandor,” says Arya, dark. “That’ll hurt better.”

Jaqen sighs. “Alas, planning a murder takes energy. Let’s see how we feel about it in the morning.”

**THE RHOYNAR**

He must not remember his name. If he remembers his name, he will remember why he came to the god. And then he will have to kill. Like the fool of a Braavosi that crawls behind him.

They’re crawling up the corpse-gate, because he’s been tricked at the front doors once (the event is not to be shared with the Braavosi). But they must find their way into the House of Black and White. The last place two loyal renegades should go.

*I don’t want to die. I want to serve.*

They will serve...someone...again. He pauses.

“Arya Stark,” he whispers.

*Jaqen H’ghar.*

He lets her face return to the darkness that still dwells in him.

*The god still remembers me. I cannot be lost if the god remembers for me.*


*You remember to wipe your ass this morning Braavosi? Be proud of that too.*

He continues his crawl; he wedges his feet and hands into the corners of the chute, pulls himself up the slope.

The theory is sound. The face of Jaqen H’ghar was pushed out. Repudiated. But it’s not *gone* as long as somebody else has it. So they just have to go to the place where people *would* have the face, and take it *back.*

The mechanism of it they’ll have to figure out as they go.

A rectangle of light ahead.

The fool may need to be told to remain silent. So he nudges the Braavosi with a foot.

——

The House is as quiet as a grave. They are not challenged as they move through the vast stone
halls, the ceilings lost in the darkness above. The Braavosi has a small lantern at his belt. The
Rhoynar allows, grudgingly, that the light is useful.

The Temple is dark, a few candles burning fitfully before some of the statues.

The first he sees is the Lady of Lys.

Jaqen weeps.

He feels like weeping himself.

“What are you—” a new voice.

He whirls around, grabs the Braavosi, even as he pulls out a blade, places it at the Braavosi’s
throat.

“Stay back,” he says. “This man is a renegade, and I will spill his blood, right here, on hallowed
ground, if you come any closer.”

A candle is lit, then another.

The sister of the philtre. And a woman, wearing the same face as the sister, though it is the
Faceless Man Arya Stark calls “the Handsome Man”.

“Blotchy!” says the Braavosi. “You look much better than the last time I saw you.”

The one the fool calls “Blotchy” runs a hand over his face; his features change to something
unfamiliar. Still a brother. Still Lorathi. But it is a face the Rhoynar has never seen before.

The face this one was born with.

“Renegades,” says the Handsome Man. “What are you doing here?”

“We live here,” returns the Braavosi.

They do. “We are trying to solve this problem the Braavosi have created,” says the Rhoynar.

“Um.” The sister of the philtre raises a hand—showing she has no weapons. “May I approach?”

“No. I will kill him if you do.”

The Braavosi relaxes into the Rhoynar’s grip, leans back against his chest. “He will,” says the fool.
“You all know how much he despises me.” He pauses. “Mutual, of course, he’s not unfair. But
either way he’ll slit my throat, ear-to-ear, and then Arya Stark will be very sad.”

The Wind sees no difference between Faceless Men and us.

“And the ground will be tainted, quite badly,” says the Braavosi with a grin. “I’ve been a very
busy little renegade—they’ll be finding bodies under the Sealord’s palace for decades.”

“He’s very good at hiding things,” the Rhoynar agrees.

“What do you want?” demands the Handsome Man.

“Jaqen H’ghar,” says the Braavosi. And again he sounds proud. “We got rid of his face—a
mistake. We want to take it back.” He cranes his neck upwards. “If they wear the face, and we cut
it off them, do you think it’ll work?"

The Rhoynar furrows his brow.

_Death-masks are external to the self. The mask will change back to the face the brother was born with if we take it off him._

“No,” he murmurs. “Some other way.” He raises his voice. “We haven’t _quite_ worked out the how of it,” he says. “But you’re welcome to think on it as well—from a distance.”

The Handsome Man raises both eyebrows. “And what will you do while you ‘work it out’?”

The Rhoynar shrugs. He looks around, at the dust on the statues, the traces of white powder on the pillar, right where someone would have stumbled into it. “A lot of _other_ work to do,” he observes.

“Floors are a disgrace,” agrees the Braavosi.

**MISSANDEI**

Grey Worm stands like a shadow at the edge of her awareness. He will not come closer.

_So be it._

She concentrates on the hot words being thrown across the “war-room”—a large table dragged out onto the deck of one of the Dornish barges. It was a pleasure-barge, converted to wartime use, but it _wallow_.

It’s one of the points of contention.

“…not a fucking _Queen_ ,” Asha Greyjoy is saying. “We _vote_ on the targets, I work _with_ my men not over them, and I am telling you it does not sit well with them, sailing past Blackwater Bay.”

Tyrion Lannister is doing his customary thing—pacing, on _top_ of the table. “Now I know you are not _stupid_ , Asha,” he says, “but I’m starting to revise my opinion of the Ironborn—and it wasn’t very high to begin with. Wildfire. _Wildfire_. How many times does it need to be said?”

Asha points, angry, towards the direction of King’s Landing, over the horizon. “Euron could be _right there_! We have three times his ships—two, if you don’t count the _pleasure barges_.” She looks around with a disgusted frown, again. “We can _break_ Euron, right here, right now!”

“There are reports of raids on the western coast,” says Varys, mildly. “There is no guarantee that the King of the Iron Islands is sitting in Blackwater Bay.”

Asha Greyjoy sneers. “The King of the Iron Islands is sitting in Blackwater Bay.”

Asha Greyjoy grits her teeth.

“It is a sound strategy, Asha,” says Daenerys Targaryen finally. “To go to White Harbor, gain a foothold on Westeros _without_ a fight. Then, alongside the King in the North—”

Asha Greyjoy sneers. “The King in the North,” she spits. “He has turned your head with pretty words, Daenerys. The Ironborn reaved from one corner of the North to the other, and this _same_ Jon Snow sat behind his walls in Castle Black and did _nothing_. He is cautious. Overly cautious. He lets opportunities pass through his fingers.”

Variants of this conversation have been swirling around the table all morning. On the other side of
the table, the Tyrells are in a “poisoned words and cutting looks” type of war with the Sands—betrothal negotiations over Willas Tyrell and Nymeria Sand.

Daenerys sighs.

“This one does not understand,” says Missandei quietly.

“What?” demands Asha Greyjoy.

“The nature of this solution you propose, my Lady,” says Missandei.


Missandei keeps her eyes wide: this one does not understand.

Asha points to the board—small jeweled markers are inset small, hexagonal depressions to hold them. Gold and green and blue—the invasion fleet. Each stone represents two-score ships. She picks up the blue ones, places them further towards land.

“Split the fleet,” she says. “Fast and slow. My ships are fast, Daenerys, we would have been at White Harbour by now if we’d left the Dornish behind.”

“We don’t leave allies behind,” says Daenerys mildly. A reminder—Theon Greyjoy is not well. And yet Asha helps him move from ship to ship, takes him everywhere with her. He sits now, silent and shivering, in a chair on the far end of the table, covered with a blanket.

Asha accepts the admonition with a nod. Then she taps upon the table again. “A feint, at the mouth of Blackwater Bay. If Euron’s there, he will come out of the bay’s protection, out of the range of Cersei Lannister’s Wildfire, the moment he sees my flag—he will not be able to resist. And then he will chase me—all the way into a pincer.” And she re-arranges the green and gold ships into a claw-shaped formation.

“And if he’s not there?”

Asha shrugs. “Then we just meet up again, here—” she points to an outcrop of land, beyond Dragonstone. “A rendezvous point.”

VARRO

Their door is locked.

He slips a thin knife into the wedge, lifts the latch, twists. The door creaks open. But then, they already know he is here. He walks in, silent.

Arya is on all fours on the bed. Jaqen covers her, deep strokes, slow, hard, each time she flinches forward from how deep He goes.

He steps closer. Arya turns her face to him, meets his eyes.

Oh.

Not quite Arya Stark.

The need to get rid of his clothes, to escape the flame burning through his veins, free his aching member from its confines, he strips, he might have ripped something he doesn’t know, he is on the bed, beside them.

“My turn,” he says, when they look to be transitioning to another position. “My turn,” he says and his voice is hoarse.

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He lies there, between them, his eyes open; his gaze finds nothing but darkness.

“Thought you needed to think some things through,” says Jaqen.

“A comet streaked past,” he whispers. “It kissed the sky between the earth and the moon. But it does not belong--by what mechanism can it be bound to them?”

Truth, from the mouth of babes --Sansa was not wrong.

Jaqen shifts closer and He draws Varro into His arms, even as Arya loses her barbs, lies against him, skin to skin.

Varro exhales. A long, shuddering breath.

“An entire universe of stars,” Jaqen says. “Earth and moon and comet is the least of the arrangements in it.”

Varro stills.

“Binary stars locked in orbit. Trinaries where three twist about a common center, trinaries where a third is a wanderer, that only comes close every aeon; clusters of stars with no fixed orbits at all, planets where four suns rise in the sky, worlds where the moon is as big as our world, and it orbits in orbit around behemoths of toxic gas, and rings of ice crown the world.” The god kisses the corner of his eye. “Varro, what the Citadel, the astronomers of Qarth do not know--it can fill the universe. It does.”

Varro closes his eyes. “So these are the things gods whisper into the ears of their mortal lovers,” he says, “and so guarantee that the lover will ever pine for things he does not understand when the god leaves him.”

“You’re not mortal,” she snaps. “And we are not the leaving kinds of gods.”

Varro does not respond.

“So you want us to believe you are what?” asks Jaqen. “A momentary diversion? A casual fuck, from time to time, as our paths run into each other?”

That would hurt more than ‘never again’.

“If that was all I could stand to take from you?” Varro asks.

Jaqen pulls away.

Fuck.
He turns, reaches. “Jaqen, no, you mis--”

“There’s someone coming to the doors downstairs,” says the god.

Arya’s eyes film white.

All three rise; within five breaths they stand in the shadows of the balcony that looks down upon the main doors of the northern wing.

A man is pacing there. He goes up the steps, raises his hand to knock. Then his hand drops away, and he goes back down the steps. The procedure is repeated twice, thrice.

Arya sighs.

“That’s the puppy that’s gotten you riled up?” Varro asks, staring down at the smith. It feels surreal.

“No him,” says Jaqen. “You know there is-- was --a path Arya could have taken that did not include us.”

Us. Not the House of Black and White. Him and me.

The curse is not broken then.

“Does it affect you, Ver’yalli?” he asks her.

She sneers. Then hesitates. “But Lyanna Stark had no love for Robert Baratheon either. It affects Robert Baratheon’s son, obviously--I can smell the stink of desperation off him.” Her gaze flicks up, takes in the god. “But it does not affect you, Defiant.”

Jaqen runs a hand through His hair. “A man has a finite capability for insecurity,” He mutters. Glares at Varro. “This one is laying claim to all of mine at the moment.”

What have you got to be insecure about, Jaqen?

“I need to talk to Bran,” says the god.

“The smithing,” murmurs Arya. She raises an eyebrow at the god. “Your Champion spies for you?”

Jaqen shakes his head. “Not at my instigation--he decided by himself. I want to ask the why of it, if he’s dreamed something.”

“Go,” says Arya.

The god leaves.

“What will it take,” she asks, cold, when Jaqen is well out of earshot, “to make you stop pissing Him off?”

“Such was not the intent,” he says.

“Lie,” she says. “You use whatever the day incites in you to sell the lie. But the intent is to push Him into something. What?”

“A binding,” He whispers.
I am adrift.

“They sex is a grasping, to try to hold on,” he says. “You can set me aside at any time, and I
couldn’t even disagree with you. But there are clerks in the Iron Bank whose eyesight has grown
weak, so now they bundle coin. Fair. They still have a contract. Zural was set to a task. He still has
a contract, his ciphers have not been withdrawn like mine were. I have earned a place of my own. I
have. So give me a different contract. I don’t care what it is, a blood spell, a fucking slave-collar,
an oath of fealty, I don’t care. Bind me into your service, Arya, if He doesn’t want me.”

“You sing an old tune,” says the Wind. “Where here I thought the song was retired from the
repertoire--’You are my world’, no, renegade? A lie?”

“Minds change,” he says. “Bodies change. Even souls change, as we’ve seen. But a god’s word is
immutable.”

see what you are actually asking me?”


“And what if it is a slave-collar instead of what you want?”

He snorts. “What, like the collar you two have around each other’s necks?”

The Wind tsks. “When you bargain, you’re supposed to take your own side, not your adversary’s.”

“I see no adversary here,” he says. “Just cruelty, and a supplicant at her altar.”

“Very arrogant, for a supplicant,” she observes.

“Take it or leave it,” he says. And then he steps up behind the Wind, draws her icy form into his
arms. The voices are screaming, cowering, cavorting in him. “Take it,” he hisses.

Her hand rises; she idly winds a swath of his hair around her finger. “Took you tonight,” she says
as she leans back into him. “Repeatedly, as I recall. Wore your face to do it.”

He balances upon the point of a needle.

His heartbeat is loud in his ears, the whump-whump echo of his heart pumping blood through his
veins.

“I have been waiting,” she says. “Watching. I want to take you.”

Relief. His vision threatens to dim. He turns his face to the sky, closes his eyes, even as triumph
gazes at the edge of his control. Yessss...

“Oaths,” he says.

“Mmm-hmm. And what form will yours take?”

“Not sure yet,” he says as he leans down, kisses the nape of her neck. “Something like ‘Fuck you,
Sansa Stark, I am not a comet’.”

She giggles. “The wording will have to change before we present it to Jaqen.”

“I’ve really pissed Him off.”
“We’re going to have to fix it.”

He holds her tighter to him. “I may have an idea or two.”

He can feel her grinning. His love, she does so like a good scheme.

SANSA

The lanterns are doused--there is enough fear of her within the Keep that she does not need to add to it with rumors of “uncanny, witchy things”. Braziers with red-hot coals stand all around the heart tree. Bran sits beside her, his legs stretched out before him; furs and blankets are piled all around. Sandor sits before a brazier.

She rubs hers together to warm them. “So what do I do?” she asks. She has never dreamed of strange things like Jon, or Arya, or Bran.

A dull, half-remembered pang of sorrow.

Lady…

Bran gives her a serene smile. “Just lie under the tree, Sansa, and sleep. That’s all. If it comes, it comes.”

Those with potential for warging talent, they’ve run out of time--the Night’s King must be countered. Every man or woman will be needed, Bran thinks.

“And this will make me a warg?”

Bran shakes his head. “You already are a warg. This may help you touch that part of yourself that still sleeps. It is easier, in dreams,” he adds, helpfully.

“Just sleep?” she asks.

“Just sleep.”

She nods, catches Sandor’s look. He tries to smile encouragingly. He sees the need--a warg with every legion, one here in Winterfell, there will be no “errors in communication”, no delay in reporting. Scouts, ranging above the clouds…

Nevertheless, Sandor is wary of “uncanny, witchy things”.

A soft whuff. Ghost skitters out of the darkness of the weirwood, right into the middle of their little “camp”.

He’s grinning. There’s some blood around his maw, she fancies. A snow-rabbit? They’re breeding madly. A steady source of meat for the keep.

And the wild wolves, unfortunately.

Bran pats Ghost on the head. The Direwolf allows it--he doesn’t always. Then he turns to Sansa, grins at her.

“Jon,” she whispers.
Bran mirrors the Direwolf’s grin.

She narrows her eyes. Jon and Bran and Arya. If they can do it, I can do it. Bran and Arya are younger than her, after all, and yes they had their direwolves longer than she did, but so what? She gives Bran a canine smile.

“Just sleep,” he reminds her.

She nods, and wedges herself more firmly between two of the gnarled, woody roots of the heart tree.

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She runs through an endless cavern of mirrors. Each one reflects her face back to her, but it is not her face--some of the faces sneer, like Joffrey. Some weep tears of blood.

Zural.

Voices, calling her name.

“Sansa!”

“Mother?”

Catelyn Tully Stark steps out from one of the mirrors. Her skin is grey and grey-green moss grows at the corners of her eyes. A large gash, end to end, decorates her neck like a grotesque piece of jewelry. She wears widow’s weeds--black, upon black, upon black.

“Mother!”

Her mother opens her mouth, and a thin wail, anguish wrapped around rage, it wheezes out of the gash in her throat.

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“Little bird! Little bird!”

She comes awake with a start to Sandor shaking her shoulder, gently. Without thought she reaches for his hand, clutches it to her chest as she curls up, and sobs.

Bran is stroking her hair. “Hush, hush, Sansa, beautiful Sansa, my brave sister, just let it go, let it go…”

It takes a very long time for her to stop.

She sits up, slowly, releases Sandor’s hand. “Sorry, ugly--”

He smiles at her, his eyes moist, as if the excess of her weeping has found his eyes. “All alright, little bird, sometimes a good cry is called for. You wait right here--I’m going to go find you some tea. And for you, Bran, it’s far too cold.”

Too cold for him, too , she thinks, as she watches him creak to his feet, and stride off quickly across the snow.

She exhales, her hand rising to her chest, the aching, empty thing between her breasts. “So much pain, Bran.” She looks around, above her. The canopy of finger-like branches no longer feel
threatening, as they used to, or comforting as they have come to be in the past few moons. Now she reads the droop of them as something else. “They are keening.”

There is a wail, echoed in her memory somewhere—the wind wails now, as it passes through the trees, and as it brushes past branches the howling in it becomes a sound of heart-rending grief.

“Jaqen.”

Her gaze, wide, returns to Bran’s face.

“The god is in pain, Sansa,” he says. “His brothers have been riven from him.”

“More renegades than just Zural?” she asks.

Bran sighs. “I don’t know how many. But more than half of all Faceless Men, I think.”

She draws her knees up, her arms clutching them to her chest; her dress is crumpled. “Why does he not tell me these things?”

“Because they are part of the most secret of faces He wears,” says Bran.

She hears the capitals fall into place—“He”, not “he”. And Bran reads the accusation in her eyes.

Bran shakes his head. “It is not up to a god to prove Himself to mortals,” he says gently. “Grace—He extends Himself to us. But it is up to us to meet Him halfway.”

“Gods do not feel pain,” she spits.

Bran smiles then, wry. “How many gods do you know?” he asks.

“Jaqen is a man,” she says. “He had a mother.” Niobe, of Lorath. She doesn’t know much more than the name, and that she had red hair.

Bran grins. “Daorys says—”

“Do not mention his name,” she snaps.

Bran blinks. “He told you?”

“Arya told you?” she demands.

How can you stand to see the god you believe in so betrayed, Brandon Stark?

“How Faceless Men choose to love, who choses to love them in turn—that is not for others to judge, Sansa.”

“Well, I judge. We will speak of it no more. Warging. Teach me how to warg.”

JAQEN

He stands far outside the circle of lamplight around the heart tree. Sandor has just stomped off to fetch tea.

It is not a good time, he thinks, to distract the greenseer with curses.
The smith is far less of a threat than the Night’s King. Bran should be allowed to give his undivided attention to teaching others to warg, not go off through time chasing specters and curses.

His Champion speaks—“How Faceless Men choose to love, who choses to love them in turn—that is not for others to judge, Sansa.”

“Well, I judge,” Sansa replies. “We will speak of it no more. Warging. Teach me how to warg.”

Jaqen studies the shape of Sansa’s words. And he comes to a decision.

*We did our familial duty; we told her. The flow of information stops now.*

Too much time has passed, too many things have been learned by all—a regression to the way Sansa Stark treated Jaqen H’ghar when he first came to Winterfell is not warranted. Not towards Varro. Whatever her dislike may stem from—men lying with those of their own gender, her sister’s or Jaqen’s seeming irreverence for their vows, Varro himself—it will no longer be a consideration.

Information will be restricted to what is needful to win the wars to come.

All else is for the dead to know.

The dead do not judge.

**THE KINDLY MAN**

There’s six faceless brothers in the House now. Watching.

From a distance.

“Well,” says the brother of the albino eyes, “the place *is* cleaner.”

“They’re sleeping in the Temple,” says the sister of the philtre.

An incorrect statement. Only one sleeps. The other stays awake with a knife at the sleeping one’s throat.

“What are we to *do* with them?”

“Renegades are unstable—and these two have been at war with each other for a century.”

“A man thinks a Braavosi cannot kill a Lorathi,” says no one.

“*Unlikely*,” corrects the Courtesan. “But still possible.”

“A man’s sister is right— *unlikely*,” responds no one. “And the Lorathi is controlled. He will not kill on impulse alone. Varro Massag—”

“Varro Massag has had a lot of help.” The Courtesan’s voice drips disgust; she has forgiven the hunter, but she does not appreciate the strangeness of the gods, in *lying* with a renegade.

“It is for Zural Mobhai,” says no one softly. “Arya Stark loves her teacher.”

The implication is clear: Arya Stark keeps the hunter leashed between her legs.
“Teacher never turns on student,” says the Courtesan, casting him a dark look. “Hunter wouldn’t have gone after Zural Mobhai even without her intervention.”

“How do you know?” asks the sister of the philtre. “What is stronger, the bond of teacher and student, or a renegade’s compulsion? And the hunter is a thousand times worse than others—he’s been fed for two hundred years.”

“The immediate problem is the renegades here,” says the Handsome Man, “not the renegades in Westeros.”

All six nod.

“They can’t keep sleeping in the temple,” says the sister that came from the Dosh Khaleen. “The Rhoynar helped a woman drink from the pool earlier, gave her the ‘life is not fair’ sermon. A renegade has no right to do that.”

More nods.

“Give them our word,” says the Courtesan, though her mouth twists again. “Tell them we won’t attack them if they stay in their cells. They can come out for exercise once a day, meals will be delivered to them.”

“A good idea,” says brother of the albino eyes. “it allows Faceless Men to walk through the temple, see to the day-to-day tasks of the House again.”

Strange…nobody cared that the House was empty, as long as it appeared as though the guild was operational. But put two renegades at the heart of it, and every Faceless Man within arms’ length is suddenly clamoring to return home.

The brother of the albino eyes is looking to the great black-and-white doors. “Contracts are piling up,” he says. “The one in Meereen needs seeing-to, or we’ll find ourselves returning the payment.”

“Our mute sister is in Meereen,” says no one.

“The means are not…”

**JON**

It is far past the hour when he should have sought his bed. But sleep, he knows, may elude him tonight. He starts to see some sense in kings keeping entertainers—minstrels and jugglers and dancers.

Distractions.

Instead of rousing the poor boy Winterfell calls a minstrel, Jon retreats to the second-story sitting room of the King’s tower.

Jaqen finds him there, contemplating whether inebriation is a wise move. He has good cause—Karhold is overrun. The Night’s King is a warg. Or possibly a god.

*Well, it seems our god is in a far better mood than when He left.*

“Something’s changed in you,” says Jon, handing the god a somewhat battered tin mug.
Jaqen accepts the mug with a sardonic half-grin, bows a little. Then He leans back in the chair.
“Life,” He says, “is complicated.” His gaze drifts to the window—Sansa and Bran are heading back from the godswood.

Jon misses his conversations with Sansa; the war leaves him not much time for family. They used to spend days and days together when it all began.

“When we took back Winterfell,” Jon says, “I thought I’d never understood complicated before. Spoiled food, they’d fouled two of the wells. There was what Sansa called ‘the Bolton stink’ everywhere. She had the lord’s quarters cleared, but we decided to burn all the bedding.” One room a time. “Triage,” he says.

“Triage requires objectivity,” says Jaqen.

“Neither of us was objective about Winterfell,” says Jon, rueful. “Davos was helpful. And we asked Tormund a lot of questions.”

Jaqen gives him a disbelieving look. “Tormund Giantsbane?”

“Absurd, isn’t it?” asks Jon. He chuckles. “Tormund, should we mount Ramsay’s head or bury it and forget about it, Tormund?” Jon puts on Tormund’s gravelly voice. “Mount it. He took Wun Wun. I’ll do it for you.”

Jaqen’s eyes are twinkling. “The King is the North is not Tormund Giantsbane,” he says. “He may complicate rather than simplify.”

Jon grins. “Won’t know until you try.”


The wine is poured again. Jon sips; Jaqen... gulps. Now Jon really wants to know what is going on.

“I can offer a painful analogy,” says the god.

“Painful for whom?” asks Jon.

“The King in the North,” says Jaqen.

Jon refills his own mug, passes the bottle to Jaqen. “Memory is a painful thing,” he says. “Its usefulness mitigates the pain.”

Jaqen looks at Jon, His eyes narrow. “I can see why Daorys was moved to offer you sugar-cake. Useless, and sweet, and utterly painless.”

Jon ducks his head.

“So,” says the god, “time passes.”

“It does,” Jon agrees.

“And you have that second chance,” says Jaqen softly, his eyes contemplating the ruby-red surface of the wine in His hand. “Grace beyond all hope, and it is with Daenerys Targaryen.”

A second chance?

There are things, it seems, that Jaqen has not told him.
The god has many faces. Most of them are hidden.

“And so you are wed, against all opposition,” says Jon encouragingly.

“You wouldn’t have done it,” mutters Jaqen.

“A second chance?” asks Jon. He is far more similar to Arya, to Robb, to the woman that gave him birth, than he had realized. All it took to recognize them in me was giving up the desire to be recognized. “I know, I know what I lost. A true chance, I’d abdicate and jump into a rowboat, row south to meet the Dragon Queen’s armada as quickly as I could.”

The god smiles at Jon. Gleeful, almost. “Ah, valonqar, would that I could make it so,” He says.

Jon grins and leans against the chair’s arm-rest. “Let me know when you’re abdicating to become the god of love.”

And wouldn’t that confuse the fuck out of R’hllor?

Jaqen smirks. “So,” He says, “say it is Daenerys that abdicates for you. Bends knee.”

“She wants jewels,” says Jon, “a human sacrifice every now and again for her dragons? So be it. She wants to take a lover? So be it?” He raises an eyebrow at Jaqen.

Is that it? Arya and Daorys? Because Jon knows Arya, and he is not certain that is sisterly caring in her eyes when she looks at the other Faceless Man.

Jaqen smiles into his cup. “If it were only that simple, no?”

Whatever it is, it does not distress Him.

“Because she wants nothing at all,” continues Jaqen. “You offer her all the crowns of all the world and she wants nothing more than a stone bed in a stone cell and a blade in her hand to serve you.”

“I’d call myself a lucky son of a bitch and leave it at that,” says Jon.

“Truth,” sighs Jaqen. “And then Ygritte returns.”

Jon spits out his wine.

What?

Daorys. I’m not insane.

He looks to Jaqen. “And you’re telling me this now?”

“Complicated,” mutters Jaqen.

No, no, Jon knows all of Jaqen’s history—Jaqen never lay with a Faceless Man before he wedded Arya. Which implies a certain lack of complication, to Jon’s mind.

“Not like Ygritte,” Jon says.

Jaqen snorts. “You have this quality I lack, as we’ve said before—the ability to take decisive action about certain things.”

Not that decisive, Ygritte decided it for me.
“Daenerys and Ygritte are suddenly—not surprisingly—the very best of friends,” continues Jaqen. “They talk. And they know things about you you don’t even know. They live in each others’ pockets.”

Jon closes his mouth. “Almost more terrifying than White Walkers,” he offers. Chuckles a bit. “Robert Baratheon used to go hunting for a moon at a time.”

Jaqen looks to him, wry. “We dealt with House Flint. Any more seditious Houses we can ride out to?”

Jon raises an eyebrow, amused, more amused than he’s been for quite a while. “Not just fear of Sansa and Arya over my letter that we stayed away another day.”

Jaqen looks glum.

“Well,” says Jon. “Quite apart from my own twisted mind and heart, I would give thanks for Ygritte’s life. And do everything in my power to make sure she is healed and safe and alive. Valar morghulis, as you say, but every man has a limit to objectivity.”

“All gods are men,” Jaqen says. He’s looking into his cup. “The loss of objectivity is an endemic problem.”

“But Daenerys is taking care of that,” says Jon. “Um. Ygritte’s wellbeing.”

Jaqen I don’t know whether to feel sorry for you or…

But Daenerys and Ygritte is not the same thing as Arya and Daorys.

If I wasn’t wrong about one thing, I’m not wrong about the other.

“And Ygritte…” he says, “any chance her and Daenerys will run off together?”

Jaqen looks up. “If Jon Stark was not a factor, it would be almost inevitable, I think.”

A choked laugh escapes Jon. They do say common interests keep marriages together. He tries to stifle his laughter, he really does. It’s not working.

“You’re enjoying this far too much,” mutters Jaqen.

“It went on for days,” Jon points out, breathing deep to gain some control. “When the Dragon Queen suggested a stud-farm. Jon Thousandfather, Jon the Indefatigable, Jon—”

“Alright,” interrupts Jaqen. “Alright. Fair.” He sighs. “But there is no permutation of the world in which Jon and Daenerys can be separated.”

“And Ygritte bent knee to the King,” murmurs Jon.

Daorys and Jaqen, estranged as men, though Daorys still served the god?

“Ygritte has…complex motivations,” says Jaqen, His voice growing more somber. “Jon Stark knows nothing. Whatever. Of what she’ll do. At all.”

“Sounds about right,” Jon mutters.

“So now Jon’s sleeping with the both of them.”
Jon chokes.

_Um._

“Everyone’s sleeping with everyone, actually,” says Jaqen.

_Um._

Jon’s eyes are a bit wider than a dead man’s should be as he looks to Jaqen. “I…don’t know what to say,” he says. “When you say complicated, it really is, isn’t it?”

“Oh haven’t gotten to the complicated part,” says Jaqen. “No analogy for _that_.”

_Um._

“My _sister_,” mutters Jon.

_I don’t know how to feel about that_. Really _don’t know how to feel about that._


_Truth. I’m going to marry my aunt. At least Arya’s _not related to anyone_ she’s _in bed with._

Something falls into place, given the Jaqen H’ghar _he_ knows.

“It was _her_ idea, wasn’t it?” asks Jon. “Um. Daenerys’s.”

Jaqen shrugs. “Jon may have seen the bond growing between Daenerys and Ygritte, hoped it would hold Ygritte to the world of the living, keep her bound to _something_.” He shakes his head. “Justification, after the fact. Jon didn’t resist very much. Or. Um. At all.”

“I can imagine not,” mutters Jon. He shakes his head. “It must be a Valyrian thing, not just a Targaryen, the…um. Two. Because it’s _not_ a Stark thing.”

“Except for the cursed women,” Jaqen reminds him.

_Great-Aunt Branda. My mother. Arya._

“Yeah, alright, so the precedent is there,” mutters Jon.

“Precedent is neatly confined to history books,” says Jaqen. “Jon Stark is in the middle of it.” He pauses. “And, let us say—he is not very well-versed, or even well-disposed, to the entire ‘paramour’ perspective. It doesn’t…” the god sighs.

Jon grimaces, sympathetic. Took a lot of round-and-round with Jaqen before Jon puzzled his way to a perspective he could live with in his _own_ marriage to Daenerys, the sidestepping of Jon Stark’s marriage oath. Co-conspirators in the face of necessity, him and the Mother of Dragons.

_Their_ child, no less theirs though he be a bastard in secret. Loved.

_Not a Jon Snow._

But that doesn’t apply to Jaqen here.

“And so we get to the complication,” says the god.

Jon leans back. “No analogy for this one, you said.”
Jaqen meets the King’s gaze. “Daorys is a renegade.”

A sudden cold sweat.

*Dead men do not fear*, Jon reminds himself. *Dead men should not fear*. His grip around the mug is white-knuckled.

“Is he safe?”

“Would not let unsafe remain in your House, not knowingly, Jon,” says Jaqen gently.

“Unworthy thought,” mutters Jon. “Sorry.”

Jaqen shakes his head. “The right thought—my first concern was Arya, even knowing everything I do about him.”

Not betrayal, not from Daorys—an attempt to understand what has happened, an attempt to find a solution. Self-sacrifice. He is exactly the sort that would—

“But he did turn on me,” says Jaqen. “And then he spent the next two hundred years hunting down others like himself.”

Jon exhales.

*Two hundred years.*

“In expiation?” he asks. “Penance?”

“Proxy,” says Jaqen. The god’s mouth twists. “Giving traitors the gift—that was why he came to the House of Black and White in the first place.”

Jon is silent as he assimilates this. “You used him,” he says, when too many breaths have passed. *You loved him and you used him.*

“Could have given him the gift,” says Jaqen. “He didn’t want it, Jon, he wanted to serve, the bond between us—” Jaqen touches his chest. “Don’t need magic to make brothers, or to keep them, not when the soul is aligned…” The god looks at Jon again. “He destroyed his memory, piece by piece, buried his name so deep in his mind even R’hllor couldn’t touch it—all to forget that he was a renegade, all to control the compulsion, so he could serve me.”

“And now he remembers,” says Jon softly.

*Remembered it, when Zural Mobhai turned? Some trigger? He didn’t kill the Braavosi, compulsion or not.*

“I cannot give him the gift,” says the god. His voice hardens. “I will not. But if he decides to redefine himself as a Faceless Man again, destroy his memory again—he can, and he will—he craves it—the moment he feels his deception has been sufficiently forgiven by all—and then he will take out more than half the order, every renegade that has turned, and they will not be able to stop him. Not now.” The god’s mouth twists. “And I cannot turn against him, any more than I can raise a blade to Arya.” Jaqen’s eyes are closed, His head leaning back, against the chair’s back. “The Wind watches. She stands by, she wants to claim him.”

“Like Nymeria?” asks Jon, unease crawling up his spine.

Jaqen nods.
Triage. Ignore everything that is unimportant.

“You and Arya try to bind him to you as people, not Faceless Men, not gods. As people. Hence the…” Jon waves his hand. “Valyrian-Stark sleeping arrangements.”

“No binding in it,” says Jaqen. “No Stark or Valyrian or renegade or god. Just…us.” He smiles. “Lies, lovers, broken oaths, these things are understood. Accommodated, if they arise. The dissonance exists because they do not arise; because no accommodation is required--the definition of ‘paramour’ does not fit.”

A keen longing pierces Jon’s breast for a moment.

Jon leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees as he considers the god. “Extraordinarily lucky son of a bitch,” he says to Jaqen. “And that’s including the impending genocide of your order and the plague waiting in the lists. Just saying.”

A smile pulls Jaqen’s lips to a side. “One of the best memories of my life, I formed but a handful of days ago—slaything undead by the dozen, Night’s King looking out at me through hundreds of wight-eyes, but my Chosen stood, to the left and to the right of me, their swords rose and fell in tandem with mine, and the world sang in my veins.”

Jon’s turn to lean back in the chair.

He steeples his fingers. Thinks.

Jaqen’s not here for advice.

“If it were me,” says Jon slowly, “I would bind Ygritte to Jon the man before she tries to bind herself once again to Jon Stark the king. Solves all the complications.”

“Something hallucinogenic in the wine you’re drinking?” asks Jaqen.

Jon shrugs. “Worked for Rhaegar.”

“What an interesting definition you have for ‘worked’. Rhaegar Targaryen left behind a world of tragedy for everyone else to clean up.”

“Because Lyanna Stark’s brothers started a war over her,” Jon points out. “They mistook love for dishonor.”

Which is why you’re here, talking to me.

“My brothers will lose the war, at their own hands, if the ‘binding’ comes out,” says Jaqen.

Jon blinks. But Faceless Men are all dead men. They do not judge— he pauses. Gestures for Jaqen to explain.

The god’s gaze is dark. “The fact that Jaqen H’ghar uses people, that Arya Stark is a pragmatic creature, that Daorys is a weapon--however abhorrent a weapon he may be--these are the things that are understood. Keeping weapons tied to oneself with bedroom games—this is also understood.”

Jon rolls this around in his head.

“An abhorrent weapon,” he says thoughtfully. “If it stops being merely a piece upon the game-board, if it becomes apparent it was one of the players all along…”

Because Rhaegar Targaryen sought the support of his wife’s brothers—Elia’s brothers, Doran and Oberyn Martell—before he went to fetch Lyanna.

Precedent.

“You’re lucky father’s dead,” says Jon.

Jaqen’s gaze snaps up.

“Come to him for permission,” Jon points out, “he’d have tried to take your head.”

Jaqen looks away. “Would have sent Arya,” He mutters.

Jon thinks about it. “Might have worked better with father,” he allows.

“On the whole,” says Jaqen, “I think I would rather be having this conversation with Eddard Stark. All things considered.”

Jon tilts his head to a side. “Did you remember?” he asks quietly.

Jaqen shakes his head, frustrated, it seems. “I cannot tell—they’d worked me over enough to dull even my faculties. One voice was definitely Varys.”

“Daenerys’s Master of Whispers,” says Jon. “He’s coming to White Harbour.”

Jaqen nods. “He will have to be asked if it was Eddard he spoke to.”

And if it was, what was said.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I wanted to address a couple of comments people had w.r.t. to the Sansa interaction.

The way I read her, she is not closed-minded. There’s two competing forces here: the FM’s nature, and Sansa's perception-filter.

1. Why the triad didn’t just sit her down and do it "confrontation style”:

Everyone handles these kinds of revelations differently... I wrote it two ways, and I realized, there is NO way the FM will just... It's not relevant to the war--when it was relevant to the HBW's future, they did it, and just as subtly. Still, the shock-impact of Arya/Jaquin being known to the rest of the HBW... The handsome man talks about it... The shock impact of the two gods sleeping with Varro... It reverberated through the HBW... We will see the ripples.

There are other married FM, as Zural implies... They have the decency not to talk about it, lol.

Just telling people at all- it’s a huge deal. But why would they go so completely out of character as to sit someone down to explain what they are up to in the bedroom?
Last time they were direct, it took Jon almost beheading Arya...

Arya's playing proper Last Blade, FM--she has to, Jaqen's off his rocker, Varro's a renegade, she's trying to hold FM's personal and professional secrets as secrets. And Sansa didn't tell them about her wedding either.

But the triad did tell her--I thought they were equally as direct with Bran, and he got it. She is a supremely savvy character... deduced Varro was sleeping with Arya from *one* smile he allowed her to see. So after that, a very clear "Jaqen's man... All ways... Lover... Place at their side"...If it was *anyone* but Jaqen, she'd have picked up on it. Any political player of the GoT would have picked up on it, she's Baelish-trained!

BUT Sansa has a very big blind spot wrt Jaqen. And the FM don't quite realize the magnitude of it yet. Sansa has formed an image of Jaqen in her head that is not accurate to reality. She interprets all of Jaqen's actions in light of this image.

1. Saving Arya, not taking advantage of her, coming to Winterfell with their parents' bodies, the Frey heads -- Jaqen is an "honorable" man, like Jon, like Eddard Stark

2. Protecting Jon, supporting Jon, regardless of what it does to his own reputation--there's one other man she's seen do this: Eddard Stark

3. Going off to a far land and fighting battles/politics that are not his own, because he had a "duty" to his wife, actions that can (and, because she doesn't know the immortal thing) and might very well lead to Jaqen's death/exile--Eddard Stark's going to King's Landing because he had a duty.

She truly does fear for Jaqen, as she told Zural earlier. Because for all his fighting skills, for all his connections and assassin-things, she sees him as a foolish man in the same way Eddard and Robb were foolish.

4. Her very violent atheism, reinforced by Zural's justification of what gods are--just men with magical power. "God" doesn't mean anything at all to her.

This line from a couple of chapters ago summarizes her miscategorization of Jaqen: 
*There is a power that righteousness imparts to some men--men like Jon and Jaqen. Other men are different--Zural, and Maester Samwell--they use power drawn from secrets and shadows.*

Jaqen is NOT a "righteous" man. But we know this because we know his interior truths, from his and Arya's and Varro's POVs. Sansa, from her own POV--Jaqen is a "Jon and Eddard Stark" type of man. Period.

Which also means Jaqen needs to be protected. If you recall quite a few chapters ago, Sansa has always tried to "shield" Jaqen from the dark truths of some things.

Mirrors, everywhere--Jaqen has a similar mindset, w.r.t to Sansa and His own unfulfilled get-approval-from-the-maternal-figure idiocy, as we saw many chapters ago.

I think it comes back down to the same thing as always: everyone sees what they want to see. They see what they expect to see. If you'd tried to tell Sansa at some point that Eddard had a male lover? Or that Eddard was OK with Catelyn having a lover? It. Will. Not. Compute.
So she sees Jaqen being friendly with Varro (no, they're not going to make out in front of her, even Arya and Jaqen kissing is very, very rare, only twice so far) she's going to assume "yes, Daorys is loyal to Jaqen and Jaqen is such a chump, he trusts everyone far too much--like father trusted Petyr, even when father knew there was something off about Petyr's view of Catelyn".

She sees Arya being friendly, even loving, with Daorys--> yup, Arya's at it again, making sure this man stays tied to her.

The Jaqen/Varro thing does not compute. At all. Jaqen taking a female lover, that wouldn't compute either, just FYI, it would be "who is this bitch and who can I manipulate into knifing her"
JON

The poor raven has met at least two storms on the way in—it is bedraggled, it hides its head under a wing. Jon very gently runs a finger over its spine—the more he learns, the more time he spends in a controlled state within Ghost, the more approachable he seems to animals.

He looks down at the parchment in his hands.

___________

Your ice demons sound very strange.

Missandei is trying to teach me an appreciation for poetry. Her attempts are failing.

___________

Her missive is short, as always. He imagines the voice that goes along with the words—something powerful, stubborn. But…open to being touched.

It seems this is going to be a grinning day after all.

A flicker of light in the distance--it catches his eye. A train of riders, carrying torches. The spacing between each light is almost exactly equal.

Only one person enforces that much discipline.

VARRO

He wakes up to warm wetness around his cock.

Arya.

The dim glow of moonlight picks out her elfin features; she’s got her mouth on him.

He almost passes out again at the sight.

She looks up, grins. “Good morning,” she whispers.

He summons some kind of incoherent sound out of his mouth; agreement.

She turns away; he needs her, needs to hold her, but then she positions herself over the other shape in the bed.

Oh, yes, alright, that is also a very good idea.

Jaqen still sleeps, His nude form half-uncovered. His cock is erect, as if it expects what is about to
happen to it.

She opens her mouth, her lips close around Him. She swirls her tongue around His cockhead.

The god groans; opens His eyes.

“Good morning,” Arya grins.

The god shakes his head. “Still night, love. See? The moon rises.” He reaches down, gently, gently draws her up over Him.

*Yes put it in her show me please make Him feel good, please please please...*

She straddles Him, rests her head on His chest as he reaches between them, guides His hardness into her.

Varro’s hand has found his own cock.

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Jaqen clutches Arya to Himself, refusing to let her rise. He turns to Varro.

“Did you *like* listening to us?” He asks, mildly sarcastic. Only mildly.

“Did a lot more than *listen* ,” Varro says. He is far too sated, far too comfortable, to be able to respond appropriately to the sarcasm. “Mine now.”

*Even no one allows himself that which is his.*

“Jaqen,” she whispers, “beloved, let me go.”

Jaqen shakes His head, holds her tighter to Himself. “My bride is trapped,” He says. “She cannot go anywhere.”

“Your bride has to take over the *warg-* watch from Bran, and must be allowed to get dressed,” she says.

“This is a dream, my love,” Jaqen murmurs into her hair. “The time for waking is still far away.”

It feels like a *ritual*, a game, where each player knows his part.


She turns her head to him. Nods. Very serious. “It is needful, Varro.”

*Fascinating.*

“A solution to the *Jaqen thinks he needs more sleep* problem *I* never thought of,” he says aloud.

Jaqen snorts. “Your ‘solution’ was nothing of the sort.”

Arya raises a brow.

“A score of us,” says Varro, “riding to Vaes Diaf. Half the camp packed, sky already pink with dawn, and Jaqen H’ghar, with his blanket over his face, pretending he can’t hear us telling him to wake up.”
“What did you do?” Arya whispers.

Varro grins. “Stream nearby. I had a bucket.”

“Winter,” says Jaqen. Flat.

Arya is giggling.

“I did fish out all the ice before I doused you,” Varro points out. “The brother of the layered face, he wouldn’t have.” He rises on an elbow, considers the mock-outrage quivering under Jaqen’s skin. “A reminder—you were a Faceless Man on a mission with your brothers, Jaqen, not an indolent pasha in a harem, surrounded by odalisques.”

Jaqen glares at him. “One day you will feed me peeled grapes with your own hand to make up for that morning.”

Varro smiles, moves closer to the gods. “There are many transgressions I need to make up for. Perhaps we can start with the most recent, move backwards?”

“Intriguing,” says Jaqen. “Tell me more.”

*He’s in a forgiving mood.*

Would be *insane* if He wasn’t, after what He woke up to, but gods are just as capable of madness as their renegades.

Varro comes closer still, till he is but a breath away from them. He leans over the god’s face, his hand resting on the small of her back, the arched hollow of her as she lies on top of Him.

“I love the handful of the earth that you are,” he whispers.

Jaqen’s eyes widen, just slightly. Jaqen *has* to know that Arya is in on this, that she’s the one that has taught Varro this thing he speaks now.

“Because of its meadows,” he says, as he leans down, a breath away from Jaqen’s lips. “Vast as a planet.”

Irony, or coincidence, or some deeper resonance? That the verse Varro held to himself for two centuries until he gave it to Jaqen in the mill, the verse that has always been “for Jaqen” in his mind, it is by the same poet that Jaqen carries in His saddlebags?

Jaqen’s pupils have dilated. Her breathing, it plays with theirs, she rises and falls upon His chest.

“I have no other star,” he says to the god, every kernel of him yearning for Jaqen’s touch. “You are my replica of the multiplying universe.”

Jaqen’s hold on her has slackened; she turns, her thighs pressed against Varro, her breath a hushed counterpoint to his heartbeath.

“Your wide eyes are the only light I know,” Varro murmurs, “from extinguished constellations.”

He is lost, a little bit, Jaqen’s eyes, fixed on him, His lips parted like the first unfurling of a shoot in the moist spring. Jaqen’s hand, warm, upon his shoulder just...touching him. Touching him, because He *wants* to.

...*the only light I know*...
Varro is forgetting the words.

The god has risen, and she rises with him, her hands on Varro, His mouth a whispered caress across Varro’s throat; His tongue tastes Varro’s pulse.

“Your skin throbs like the streak, of a meteor through rain,” Jaqen whispers.

Oh.

“Your hips were that much of the moon for me,” He says; His hands caress her hips, once, and then fall away from her, free her.

Varro smiles, soft, the blurred world sharp only about them.

Jaqen traces the shape of Varro’s lips with His thumb. “Your deep mouth and its delights,” He says, “that much sun.”

“Your heart,” Varro replies, “fiery with its long red rays--”

“Was that much ardent light.” His voice is hoarse, stronger. He needs no touch to confine either of them, they lean into Him, they mold themselves to Him, and He seeps into them, skin-to-skin, night, heavy, thick, poured into shadows upon the earth. “Like honey in the shade.”

“So I pass across your burning form,” Varro whispers as he does; Jaqen’s skin is warm, a fire raging in the deep of Him. “So I pass across your burning forms, kissing you--compact and planetary…”

Her skin is cool, indifferent save where it touches them and then she loves them, there, as the sheets of arctic ice love the still, dark waters they form over. “My dove, my globe.”

A tremble, in the air; amber and gold, it breathes.

His forehead rests against Jaqen’s chest, Jaqen’s arm around his shoulders.

He is still, stretched taut within the nearness of them.

She moves, shattering the moment; she slithers out of the bed, out of their reach.

“Make sure He doesn’t fall back asleep,” she says to Varro. “Mormonts will be close now, Sansa wants the both of you there.”

Him and Jaqen, they sit up fully; off-balance, still half in the world of breath, and word and gold-gleaming light wrapped around their minds’ eyes.

“Well played, my mercenary heart,” murmurs Jaqen, looking at Arya. “Make good your escape while you set him and me to distracting each other.”

She smirks at the god.

“Go,” Varro says to her. A smile, between them, both of their “mercenary” hearts locked to the same beat: I’ll take it from here.

SANSA
The torchlit procession of riders snakes its way in through the main gates. She is prepared; Sara and Beron stand behind her, holding the mead-horns. Sandor stands to the right of her, Jaqen and Daorys to her left.

Lyanna dismounts. Ten-and-three now, she has grown tall, she is almost of a height with Arya. She runs lightly up the steps, reaches for the horn. The ritual words are exchanged, the horn handed to the first of Lyanna’s riders—her second-in-command, Rhogent Wymer.

A quick hand-clasp, between Sansa and Lyanna.


“Lyanna,” says Jaqen, his voice laced with his customary mockery; they clasp forearms.

Then the Lord of Bear Island grins at Sandor. “Still alive, Scarface,” she says.

“Looks like it, little bear,” he replies, grinning himself.

Sansa takes a deep breath.

Be grateful. Be gracious. It is needful—he has a role in the war to come.

“Prince Daorys,” she says, “may I introduce Lyanna Mormont, Lord of Bear Island. Lady Lyanna, Prince Daorys, our foster-kin from Essos.”

Daorys gives Lyanna a full, courtly bow.

“Prince of where?” asks Lyanna.

Daorys grins. “Nowhere, my Lady,” he says. “All titles are empty if one is dispossessed of the lands that go with them. But say the word, I’ll borrow a small army from Jon and go establish a Princedom wherever you want.”

By the sound of metal on stone, it seems Brienne of Tarth has finally answered the summons.


A chorus of low-voiced “Lady Brienne”s from the men; Sansa just nods in Brienne’s direction, exchanges a look with Sandor. Sandor nods, gives a vague wave to Jaqen and Daorys’s general direction, then strides off towards the war-room.

Brienne looks at Daorys, hesitant. They have not been introduced. Sansa forgoes the opportunity—Lyanna is drooping, it is time to show her to her suites. It has been a long ride for the folks of Bear Island, they will rest for at least a half-day now that they can do so with a free mind, behind stone walls and away from the undead.

“I remember you,” says Lyanna, giving Brienne a considering look. “Why are you wearing full plate armor? Are we under siege? Is there a tournament I was excluded from?”

Sansa struggles to keep her face under control.

Brienne looks nonplussed. “A...a knight is always prepared for anything, my lady.”

Lyanna gives her a look. “Except for falling into a lake—and then you’ll drown.”

“Slide, surely, Lady Mormont,” says Daorys. “Lakes are all frozen over.”
Lyanna transfers her glare to Daorys.

Jaqen is smirking as he grabs Daorys’s elbow. “Come along, Your Highness, we’re done here.”

Daorys looks wounded—he places his hand over his heart, gives Sansa a deep bow; the one he turns on Lyanna is a little bit deeper, even.

He chases it with a wink; Jaqen doesn’t give Lyanna enough time to work up her outrage, he almost drags Daorys away.

*They play-act so very well*, Sansa thinks. Even she almost fell into the trap of Daorys as a dissolute courtier.

“Ugh,” says Lyanna--her voice is pitched to carry down the corridor. “He’s far too pretty. And flirtatious.”

“I only flirt with women that wield swords,” Daorys calls out from behind them.

Sansa rolls her eyes as they walk down the corridors. Brienne is trailing them from a goodly distance, her gaze almost boring a hole in Sansa’s back.

*She’s heard the rumors. Better I take her with me to White Harbor than leave her here to foment more discord.*

“Oh,” asks Lyanna, her voice very low now. “He only flirts with—”

“No,” says Sansa, her voice equally low. “He doesn’t flirt. He pretends.”

Realization dawns on Lyanna’s face.

“He’s one of those,” she murmurs. She’s one of the inner circle, one of the very few outside the family to know of the Stark alliance with the House of Black and White. “I thought I smelled it,” she says, “oranges and...something. I liked the other one better--lemongrass.” She looks at Sansa. “But they’re all too pretty.”

Sansa grimaces. “A scar or two would give Daorys’s face more character.”

Lyanna looks to her, raises an eyebrow. Sansa dismisses it.

“Since we are gossiping,” says Lyanna, and her mouth curls, “not sure I’m grateful to you for teaching me that, but still. My maester heard a rumor, last village in--you with Sandor, as a reward for losing a fight?”

Sansa sighs. “The rumor was necessary--he was losing face with his men.”

She explains the story--Brienne of Tarth, the challenge. Sansa’s solution.

“My hem is muddied enough,” she adds, “and I don’t mind muddying the entire dress, ripping it to shreds, if it betters, even infinitesimally, the chances of our people coming home alive.”

Lyanna nods, slowly. “I would have had her whipped, for not following protocol. Your way is...I’m not sure if it is better or worse, but it works.”

“I considered a whipping,” says Sansa, a bit of anger licking at her throat, “But she’s a very good fighter, and loyal--trustworthy, even if she’s very prickly. The sole heir to House Tarth. We can’t afford to let someone like that go. I’m going to take her with me to White Harbor--maybe she can
be drawn into something more than reluctant cooperation with the way things are now.”

Lyanna is quiet. “We need everyone,” she whispers, finally. Thinking, no doubt, of the reason she is here--to learn to control her warg talent.

“I can warg now,” says Sansa; there’s a bit of glee in her voice.

“Warg what? Wolves, direwolves, ravens?”

Sansa looks straight ahead. “Rabbits.”

A snort. Then a giggle, from the girl walking beside her. “Rabbits,” says Lyanna.

“There’s a lot of them around,” mutters Sansa. “Makes it easier. And if you say anything, Lyanna Mormont…”

Stifled giggles.

Brienne of Tarth has lengthened her stride. She catches up to them. “Lady Mormont,” she begins.

“I prefer my wartime rank, Lady Brienne,” interrupts Lyanna. “Legion Commander Mormont.”

Sansa doesn’t allow her smile to show on her face.

Lyanna is very fond of Sandor.

Jaqen

He lets go of Varro’s arm as they turn a bend in the corridor.

“No, no,” says Varro, nudging him with an elbow, “you must keep me under control--I might decide to go back, flirt with Ragnar the Cruel’s understudy a bit more.”

Jaqen reaches out, through himself, and feeds that part of him that beats within Varro’s ribcage. “I need to touch you to keep you controlled?” he asks.

Varro’s awareness flicks over Jaqen’s side; the sensation of fingertips resting at the back of his neck. His Chosen’s gaze grows bolder as they move down the corridor, sweeping over Jaqen’s form.

“Eyes, love,” Jaqen warns. A serving-maid is walking past.

“Yes, I know,” says Varro. “Northerners can’t read jack shit.”

“You swear a lot,” says Jaqen.

“Apparently. What was the question? You asked one.”

Jaqen shakes his head. “I forget.”

They’re walking far, far too close to one another for the public hallways of Winterfell. A familiar madness rises in Jaqen’s veins; it makes reason into some mountain sighted far in the distance--too much trouble to bother with when the plains of unreasoning want are far more pleasant.

Promised her Cersei Lannister last time it got this bad. Jaqen grins a little. Jaqen H’ghar-- worst
“You free for a bit?” Varro asks.

“A quarter-watch before I meet with Jon.”

Varro gives him a side-glance. “Favor.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“I want to climb the tower I was going to jump from, and spit off the side.”

Jaqen can’t quite keep all expression from his face.

“Would like you to come,” Varro adds.

“Yes,” he says.

“And I want you to delay meeting the king, a little,” adds Varro.

“Done.”

Varro looks at him for long moments. “And I want a full suit of Valyrian steel armor,” he says slowly.

“Done.”

Varro narrows his eyes. “And I want a vat’s worth of molasses to be smeared all over Sandor Clegane’s trainees.

“Strange,” says Jaqen, “but done.”

Varro smiles then, lupine; a little bit of madness leaks out of his mouth as well. “And what do you want?”

“You, at the moment,” says Jaqen.

Varro exhales. “I rescind the last request.”


“What else do you want?” Varro asks.

“An end to slavery.”

“Done,” says Varro. “A man cannot control the exact timing of it, but done.”

Jaqen grins. He knows an oath when he hears it. “Tower first,” he says.

A CHAMBERMAID

A chance meeting at the end of the Long Gallery—she runs into one of the other chambermaids, a new one, from the Lord’s Keep. She smiles in greeting—the woman has the right hair.

We gather.

Both of them are drawn, synchronous, to look down the hallway. To look at two men, speaking
quietly in a language she cannot understand.

“Not Faceless Men,” says the new chambermaid.

She shakes her head, rueful. “No. They cannot be. The lust rises off them like heat off desert sands.”

Faceless Men are dead men. They do not lust. They do not want. Automatons to their cold, dead god.

The new chambermaid sighs, a hand on her breast. “Poor Princess Arya. I feel so sorry for her.”

JAQEN

They climb. Jaqen has to help Varro in places—his lover’s ambition outpaces his recovery.

Some satisfaction: he wouldn’t have managed this himself if he had tried to jump.

The tower is crumbling, but the stone ledge that runs up on the inside lip of it is mostly secure. Jaqen sits, his legs dangling over the hollow core. Varro lies with his head in Jaqen’s lap, catching his breath.

The teeth of the broken bonds twist through him, through his soul; counterpoint, amplification to the wretched wails that still sound under the Wall. And yet his mind, his body, they lie at peace with one another.

Because the heart has made it so.

He strokes Varro’s hair, once.

“Everything comes back down to a single name,” says Varro.

Arya.

“I think she’s cleverer than you,” Varro adds.

Jaqen snorts. “You think I don’t know that?” he asks. “You being here barely balances it; you’re supposed to be the intelligent one and she still leads you around like a bull with a ring through its nose.”

“The clever one,” murmurs Varro, his eyes half-closed. “The intelligent one. So what does that make you?”

“The pretty one, by process of elimination,” says Jaqen, smirking. “But I don’t even get to be that—the two of you are unconscionably beautiful.”

Varro opens his eyes. “And there it is,” he says.

“Cringeworthy?”

“Am I cringing?”

“Looks like leering to me.”

Varro shrugs. “Close enough,” he says. “I was going for ‘inviting’.”
Jaqen leans forward; he captures Varro’s lips. Need is banked, lust is banked; just the lips under his, consuming him, slow, as a moment stretches towards the horizon and all that can be, *is.*

“That was the fifth day,” says Varro, as they part after some length of time of which Jaqen has kept no count.

“What was?” he murmurs.

“Couldn’t die before doing this,” says Varro. “just the once.”

Almost savage, Jaqen seals his mouth around Varro’s and he inhales all the breath in Varro’s lungs.

With a shudder, Varro lets it go.

Jaqen breathes him, deep into himself, then returns the breath, breathes it out into Varro’s mouth and Varro breathes it down. And then Varro exhales into Jaqen’s lungs and the breath is searingly cold.

*Arya.*

They breathe; they pass salvation back and forth between them.

Varro gasps as they pull apart.

“We’re on the tower,” says Jaqen. “You can jump now.”

“You are angry.”

“Not at you.”

Varro raises a hand, traces it over Jaqen’s brow. Jaqen leans into the touch.

“Not *in* me anymore, Jaqen, you can’t rage at Asshai through me.”

“Suppose not,” Jaqen mutters.

Varro’s hand shifts, closes upon the back of Jaqen’s neck. He draws Jaqen down to his mouth again.

**THE MASTER STONEMASON**

He shakes his head as he looks across the ruins of the northern wing, far-seer held at his eye.

“Not Faceless Men,” he mutters.

“How not?” asks the drover, perched upon a sundered stone block.

“T ook *far* too long to climb the tower.”

“The blonde one was sick, I heard.”

The Master Stonemason shakes his head. “Faceless Men do not get sick.” Faceless Men do not feel pain. They do not slow down. They do not stop. “These two are mercenaries. Pulling the wool over the Starks’ eyes.”

“What are they doing?”
“Too dark to tell, exactly,” says the Master Stonemason. “But fucking, given how they looked at each other before they started the climb.”

The drover shakes his head. “I feel so, so sorry for Myra,” he says. “She had her heart set on the blonde one. Thought he was a prince or something.”

JAQEN

The moon is large, bloated; it sits upon the horizon, presses down upon the ground, keeps it from touching the sky.

“Feels like I’m going mad,” says Varro. “Madder than normal. Just…” he makes an explosive motion around his head, as if his mind has burst open.

Jaqen grins. “She’ll do that to a man.”

Varro gives him a look. “Not just her.”

Mmm. Suppose not.

“What do you think she’d want?” Varro asks. “She already has a very good blade.”

“Lannisters,” says Jaqen.

Varro raises an eyebrow.

Jaqen sighs, and tells him about the “bouquet”.

Varro listens, silent. “Transportation would have been a bit of a problem,” he observes, when Jaqen nears the end of the telling. “What did you end up doing with the heads?”

“God rid of them.”

Varro grins. “She’d have loved it. Have you told her?”

“She still thinks I’m sane,” says Jaqen, wry. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“Pity there’s no Lannisters nearby,” says Varro. “I’ll have to think of a suitably macabre alternate.”

I’m not sure I want to clean up what’s left behind when a renegade starts giving “macabre” gifts to the Wind.

“She can be placated with poetry, these days,” suggests Jaqen.

“That’s your domain,” counters Varro. “I do numbers.”

Yes, please, whisper trigonometric sums into her ear at night, I want to see how far that gets you.

“Further than you’d think,” says Varro. He sounds a bit too sure of himself. He stretches. “Getting colder. I feel the change but the body doesn’t seem to react.”

“Mmm.”

“Well, there go any courtesan missions she could have taken,” says Varro. “Can’t leave magically winter-proof people in the wake of the assassination.”

“The Many-Faced God is absolutely devastated at this turn of events,” says Jaqen. “Two of his
servants won’t fuck their way to a kill?” He tsks.

Varro cranes his neck back. “Two?” he asks. “Arya...me? Quite an assumption there, Jaqen.”

Jaqen’s thoughts come to a screeching halt.

He...

I just tried to constrain a Lorathi.

“A man apologizes,” he says.

Varro smiles a little. “I forget how inexperienced your heart actually is,” he muses. “Infatuation creates a state of mind that is almost impossible to counter in small things.” He snorts. “A full suit of Valyrian Steel Armor.” Varro reaches out, pulls Jaqen down again to press a kiss onto his lips. “Bouquets of Lannisters.”

Another swipe of Varro’s tongue, and Jaqen must still his heartbeat, pause, return the kiss with the kind of detachment he did not know he could summon, not with his Chosen.

“It was a very big assumption,” says Varro. “Also correct, as it happens.”

Jaqen grits his teeth. “You...what is wrong with you?”

“What?” demands Varro.

“Just...” Jaqen shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“Say it,” Varro growls.

Jaqen sighs. “Up and down a mountain upon a runaway horse with you,” he says. “Twisted sideways, breath in my mouth out of fear one moment and then just... euphoria. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Varro raises an eyebrow. “How was it with Arya?”

“Direct,” says Jaqen. “No backwards, no twisting, no side-steps. Some jealously, twice, on my part. But she always played it straight, no need to second-guess her.”

Varro chuckles. “So you got unbelievably lucky once,” he says, “you think it’ll happen again?”

“A man only has so much capacity for play,” says Jaqen. “If the time and energy is expended in playing outside of the bed, you get exhausted tokens in bed.”


Jaqen chokes. “I don’t...I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

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“Stop games outside the bed,” says Varro. “I agree. Marry me.”

“Already married,” says Jaqen.

Varro gives him a look. “When’s one spouse stopped a Valyrian from taking another?”

“Um.”

“See?” Varro says. “You don’t want direct. You want to play—as long as it’s your game and no
You could pull it off with her—wouldn’t have, had she been faceless for but a single decade. You can’t with me, I’ve got stakes of my own— _that’s_ what sends you up and down the mountain.”

“ _Stakes_ implies a bet, a chance, a _bluff_ that can be called,” murmurs Him of the Many Faces. “Yes. If she agrees, of course.”

Varro moves to rise. “Excellent. Jon and Bran are probably _warging_ , but Sansa’s still packing, no? Some family should stand with you.”

“Two witnesses are customary in the North,” says Jaqen. “Why don’t we _all_ go to White Harbor? Zural should attend your _marriage_ —Arya’s teacher, your student. It’s almost required.”

They pause. Consider each other, eyes narrowed.

“Mutual disarmament?” suggests Varro.

“As long as you concede your bluff,” says Jaqen.

“I concede _nothing_ ,” mutters Varro. “But one must always allow the loser to save face.” He smirks up at Jaqen. “A jest, my lord. And now it’s time for you to go meet with Jon, and for me to wrestle with that miserly son-of-a-bitch that’s running the armory. He seems to think all weapons in Winterfell are _his_ personal property.”

**ARYA**

She finds Varro in the armory, arguing with the quartermaster. The issue is resolved, though it takes all the clout her name can muster (_I am Arya Stark_. _I do not need written orders to take a weapon from Stark stores_), and she drags her lover to the Great Hall to break fast. They arrive at the table, arm-in-arm, only to find Sansa and Sandor already there. All the candelabra are lit; breakfast is still bread and cheese, but the quality and quantity of cheese has gone up.

Sansa’s head rises—she takes in Arya and Varro with a coolly neutral look. _As long as she keeps her disapproval to herself..._

Arya takes her customary seat to Sansa’s left. Jon chooses that moment to enter the Hall, flanked by Jaqen. The three are moving very slowly—Bran is at Jon’s right. On crutches.

Bran’s arms are trembling by the time he reaches the table, but he lowers himself very carefully onto a seat; slumps. Jaqen reaches around His Champion, runs a wide leather strap around Bran’s torso, straps him to the hard wooden back of the chair.

Bran looks up, and she sees him give Varro a radiant smile. Varro acknowledges it with a nod—mild approval. For a Lorathi in the role of “teacher”, _that_ nod is practically an admission of overwhelming pride.

Varro reaches behind his chair for the thing he’d made her threaten the quartermaster for—a two-handed battle-axe, the haft lengthened for mounted combat.

Bran’s eyes fixate on the light glinting off the double-moon of the axe’s blades.

“ _Only_ for self-defence,” says Varro. “You will hold mounted position with the command-core. But
we will train with this, and the saddle Lord Tyrion designed for you.”

Bran’s mouth has parted with glee.

Everyone, even Sansa, is grinning.

“Reminds me,” says Jon, “we need to rework the formations of the First--the Women’s Auxiliary won’t be ready in time to bolster the spear-wall.”

Jaqen raises an eyebrow.

“Commander Brienne,” says Sandor. He sounds frustrated. “Reluctant commander makes disloyal troops. A lot of muttering—a score of women deserted in the last seven day.”

“Lady Brienne,” says Sansa. Her tone is very sharp. “She has been re-assigned. She will continue to vet the new hires, Jaqen’s way, but I’m trying to find a permanent position that is more suited to her stature.” She sighs. “We’ll see what happens after White Harbor.”

_Brienne’s a straight fighter; counter-espionage will not work for her, long-term._

Jon looks to Varro—a question: _will you fight?_

Varro, in turn, gestures to Jaqen, deferring the decision to the god.

“Command core,” says Jaqen.

It make sense--there are two targets that will attract the Night King’s ire upon the battlefield: the King in the North, and the greenseer.

Varro will protect Bran.

But who will watch _Jon’s_ back when two-thirds of his Riders are leading centuries, and the rest are leading legions?

The purpose of Brienne of Tarth becomes clear.

“Brienne’s a good fighter,” says Arya, leaning her elbows on the table.

“She bested me,” says Sandor, gruff. Hesitates. “And I was in better shape then.”

_Something off here._

“Younger, I think you mean,” says Jaqen. “I’ve told you before, Sandor, you need to sit this war out--you’re too old to play soldier.”

Jon smirks at his brother-by-law. “I agree with you wholeheartedly, Jaqen--men over a certain age should spend their dotage before a hearth-fire, dawdling the grandchildren on a knee.”

Arya chokes. Bran has dissolved into laughter.

“If _that_ is the case,” says Varro, popping a bit of cheese in his mouth, “the Princesses need to give more attention to younger men, no? For the war effort and all.”

“And where would we find such men?” asks Sansa, falsely-sweet.

“Well, for starters,” says Varro, very serious, “ _I’m_ younger than Jaqen, and yet I languish, without
a single kind word from the two most beautiful women in the North.”

Jaqen leans back in His chair. “He languishes,” the god murmurs.

Jon grins. “Skill counts for quite a bit with Stark women, Daorys--Jaqen is a better swordsman than you.”

“Is not!” says Bran.

The god frowns at Bran. “Thought you were championing my cause, Brandon Stark.”

Bran’s eyes grow wide--feigned innocence. “But...but battle-axe!”


_Jon’s on our side!

“Valar dohaeris,” says Varro, gives the king a small, seated bow.

“Speaking of flirtation,” says Arya, turning to Jon, “did you get any letters while we were away?”

“A lot of romance,” says Jon. “You wouldn’t be interested.”

_Yes I would!

“I need a poem to send back,” Jon says.

“What kind of poem?” she asks.

Jon gives her his one-sided smile. “Something that speaks to Daenerys’s and my mutual, heartfelt longing.”

She pretends to think. “Jon, I think you’re in luck. I have just the thing. My own composition, as it happens.”

She ignores Jaqen’s groan.

**SANSA**

They’ve all lingered far too long at the breakfast table. She is making up for the lost time as best she can when Jaqen finds her in her bower, paring down her wardrobe. It is not wartime, and there are important audiences to consider, but they cannot travel as fast as they need to if she takes a trunkful of clothes.

_One saddlebag, that’s it._

Jaqen leans against the door-frame. “Sansa,” he says, “Would you have a quarter-watch to spare?”

She hesitates. “If it is very important,” she says.

“Naught to do with the war. A personal favor.”

She raises an eyebrow.
“Daorys,” he says. “We--”

“I cannot,” she interrupts.

His turn, to hesitate. “He has done nothing to invite your acrimony, Sansa.”

Durian Stark is a hypocrite, she thinks. She is about to benefit from a thing every fiber in her condems.

She puts on a sickly smile. “I have no ill-will towards him,” she says, “just a little concerned, with Zural in White Harbor, whether Daorys will be sufficient protection.”

Sadness, then, in Jaqen’s gaze. “He will be. You have my word.”

She walks up to him, lays her hand gently on his cheek for a moment. “I must take counsel with Lyanna now, Jaqen,” she says.

He moves aside. “As you wish.”

ARYA

…but only because He thought it was a bluff, says Varro, looking up. He is on his knees before her. Her legs are spread wide, she leans against a stone wall.

Her fingers are wound through his hair. She grips him as he laps at her cunt, hungry; she overflows with arousal for him.

“We got Him into the habit of saying ‘yes’,” she whispers, head thrown back, eyes closed. “We showed Him how much He means to you, we overwhelmed Him with contradictory information—where did we go wrong?”

Varro sighs, kisses the inside of her thigh. “Maybe we should have only used one of those.” His mouth returns to her core. He opens her with his fingers; his tongue probes deeper in her.

She moans, raises her hips.

Thirteen days. You are going to be gone for thirteen days.

“You taste so good,” he whispers.

They are in a small room near the armory; it used to be for storing the fletcher’s supplies. Nothing but debris now—the fletcher works out of the newly repaired barracks.

A convenient place for a tryst--nobody comes here.

“He’s playing some game of His own,” Varro mutters. “Threatened me with Zural, I—”

“To be fair,” says an entirely unexpected voice—she whirls, pulls her knife—didn’t sense anything. “You,” says Jaqen, “threatened me first. With Sansa.”

Her eyes are wide. Why didn’t we sense you? We should have sensed you.

The god smirks, walks into the room. He looks down at the ground, carefully moves a rusty, bent metal hook out of His way with the tip of His boot. “What an interesting choice of locale for
depravity,” He says. “But then, the depravity is a cover, isn’t it?”

He has a very malicious smile on His face as He reaches them. Varro rises, his lips glistening with her arousal; Jaqen leans forward, His tongue flicks out, snakelike, to lick at Varro’s mouth.

“Mmm. Maybe not just a cover,” He murmurs.

“Why didn’t I sense you?” she asks, sullen at having been caught.

Jaqen smirks at her, even as He places a hand over her stomach, leans in for a kiss. “I have my ways.” He grins. “Very useful, my ways, when I find my Chosen are plotting, plotting away…”

“What ways?” she asks, almost in tears from the frustration; His kiss was a light, teasing thing when all she wants is to be devoured.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” He says. He smiles over His shoulder at Varro. “Or you will. Eventually.”

She suddenly realizes Varro looks a bit…frozen. Trepidation.

“Not wise,” agrees Jaqen, “playing these kinds of games with me, my loves.”

“Not his fault,” says Arya, moving away from the wall’s support to stand between Him and Varro. “My idea.”

“I started it,” mutters Varro.

She turns her head, glares at him: stop being honest.

Jaqen chuckles. “A comment from Sansa is going to make you question us, Varro? If you thought that was believable, I have this amazing eight-legged horse I’d like to sell you.”

“Fuck you,” says Varro.

“Not enough time, sadly,” says Jaqen. He turns, shaking His head, and just… walks away.

“Fuck you!” she calls out behind His back.

How did I not sense Him?

He pauses in the doorway, looks over His shoulder. “You two coming? Jon’s cooling his heels in the godswood—not nice, keeping the King waiting.”

She exchanges a panicked glance with Varro as she rushes to pull up her britches, he wipes his face, tries to smooth his hair.

Neither of them meet Jaqen’s eyes as they emerge from the storage room.

Jaqen chuckles, again. “Fucking amateurs.”

SANSA

There are so many little tasks to take care of before she leaves…she’s rushing towards the war-room, there’s a supply-train she needs to confirm has arrived. A whirl of activity surrounds her--
more than strictly necessary, she’s been inventing tasks for herself as the day passes--it keeps her from worrying about the how of dealing with the Iron Bank.

*Daorys said he’d brief me on the way.*

She will bring it up earlier than *that*—everyone will eat a warm luncheon before they leave, it’s a good time to coordinate strategy. And introduce Brienne, so there are no surprises on the road.

She’s passing by one of the large arched windows that faces the godswood; light catches her eye.

*More light than usual.*

People, standing before the heart tree.

Jon.

Three figures in gray, the two tall ones flanking the shortest.

A shadow upon the ground, next to Jon--Bran.

*Praying before the journey?*

But it looks like *Jon* is leading the service.

“Death cultists,” she mutters as she walks on. It’s one of Sandor’s favourite mutterings, whenever he catches Bran and Jon at prayer.

*Nothing they do ever makes sense unless you look at it sideways and upside down. Daorys is loyal to Jaqen. And Jaqen trusts far too much, he will not want to see what is right under his nose.*

Sansa sighs. And with difficulty, she drags her mind back to the “useful”.

*Bolton colors.*

A year ago, she burned each and every piece of red-and-pink clothing in the Stark wardrobes, including one of her father’s doublets.

She almost collides with one of the porters, carrying an armload of wood for the hearth.

“*So sorry,*” he says.

A new face. She smiles, gracious; her mind turns to the list of tasks she must delegate to Arya.

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The noon-meal is bread, and a savory rabbit-stew--just her and Daorys at the moment, dwarfed by the empty table. The silence between them is strained.

She serves herself a tiny helping--vegetables and potatoes, no meat. Because, like the fool she is, she had to go and *name* the first rabbit she *warged*. And he’s not going to be wary of humans much now, not after all the petting she and Bran gave him. Means he could very well end up in a stew pot.

A clanking sound--it is coming towards them.

“I invited Brienne to join us,” says Sansa.
The knight in question enters the Hall through the eastern corridor.

“She’ll have to leave the plate behind,” murmurs Daorys.

Sansa nods, terse.

_She doesn’t know how light we rode to Bear Island, to the other Houses, before the Battle of Winterfell._

Brienne of Tarth approaches the table, then comes to an awkward stop, staring at Daorys.

“Prince Daorys, may I please introduce the Lady Brienne of Tarth,” says Sansa. He gives Sansa a questioning look: _we’re still playing this game?_ Sansa returns the look with a very small movement--one shoulder rises a fraction of an inch, falls “Lady Brienne,” says Sansa, “Prince Daorys, our foster-brother, from Essos.”

She hears what could have been a sigh in Daorys’s breath. But he rises, gives Brienne a small bow. Then he moves, pulls back a chair--one to his left. He gestures to the knight; he has a small King’s Landing type of smile on his face.

Brienne looks bemused; she mounts the step to the dais, smiles widely at “Prince Daorys”, and folds herself into the seat. Gives a small, seated bow to Sansa.

“I did not know the Starks had such deep connections in Essos,” she says.

Heir to House Tarth, Renly Baratheon’s guard--Brienne is not entirely ignorant of the way things were, what House was allied with whom.

The thought flashes in an eyeblink.

“Syrio Forel,” says Sansa. “The First Sword of Braavos. He--” she turns to Daorys. “He was Arya’s…”

“Tyne’kepa,” supplies Daorys.

_Second-father._

It stems, Zural had told her, from a Braavosi custom--the responsibilities of a Second in a dual, to keep safe the duelist’s family, should the dualist be killed.

It makes a certain kind of sense. If Eddard Stark extended his _patronage_ to Syrio Forel instead of merely hiring him, the former First Sword of Braavos might see it as his responsibility to save Arya’s life, to act as “Tyne’kepa”. Nobody knows _what_ the agreement between Syrio Forel and Eddard Stark had been, but patronage is as good a guess as any other. Sufficient, at least, for the Sealord to call Arya, in his first formal letter, as “Second-daughter of my beloved teacher”.

Daorys smiles. “Braavosi custom, Braavos honours it,” he says, “it does not matter if it baffles your nobility here.”

Brienne hesitates. “Yes.”

Daorys turns to Sansa then, a small smile playing about his mouth. “Small world,” he says.

She raises an eyebrow.

“Tormo used to be _very_ hot-headed,” he says. “Ran with this ragtag group of braavos, always half
an insult away from taking mortal offence.”

She leans back in her chair.

*I have learned what I can of Tormo Fregar, Daorys. Those days are twenty years in the past for him. He is a consummate politician now, for all that he still wears his sword at his belt.*

A reputation, once made…

Daorys shakes his head. “A commotion, blocking the street--nobody knew what I was, of course, just a man with a blade, minding my own damn business, but that’s no defence if a Second’s needed, not in Braavos--I got dragged into the mess.”

“You played Second to Tormo Fregar?” she asks.

*You could have been at most, what, ten?*

Daorys snorts. “Half the city’s played Second to Tormo Fregar at some point. *Sloppy* fighter--heard he got better after Syrio took him in hand.*

*He’s telling me this for a reason. It means Daorys is much older than he appears. How old is he? Too old to dally with Arya, she’s ten-and-seven! But, of course, the older the man the more susceptible he is to a passionate young woman’s charms.*

She drags her mind back to the present.

*Daorys wears a death-mask, like the one Arya showed me. At all times.*

But he must take it off from time to time, to wash his real face at the least--assassin-magic can’t do everything, or Arya and Jaqen wouldn’t bathe once a day, would they?

He’s telling her this so there are no surprises on the road. So she can cover for him if he needs to take the mask off.

It also explains how all the assassins are “good looking”. They just pick an appealing mask.

*Zural was lying to me the whole time--the biggest lie of all. His face was false.*

It makes her feel better, somehow.


Silence descends once again around the table. Sansa opens her mouth to cut through it--she is interrupted by the creak of heavy doors, a sudden draft of cold air. Arya steps into the Hall, knocking snow off her boots. Her hair is dishevelled. She carries something tucked under her arm.

Arya stomps up to the table.

*“Ke’mak?” asks Daorys, now looking very amused.*

Arya glares down at whatever it is she carries. “Bran told me to keep it safe. I have *no* idea what I’m supposed to do with it.” And she bends, puts her load on the ground. A fuzzy white shape darts out, it…

*“Ser Hops-a-lot!” Sansa exclaims.*
Everyone turns to stare at her. She colors. Clears her throat. “Um. Bran wanted a pet.”

“Prince Daorys” has curled up, suppressed laughter wracking his frame. Arya looks like she’s about to punch him, she does, but suddenly he’s no longer hunched over, he’s got her arm trapped at his side.

“Too slow,” he says.

Arya’s pressed up against his side; she is looking down at him lovingly, all propriety be damned. Then, as if the two can feel Sansa’s glare, they separate, and Arya takes a seat.

“Princess Arya,” says Brienne. The jerky bow she gives Arya is of a different caliber than the one she gave Sansa. “It has been a long time since we saw each other.”

Arya smiles. “All grown up, as you see,” she says. “Alive. Sandor was partially wrong--there was no safety for me in Westeros. But There was a House, across the Narrow Sea, willing to take in a Stark, regardless of whom it might enrage.”

Daorys looks up to Arya, briefly, his long lashes framing a very intent gaze.

Dear gods, this is ridiculous. He is head-over-heels in love with her.

Brienne sighs. “If I had but known, I could have taken you to Braavos myself, all those years ago.”

Resentment, under the surface regret.

So it’s Arya’s fault, for running away and stealing your chance at redeeming your oath?

“You need to consider a perspective other than your own, Lady Brienne,” says Arya. She gives the knight a very level look. “I didn’t know you from a hole in the ground. What I learned of you came from your mouth--that you were sworn to my mother, but she died while you were protecting Jaime Lannister--” she looks pointedly at the gold, lion-hilted sword at Brienne’s belt, hidden by the table. “And you carried a Lannister sword.”

“Jaime Lannister is not like the others!” says Brienne.

So it is like that.

“Your perspective,” says Arya. “Either way, I had no cause to trust you. Instead of thanking the man that had kept me alive all through the Riverlands, killed for me, put food in my belly, you attacked him.”

Brienne’s nostrils have flared; the sinews on her neck stand out with the effort to keep her jaw clenched.

“Done is done,” says Arya. “Obviously, I trust you now--you took my sister to safety at the Wall. It is enough. More than enough.”

“Have you given thought, Brienne, to what position you would like in this household?” Sansa’s voice is coolly neutral.

Brienne glances up from her bowl. A frown. “I…” she hesitates. “You will not replace Sandor Clegane.”

“No,” says Sansa.
“But he will not ride with you to White Harbor,” says Brienne, her voice tight.

Sansa nods.

“It is not right,” says Brienne, “for a guard to abandon his charge.”

Sansa’s jaw clenches.

“And where is your guard, Princess?” asks Brienne. “Commander Jaqen?”

The scorn in her voice...

“My lover, you mean?” Arya asks, dry.

The knight gapes; her gaze slips to Sansa, then down to her plate.

Arya Stark is not the kinds of Princesses you are used to, Brienne. Nor am I. Both of our virtues are non-existent, sacrificed somewhere in the course of this war. We are not proper vehicles for your redemption.

Arya sneers, though the knight does not see it.

“Your honor is your brother’s honor,” says Brienne. “You diminish King Jon if you make japes out of scurrilous rumors instead of countering them.”

“Jon,” says Arya, amused, “has honor enough to lay over the entire North as a mantle, and make up the lack in the rest of us ten times over. He doesn’t need the pitiful handfuls of it that are kept between his sisters’ legs.”

Brienne’s mouth is opening.

Sansa very carefully puts her cup down on the table. “As our mother is dead,” she says, “I believe instructing my younger sister on the graces of her station as a Princess of the North is my responsibility.”

Brienne flushes, an ugly red.

Sansa turns to Arya. “Why is Jaqen in bed?” she asks.

She’s just given Arya free rein to take this to its limit.

“I drugged him,” says Arya, slicing off thick chunks of bread with the serrated saw of a knife, “so I could work on seducing Daorys.”

“Ver’ylli,” warns Daorys.

“You know how paranoid Jaqen is,” says Arya to Sansa, ignoring “Prince Daorys’s” warning. “Doesn’t let me go off anywhere without asking a thousand questions. So I’ve devised a plan--I’m going to get a second lover. Then Jaqen will think I’m with Daorys, Daorys will think I’m with Jaqen, and I’ll get the peace and quiet I need to get work done.”

Daorys clears his throat. “The princesses have a very cutting sense of humor,” he says. “Such a thing serves all of us well in court. It is not meant to insult those they invite to their table.”

Sansa grinds her teeth. But Arya, she accepts the reminder of the parts they have to play.
“Gently done, Daorys,” she says, “but right--Sansa and I get carried away sometimes. A jest, is all.”

Brienne keeps her eyes on her stew. She has stopped eating. “It is not funny,” she mutters. “If you knew the kinds of things they say about you in the kitchens...”

Sansa sighs. 

*She means well. She still has “daughters of Catelyn Stark” plastered over our faces in her head.*

The door behind the dais opens, closes; Sandor enters the Hall. He moves to stand behind the chair to Sansa’s right, leans his crossed forearms upon the chair-back. “Supply wagons were late at the Last Hearth,” he says.

Sansa’s brow furrows. “*How late?”*

“Just two days.” He snorts. “Never seen better coordination of logistics for a wintertime campaign, given the distances involved.”

Sansa acknowledges the compliment with a very small dip of her head, and Sandor lowers himself into the chair with the habit of long practice, simultaneously reaching for the ladle of the stew-pot.

Brienne of Tarth’s eyes widen; her nostrils flare.

*She thought he was just giving a report.*

“So the dog eats at the table with its masters,” the knight mutters.

Three heads whip around to stare at her. Even Daorys looks stunned. But Sandor just sighs, and continues ladling his stew.

“Lady Brienne,” says Sansa quietly, “you are excused.”

Brienne’s cheeks are red—embarrassment, anger.

Silence reigns, punctuated by the clink of Sandor’s spoon against his bowl. Brienne of Tarth clanks to her feet. She bows; Sansa does not look at her.

----

The hour of departure is upon them--Sansa and Daorys walk towards the main courtyard where Brienne of Tarth is supposed to be seeing to the state of the mounts.

“I’m going to rip her face off,” says Sansa, in a tone of wonder. She glances at Daorys. “You think I over-react?”

He shakes his head. “Jaqen followed standard House protocol after Harrenhal, letting the recruit find their own way to Braavos. A mistake--Arya was younger than any we’ve ever recruited, the times were not standard, and she was not some nameless orphan-child with potential. Overwhelming chances that Arya Stark would have died, or been imprisoned as a hostage, or as someone’s unwilling wife. The Hound kept her alive, and free.” He looks to Sansa. “You disapprove of me because of my interference, so I’m not sure what this is worth--but I am on your side. A name is owed to Sandor Clegane--I’ll cut Brienne of Tarth’s face off for him, if he’d like to display it on his mantel.”

“You were telling me the truth,” she says, looking at him sidelong. He wears the unadorned grey...

“As I said.”

“Men are fools,” she replies. “You succumbed to the same weakness that contributed to Zural losing his vocation and his sanity. But all of that, and she stops, in the middle of the corridor, she puts a hand on Daorys’s arm. “All of that is a matter for family--between House Stark and the House of Black and White.” Her voice is a low, furious whisper. “Whatever mess we create between ourselves, it does not concern outsiders. It will be contained.”

Daorys looks very neutral.

“Whatever the reason, you do something for the Starks,” she says.

“I do it for the man I was before I came to Jaqen,” he says quietly. “What was done here...ripples, outwards. It must be stopped. Doing so should liberate the Stark gold--but that is incidental to the main.”

_Gods, this man is strange. I extend an olive branch, and he sweeps it aside._

Sansa drops her hand, starts walking again. “Either way, I know something is owed, from my side,” she says.

“Nothing is owed,” he says.

They are almost upon the courtyard. She doesn’t wait for him to open the door for her, she shoulders it open.

Brienne is loading a second horse with gear.

At the sight of her, Sansa realizes she is still _livid_.

_You diminish the King’s honor...not right for a guard to abandon his charge..._ 

..._dog eats at its table with his masters._

She makes a snap decision. “Leave it, Brienne,” she calls out across the courtyard. “You will stay here--” otherwise I’m going to pay Daorys a gold coin and whatever else the ‘god’ demands, for you to have an ‘accident’.

Brienne whirls around.

Daorys pulls her back. “You should take her,” he says in a low voice. “Bring her around to your way of thinking. She is vulnerable right now, she knows she erred.”

“I don’t need her, or her fucking blade,” Sansa snarls. _Oathkeeper. Lie!_ The smith told Bran--the sword she carries, the smith’s _master_ reforged it, and Gendry Waters thinks it’s called Widowmaker. But there _was_ no widowmaker. It’s half of _Ice_, and its real name is _Widow’s Wail_. For _mother’s_ wail, when the Lannisters cut off Father’s head.”

Daorys’s eyes widen a bit. “Does Arya know?”

“No, not yet.”

Daorys swears. “And the smith _will_ run his mouth off to her first chance he gets.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Someone needs to persuade Brienne of Tarth to give up the blade to Jon, or to
you--it’s the only way she will live past Arya’s finding out.”

“Arya’s not unreasonable, she knows--”

“Arya,” says Daorys, “is entirely unreasonable when it comes to certain things. Neither Jaqen nor I would dare to try to reason with her over this.”

Sansa’s eyes widen a bit.

“I thought it was the Lannister blade,” he mutters. “The House knows Lannisters had one, Brightroar, didn’t know where it went. Arya possibly assumes the same--hard to imagine Ice ending up as that gilded monstrosity.”

“I…” Sansa takes a deep breath. She is unsure. She cannot act when she is unsure. “Brienne may not know where her blade comes from. We have not spoken of it.”

Two figures in grey--Arya and Jaqen--walk through the arches at the far side of the courtyard, packs in their hand.

“What is her relation to Jaime Lannister--why would he give her Valyrian steel?”

Sansa hesitates. “No relation, as far as I know,” she says. “She saved his life, I think. And she’s in love with him, more fool her.” A sidelong glance at Daorys.

Daorys sighs. “Yes, yes, fools everywhere. I know.” He looks towards Jaqen, and Arya, who have not come closer--clearly waiting for him. “I’ll talk to them.”

ARYA

“Looks like Varro and Sansa are on speaking terms, at least,” she says to Jaqen as she catches sight of the two at the other end of the courtyard, heads bent together in discussion.

Jaqen narrows his eyes. “It seems to me he’s trying to get on her good side.”

“Fucking Sansa,” mutters Arya. “Everyone tries to please her.”

“It’s the dresses,” teases Jaqen. “Very discerning.”

Arya grins at her lord. “You should borrow a few from her, then,” she says. “Get the House back on your side much faster.” She recalls the white-and-gold thing from yesterday Sansa has exchanged for a sensible winter riding dress. “Might have to let out the hem--you’re much taller.”

Jaqen sighs. “The skirts are fine--masculine ankles...calves...all the rage in Yi Ti this year. It’s the bodices that trouble me--can’t hide much more than a table-knife in there.”

Arya nods. “That is a problem. I remember you had to cut that blue silk one to ribbons last time, just so I could get at a dagger...”

Jaqen pauses. “Perhaps I was inefficient in the cutting. It requires further experimentation.”

Varro starts jogging across the courtyard, towards them; a little flutter at the pit of her stomach.

“Many ruined dresses?” she asks.
Jaqen nods sagely. “Very many ruined dresses, I extrapolate--sacrifices must be made, in the pursuit of knowledge.”

Varro slows, comes to a stop a half-pace from them. He steps closer. “Loves,” he says, in Imperial Qi, not an inkling of humor anywhere in his expression, “Sansa is spitting fire--she doesn’t want Brienne anywhere near her.”

Jaqen is impassive. “ Entirely expected, after that comment. Brienne can stay behind--we’ll keep her out of Sandor’s hair. There’s you and three of Sandor’s best--a bigger escort is unnecessary, the road to White Harbor is well-secured.”

Over Varro’s shoulder, Arya sees others coming into the courtyard--Jon, and Samwell, and Sandor. Bran, supported between Jon and the Maester. They’re speaking to Sansa--she’s gesticulating, and the lines of fury are unmistakable.

**Sansa needs a holiday, if she’s reacting this poorly to something as small as an insult.**

It’s not a surprise--Sansa has been working like a madwoman for two years now, with neither hope nor support for much of it.

Every man has a breaking point.

“There’s more to it,” says Varro. “The sword Brienne of Tarth carries is a *re* forged blade--reforged in King’s landing five years ago. One half of Ice.”

Her vision films white.

“Arya *wanted* to like Brienne of Tarth,” the Wind says. “Now I know why I made Arya despise her instead.”

Hands, upon her arms. Gentle. “Does *Brienne* know?” Jaqen is asking.

“Sansa’s not sure.”

*Make her like us! We’ll be the best of friends, we’ll weep together over my mother, my father, we’ll weep for every inch of father’s steel she carried all this time. We’ll make her give it up to Jon, make her bend knee and ask for forgiveness, and we’ll make Jon say nice things to her.*

*And then we’ll cut off her arms. And her legs--we won’t let her die, not like that--first we’ll pin the limbs back onto her torso, in all the wrong places!*  

*What fun!*

“Sansa should leave her behind,” she says aloud. “I’d like to find out if she knew or not--see if she will surrender the blade to Jon.”

Varro is studying *her.* “Faceless Men and torture don’t mix well, beloved,” he says. “Let the renegade do it for you.”

She licks her lips; she turns to Jaqen. “What do *you* think?”

“Valar morghulis,” He says. “But wait till after the battle. We need her.”

The Wind purses her lips. She doesn’t like waiting. “I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, and just so you know,” says Varro, “she’s been carrying it around like a fool because it’s a
The Wind whips around Varro’s legs. She narrows her eyes. “You don’t want me to kill her?”

_because it would be hypocritical of us, because we’ve also done so many stupid things because we’re in love with you and Jaqen?_”

“I don’t care if you kill her,” he says.

_He just doesn’t want us to dirty our hands playing pin-a-limb with Brienne_, the Wind thinks, sadly.

“I’ll think about it,” she says. And this time she actually means it.

Jaqen tilts his head towards the shadows beyond the arch--an unlit corner. They retreat, out of sight of those in the courtyard.


“He knows he’s a renegade,” says Varro. “He expects me to come after him. Paranoia--his eyes will fixate on me; she will pass below notice. I enter through the west gates. Sansa, at the same time, through the lord’s gate to the north. He will know she was there, but by the time he does, she’ll be gone.”

“Poisons,” says the Wind. “It won’t be anything but poisons.” She hands him the small pack she’s carrying. “Every antidote we have, philtre-kit in case you need to brew some more. Just in case he does get through.”

Varro nods, slings the pack over his shoulder. “What else?” he asks.

“You,” says Jaqen. He cups Varro’s face in His palm. “Beloved,” He says, “you hide your pain from me--I try not to notice. But a fortnight…”

The fish-poison.

She can feel Jaqen’s blood billowing out of Him; clouds of darkness, soaking into Varro’s skin.

“I’ve made the ride in far worse shape,” Varro reminds Him. “And a moon from Volantis to White Harbor, and who knows how many moons before that from Asshai. Just pain, my love. Thirteen days--a blink of an eye.”

The Wind smiles. “I had been waiting to take you.” She pulls out the obsidian blade from her belt--even the air dulls the edge, but then, air can sharpen it again. She slices, swift.

Blood spurts upon the ground, a long ribbon of red droplets against the snow; black, in the very dim light.

Varro’s eyes are wide. “Arya, what--”

Jaqen grins. “Almost forgot about that,” He says.

She smiles at Him. “I didn’t.” And then she reaches out, smears her blood--throbbing pain, with each heartbeat, from the long, deep gash upon her palm--over Varro’s forehead. She reaches for his shirt, untucks it; bloody-handprints all over it now, she smears the blood upon his chest, his torso, his back, over and around his shoulders. _Everywhere._

“Don’t put it anywhere near his mouth,” says Jaqen, dark. “We still don’t know what triggered the
memory-loss."

“Not for eating, Varro,” she instructs him sternly.

Varro looks very confused.

“He’ll figure it out,” says Jaqen, and rips off a part of Varro’s sleeve. Then the god gestures to her. Obedient, though reluctant, she takes her palm away from Varro’s skin, holds it out to Jaqen. Jaqen swipes His tongue across the wound, staunching the flow.

A sudden, rapier-sharp pulse of lust, from Varro.

Jaqen ties the strip of sleeve tightly across her hand.

Then He nicks His finger upon the blade she holds--a much more measured cutting than hers--and lays a line of darkness across Varro’s forehead before giving her His finger to suck off.

Another pulse of lust.

“What are you doing?” Varro whispers.

“Old magic,” says Jaqen. “It works when she does it. My blood--I have no idea. But it can’t hurt.”

Varro draws a bit closer to the both of them. “Couldn’t do this last night, o cruel ones?”

Jaqen smirks at him. “Wouldn’t have worked last night.”

She nods.

Now Varro gets it. He’s wearing a very wide grin. “I see.”

A heated kiss, between the three of them; bruising, no elegance to it, nothing but lips and tongue and mouths everywhere, and then they pull apart.

“Sansa needs to give Brienne a sop,” says Jaqen. “She’ll be unmanageable if she’s left behind purely as punishment.”

SANSA

She thought it was a smear of dirt, something he picked up while they were loading the horses. She’d been too distracted with the farewells, with the arrangements for Brienne, with the last-minute instructions.

They ride out of the gates, and the bright flare of lanterns over the bailey illuminates Daorys’s form for a moment.

Her eyes widen.

Blood. On his face, on his shirt.

“What…” she stares at him.

He looks sideways at her, walks his horse closer--they won’t gallop until the beasts are warmed up. “A...piece of old magic,” he says. “Jaqen and Arya are…” he clears his throat. Grins. “Perhaps
mildly overprotective--I don’t know much about it, but from what I do know a drop or two should suffice.”

That’s a lot more than a drop.

“Whose blood is it?”

“Theirs,” he says.

Death cultists. They get stranger and stranger every day.

“Well, you’d better clean it off before the riders see you,” she says. Three of Sandor’s ride behind them now.

He shrugs. “Braavosi swordfighters’ custom--not my fault if Westerosi don’t understand it.”

JON

“She’s a proud one,” Jon observes.

Below them, Brienne of Tarth is putting a small squadron of guards through their paces. She is too intelligent to mistake her “promotion” to interim commander of the guard for anything other than what it is--an admonition.

But it is also a second chance. And she’s certainly putting her heart and soul into it--including having patches made up--direwolf over crossed-spears--to represent the guards of House Stark.

“Sandor never claimed a coat of arms,” says Arya. Her tone is very neutral.

Jon sighs. “She says she wants it done ‘right and proper’.”

He feels Arya shrug.

“Have you given your arms any thought?” he asks, idly, his eyes upon the fighters.

“A direwolf skull, smiling, with snakes coming out of the eye-sockets,” she says.

Jon chokes. “You know whatever poor member of your order gets roped into marrying the Sealord, they’re going to have to live with that, right?”

She gives him a grin. “What’s the other option? A wolf with a fish’s tail?”

“By that rule,” he says, “I should have a wolf with dragon-wings coming out its back.”


He imagines it. Shudders.

“We make the rules now,” she adds. “Girls and bastards, we get swords and arms, just like everyone else.”

“Doesn’t mean we can abandon all good taste, hāedar,” he says.

He’s trying to learn High Valyrian, given that Daenerys speaks it, as do her Unsullied.
As does the less-than-mortal side of my family.

He’s been stuck, though, on the lesson denoting familial relationships for Valyrians.

Younger brother, or cousin by father’s brother or mother’s sister: valonqar. Unless your father married his sister, in which case see Column B: siblings of first-blood, or, in case your grandfather married his sister, see Column C: cousins of first-blood, unless both father and grandfather married their sisters, see Column C: Siblings of equal-blood.

“Taste is overrated,” she murmurs. She turns to Jon, a strange smile upon her lips. “I am forgetting the pleasure of food,” she says. “Day by day. But I noticed it just today.”

He returns the smile. “I couldn’t tell at first, whether it was the taste of ashes in my mouth, or whether I had lost interest in all the things of the living. But yes. But I remember waking up one day, and the bread was good, and freshly baked, the kind of thing we used to take note of in Castle Black.” Jon shrugs. “Could have been sawdust, for all I cared.”

“One has to care,” she agrees.

“Wonder what else goes in the months, years after one dies,” Jon says.

She returns her gaze to the practice yard. “You die twice,” she says. “Once when you die, and once when all the people that remember you remember you for the last time. We are not one person—we are a thousand people, one for each fragment of time we lived in the eyes and memories of another. At some point, father and mother must have picked me up, put me down, and...never picked me up again. That child they used to carry in their arms, she died, all unnoticed. That is what goes, as months turn into years, and years into centuries—all the people you used to be. Dead, one by one. The boy who looked forward to fresh bread. The girl that wanted a sword of her own.” She grins, and reaches out, clasps his hand; her fingers are cool. “There is a little Arya Stark that lives still—the one that you saw, before she went to King’s Landing. She is not the same Arya Stark I remember—she is purely something you created; she lives as you remember her to be. And one day, you will die. And she will die with you.”

Jon squeezes her hand. “But I will never die,” he says, “because you will remember me forever. And the little Arya Stark I gave needle to, because she wanted a sword of her own—she will forever be a part of your memory of me. And so she will never die either.”

Arya raises an eyebrow. “You’re strangely optimistic today.”

Jon thinks about it. “Seems there is life after all,” he says. “After death. After dishonor.” He gestures to Brienne of Tarth—she is critiquing the guards’ marching-formations—though his thoughts lie upon the strange ceremony he led under the godswood while he wore the mantle of ‘King’. “Second chances.”

DAENERYS

The reply from Jon Stark is short. But longer than her letter had been. She very deliberately refuses to read anything into the relative lengths of the missives.

Not my ice-demons—hoping Drogon will take ownership of them.
Arya’s become quite the poet. You might like the one she regaled us with at breakfast today:

There once was a Queen named Lannister
Who drank red wine by the cannister
She ripped off her dress
She made quite a mess
Then broke her neck on a curved stone bannister

I’ve taken the liberty of replacing certain words; Cersei is your Hand’s sister, in the end.

Tyrion looks at the goblet of wine he’s holding. “I know Cersei is a whore,” he mutters. “Don’t need to remove words on my account.” He looks to Daenerys. “He’s telling you he knows the letters are not private.”

“I understood that,” says Daenerys, twirling the stem of her own wine-glass between her fingers. “Wonder what he’d have sent if he thought you weren’t looking over my shoulder?”

“Same thing, probably,” says Tyrion. “His advisors are looking over his, after all.”

GERION

He stares out sightlessly into the deep night. The blade sits upon his lap; he goes nowhere without it--the price he paid for it guarantees that.

My honor. My integrity. My home.

Even Tywin Lannister would hesitate to welcome back a brother that has dealt in slaves. It doesn’t look good.

Gerion did a lot more than deal.

“Westeros will never forgive you,” says the priestess. She rises, out of the bed, comes up behind him. “Even if you bring back Brightroar.”

He smiles, twisted. “Gerion Lannister is dead,” he says.

In more ways than one.

He remembers the cutlass, the sharp stab of pain at the base of his skull. His life, his worthless, long life, flashing before his eyes in no order that he could ever reintegrate, later.

I died.

Betrayal, after nigh on twenty years as the unquestioned leader of the Pirate Isles.

Brightmane. The Pirate King.

A fiction, and a truth--he made the isles what they are, not the ramshackle collection of lawless ships’ crews and frightened men, but marauders, lords of the deep. Captains walked like lords, they lavished in wealth far beyond the reach of most true lords.

Until Slaver’s Bay was no more. And the gold started drying up, and ship ship after ship, holds full
of valuable cargo, could not be docked anywhere.

*Slaver King.*

Betrayed.

The Red Priestess—she has not given him her name, though she has given him everything else—she comes to stand behind him, her flawless skin glowing radiant gold in the candle-light. She strokes his shoulders; her hand clamps around his. She tightens her grip; his hand digs into the hilt of Brightroar, almost painful.

“She’s the Lord of Light brought you back for a reason, Gerion,” she whispers.

She moves, swift, pulls the sword back, to the right. The blade swipes across his palm. He swears, looks down. “What—”

His words die in his mouth.

Red blood, across the Valyrian steel. It *glows*.

Brightroar *burns* where his blood has fallen upon it.

Resurrection—he did not see it. One moment he was asleep, he was *nothing*, and the next he was nothing but pain. It could have been nothing. But *this*...this is proof, is it not?

*I was chosen for a far greater destiny than Tywin allowed me.*

“The Lord of Light,” she says, “he has chosen you, Brightmane. And now he has need of you.”

Gerion nods. “A Lannister always pays his debts.”

Chapter End Notes

So...more big stuff that had to be done before we start setting up character-deaths a ways down the line. I mean, no romance, no attachment, no pain, right?

*grin*

So, the "poet" in question w.r.t. to the love poetry in Jaqen's little book is one of my literary gods, Pablo Neruda. It's the first time I've embedded instead of block-quoting, so here it is in full:

**SONNET XVI**

I love the handful of the earth you are.
Because of its meadows, vast as a planet,
I have no other star. You are my replica
of the multiplying universe.

Your wide eyes are the only light I know
from extinguished constellations;
your skin throbs like the streak
of a meteor through rain.

Your hips were that much of the moon for me;
your deep mouth and its delights, that much sun;
your heart, fiery with its long red rays,

was that much ardent light, like honey in the shade.
So I pass across your burning form, kissing
you - compact and planetary, my dove, my globe.
JON

Daenerys’s letter is a splash of freezing water thrown into his face. For a long time, all he can do is stare at the parchment, its edges curling in on itself.

We’re nearing Blackwater Bay. No sign of masts--Euron Greyjoy is waiting at Dorne, but nothing will dissuade Asha from going through with her plan.

The water is black, but when the waves break upon the sides of the ship, they curl and scatter into white foam.

The Dothraki are restless. And afraid, as afraid as their horses. Neither sun nor shore to be seen in any direction, just black water and the white crests of waves.

Viseryon carries me from ship to ship--Drogon’s too big, he disappears for days. I speak to those I can.

We are looking forward to landing in White Harbor.

-Dany

Jon is running, down the steep stairwell that leads from the ravensloft to the Maester’s quarters.

“Sam! Sam!”

The sound of feet, slapping on stone. Sam, dressed in a pair of loose britches and surcoat reminiscent of their Castle Black days.
“Jon?”

“Summon the council,” says the King in the North. “Now.”

**MISSANDEI**

She stands upon the rolling deck of the hastily re-named “*Dragonfire*”. A part of the ship’s old name, somebody’s “*Tits*” still shows under the paint at the right angle. She watches the division of the fleet; weapons and trunks and supplies being moved from the fast rakers on to the dornish barges, lines being cut, ships pulling out of formation.

Grey Worm watches as well; he stands just far enough away from her as to make clear they are not together.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” she says.

A pause. Hesitation. “Me as well,” he says finally. “But Asha Greyjoy is a great sea fighter. And we have three times the ships.”

“All confrontations have statistical outcomes,” says Missandei, grim. “A barrel of pitch bursts open, kills an admiral before the fight has even begun. A man breaks an oar, a ship turns too slowly.”

Grey Worm does not need to be told this. The Unsullied know that all training, all discipline, all aptitude—all it does is weigh the chances in their favor.

“If the worst we have envisioned should come to pass...” she says softly, *and I am no longer in a position to do anything ... If the worst comes to pass, she will have lost her ships, her armies, everything but her dragons.* “Take Mhysa to White Harbor.”

“To the King in the North,” says Grey Worm.

“He is not to be trusted,” she says. Truth, wedded to lie—Jon Stark is infatuated with the Queen, that much is clear. He cannot be trusted to do what is necessary, should the need arise. Missandei shakes her head. “To the younger princess. Arya Stark.”

Now Grey Worm looks at her, startled into it. “This one sees why a king should not be trusted. But why the King’s sister?”

“Arya Stark is a strong-willed, highborn woman that understands powerlessness. She will be a sympathetic ear, she will be able to steer Daenerys away from the pitfalls of their Northern court.”

Grey Worm’s lips are pressed together. “The Princess Arya Stark will defy her King?” he asks.

“Based on my *analysis*,” says Missandei, the slight emphasis on the word she draws Grey Worm away from his distrust of Missandei’s character to his respect for her professional capability. “Arya Stark will do the right thing.”

Of course, the “right thing” means one thing to a freed slave, loyal to Daenerys Targaryen, and something entirely different to a Faceless Man. Like all mortals, Grey Worm *projects*; he does not understand that Missandei can be two contradictory people at the same time, and be true to both.

He nods. “To Arya Stark. I will remember.”
There is barely enough room to breathe in the war room; fur-covered bodies are pressed up against each other, the ones in the back against the walls craning their heads to look over the ones lining the middle: all the riders, the lords, the commanders that can be gathered. They talk amongst themselves; they grow impatient.

The King stands, along with the inner council, in the middle of the room; loose papers and parchments are strewn upon the great table, and Samwell is hunched over two letters, peering at the script. Finally, he straightens, knuckling the small of his back to get rid of the kink.

Silence falls, in bits and pieces.

“It is a different hand,” announces Samwell. He looks up, meets Jon’s gaze. His friend looks pained; angry. Sympathy curls in Sam’s chest.

Lord Manderly reaches for the papers--Jon interrupts the movement, placing a hand flat upon the missives.

“I did not give you leave to examine my correspondence,” says Jon, his voice cold.

Startled, Lord Manderly nods, pulls back. He gives the king a very strange look.

Jon has returned to studying the table. No, he’s studying the newest letter, the one that is longer than all the others, written on parchment instead of the thin pulp-sheets. “The Queen writes of Asha Greyjoy’s plans,” he says quietly, “of the fact that they have still not even reached Blackwater Bay. And yet this is the first we are hearing of it. This letter is thrice the length of any other, it is...not rude. Not curt. Not commanding.” He looks up, to Arya.

Princess Arya is the only person Jon has allowed to read all the older missives.

Because Arya will not spare Jon’s heart, nor try to steer his decisions by slanting her interpretation.

“By my assessment,” says Arya, “someone very clever has been intercepting Daenerys’s letters to you. The words originate from her, but all the older missives have been rewritten, censored to remove anything but the most offensive of lines.” She studies Jon, and a flicker of a smile comes and goes. “I think you have thrown this someone’s--this middle-man’s--plan into great disarray, brother mine, by not taking offence. It is unthinkable, after all, that a crowned king would tolerate such insolence from his wife-to-be, that he would actually be amused by it.”

Arya smile is answered by a small grin on Jon’s part. “I think my exposure to other insolent madwomen just made it seem...normal.”

What in the seven hells did Daenerys say to Jon?

“Varys of the Whispers,” murmurs Jaqen, a single finger toying with another stack of parchment to the side. “He is raven-master aboard the ships. All our official missives must pass through his hand at some point. And all the official missives say they crossed Blackwater Bay without incident a sevenday ago. Queen Daenerys...slipped his leash this time, I think.”

Samwell purses his lips. “What about Lord Tyrion?” he asks. “Her other advisors? They could all be in on it.”
Jon turns to Sandor. “You know these people best,” he says.

“Tyrion is a liar, like all Lannisters,” says Sandor Clegane, his voice grave. “But this smacks of the eunuch's interference. Slimy one--him and Baelish are well-suited to one another.”

Jon grimaces.

“Pah!” says Lord Manderly. “Varys, Lannister, it matters not. What matters is that all this time we’ve been waiting for dragons that won’t be here for another moon, at best. Meanwhile the horde will have broken through the Long Lake line, and it’ll be at the White Knife, and then to White Harbor.”

“Lord Manderly is right,” says Lyanna Mormont. “We cannot afford to wait any longer. We must begin cleansing the north.” She sneers. “Let the southerners and the Targaryens waste their time and their men chasing Greyjoy phantoms--we don’t need them.”

“There’s no White Walkers south of the Wall,” says Tormund Giantsbane. “Only wights. We can handle wights.”

Sandor Clegane’s jaw is clenched. “We’re barely holding the Last Hearth. The garrison won’t last more than a fortnight without substantial support. If the dragons are not coming within a sevenday...”

Jon raises his head, his gaze slowly passing over the room as he meets the eyes of his lords, his riders, one by one. “What say the rest of you, my lords? Do we strike out alone against the Night’s King?”

“We are ready, White Wolf!” says Sigorn Thenn.

It is as if a dam has broken; the war room is drowned in calls for war.

GENDRY

It is still early, just a half-watch before the “noon” meal—leastwise the meal that signals the middle of the work-day at Winterfell.

*Would we ever know whether it was noon if the clock stopped keeping time and the moon did not show? Maybe the world’s gotten switched around, maybe we sleep through the morn and work all night.*

Still, if everyone calls it morning it must be so.

Bran’s doing whatever it is Bran does in the mornings; Dacey is getting to work making barrel-staves, the standard starting-point for any smith’s apprentice. And they won’t go to waste.

It leaves him free to go see the Maester in the lord’s keep, beg the loan of that tome from him.

She’ll want that book on hand, for sure, when they discuss the matter later.

Gendry walks with a certain bounce to his steps. Hours and hours spent together, their heads bent over books and inscriptions.

*She belongs to another.*
To the Sealord of Braavos. A king.

*I know*, he tells himself irritably. *Just want to spend a little time with her, is all. Reminisce. Find out where she’s been all these years.*

He has a sudden pang of *sympathy* for the Hound. Left behind while Princess Sansa rides off to White Harbor to visit with the ambassador the King summarily *dismissed* from his court. *Now why would she do that?* But even her own serving maid, Gilly, doesn’t truly know what the Princess is up to.

*Princesses, and the low men that are doomed to dream about them.*

He chuckles at his own ridiculousness.

*But you are a king’s son.*

The thought is insidious. It curls its fingers into his head. Doesn’t find much purchase, except in stray, unguarded moments like this one.

*Now why would I claim that, suddenly, when I’ve spent all this time getting away from it?* And it’s not possible. Arya is already betrothed.

*Betrothed is not married.*

He grinds his teeth.

A heavy tread upon the stone. He turns a corner.

The King walks, black furs cascading over his shoulders, his sword, Longclaw, that *magnificent* sword, at his belt—King Jon’s let Gendry look at it twice.

Another man walks at the king’s side. Tall, his cloak is grey, shoulder-length black hair.

Something nags at Gendry.

Something about the man…

“King Jon!” He throws himself forward, rushes headlong between the two men, pushes the King into a pillar. Faces the man.

The eyes are different. The hair is different. But the face is the same.

“Run!” he shouts. “Run, your Majesty!”

There are *two* swords at his belt. Gendry knows what this man did at Harrenhal. Cold, terrified sweat breaks out all over his body.

*I’m going to die.*

Gendry swallows. “Run, your Majesty,” he chokes out.

Nobody moves.

“Well,” says Jaqen H’ghar, “you can trust his character at least. We’ll see if the smithing is at par.”

Gendry feels some fury rising in him, from where he does not know.
“This man is an assassin!” he shouts over his shoulder at the King.

King Jon has straightened, looking at Gendry with consternation. “I thought you said he wouldn’t recognize you,” says King Jon, to Jaqen H’ghar.

“Might not recognize me,” says Jaqen H’ghar.

Gendry’s eyes grow wide, he looks back and forth between the king and the assassin.

“We know what he is, Gendry,” says King Jon gently. “Jaqen is family.”

*Family? So she offered that to him as well, only he took her up on it, opportunistic slime that he was.*

Jaqen H’ghar gives the King what looks like a warning look. “Arya will marry Tormo Fregar, and then I will be nowhere in the picture.”

The words trigger an awful suspicion. *Arya will marry___ and then I will be nowhere in the picture.*

*It implies Jaqen H’ghar is in the picture now.*

*Arya idolized this man once. Arya-the-child did. What did that idolatry change to when she grew up?*

Hatred bubbles up in in his chest.

“*You* left her to die,” he snarls.

“Funny,” says Jaqen H’ghar, “I saw her just a couple of watchs ago, Gendry Waters. Seemed very much alive.”

The King sighs. “Lekia…”

Jaqen H’ghar snorts. “As you wish.” He turns to Gendry with a clearly false, sunny smile on his face. “Good luck with the smithing, Smith Waters.” He turns, walks away.

Gendry glares at the assassin’s retreating back; Jaqen H’ghar turns the corner and disappears from view.

“Jaqen is a brother to me,” says the King.

Gendry whirls about; he’d almost forgotten the king! He drops his eyes; his hands are balled into fists, nails digging into his palm.

“Forgive me, my lord,” he says. “I spoke in haste.”

*A two-bit assassin, insinuates he’s defiling the Princess, and he’s a brother for the Starks? Are they really that hard up for relations?*

King Jon is studying Gendry’s face. “I did not know there was bad blood between you two. Did he not rescue you at Harrenhal when you and Arya were children?”

*Rescue? You mean slaughter an entire garrison on a whim, just because Arya asked—*

*Oh.*

His jaw clenches.
“We were children, my lord, as you say.”

And he was already an old man.

Doesn’t look old. Looks younger than he did back then.

Drinks the blood of virgins to keep his looks, like the witch in the story, Shiera Seastar.

King Jon sighs. “You were looking for me?”

Gendry shakes his head. “Maester Samwell, my Lord.”

“Sam’s sending ravens,” says the King.

Gendry keeps his gaze on the ground. “Thank you, my Lord. Permission to leave?”

“Yes, of course.”

He bows, turns on his heel.

“Gendry,” says the King.

He turns. “Sirrah?”

“You are a Stark man now. You are in no danger from Jaqen H’ghar. But I must advise you to keep your antagonism towards him leashed. And your shared history to yourself.”

Gendry bobs his head in vague agreement. Waits for the King to leave this time—in the same direction as Jaqen H’ghar—before he moves from his spot.

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He sits, glum, staring down at his bowl of stew. The barracks’ mess-hall is noisy, filled to the brim with soldiers and trainees. Many of them are readying to move out within a few watches—they take every opportunity they can to eat in the mess, and eat as much as they can.

He could have eaten by himself, asked the kitchens for a tray to take out to the smithy.

But Dacey and Bran will not be around. And he doesn’t want to be alone at the moment; he feels uneasy, feels the need to keep glancing over his shoulder.

Jaqen H’ghar.

A roomful of soldiers may not protect him, but it’ll make the assassin’s task harder.

He’ll make it look like an accident, says one part of his mind.

Gendry is the keep’s smith, he’s pointed to a table filled with what looks to be officers. Cavalry men, from their boots. Some are in uniform, some not. Many are older—they look like experienced men to him. Hard to tell ranking, and they don’t introduce themselves.

“Nothing but trail rations out on the field,” says one.

“Or rabbit,” adds another. He grins. “I like me some roasted rabbit.”

“So what’s going to happen to us?” asks one of the green-uniformed trainees, a somewhat scraggly-looking man in his mid-twenties. “With Commander Clegane gone to the front?”
“Ah, you’ll be looked after,” says one of the grey-uniformed men, a corporal, by the stripe on his arm. He smiles, very vicious. “Commander Jaqen’s going to take up the last batch of trainees.”

Gendry starts at the name.

A grizzled soldier to Gendry’s right, he shakes his head. “You’ll be crawling backwards soon enough, boy, praying for the Hound to come back and save you.”

A couple of dark chuckles.

“Commander Jaqen’s a merc,” mutters the trainee. “How bad can he be?”

More laughter.

“He’s not a mercenary,” mutters Gendry.

He feels a sudden excess of attention focused on him.

“You stay in the keep, don’t you, smith?” asks one of the men.

Gendry nods, tight.

Should have kept my mouth shut.

“You have proof? He’s the Sealord of Braavos?”

No!

“No,” says Gendry. “He’s a fucking assassin. Not a king, not a mercenary, not a soldier. An assassin.”

Silence. A few looks.

“Could be,” says a soldier. An older one. “Could be. He don’t fight like any merc I’ve ever seen. Kill-strokes, every one of ‘em, kills every time he raises the blade.”

The corporal leans forward, rests his elbows on the trestle-table. “How do you come by this, smith? We don’t like liars and rumor-makers around here.”

Gendry’s jaw tightens. He meets the corporal’s eyes. “I saw him. Years ago. He’s a murderer.”

Eyebrows rise. Others lean forward.

“Saw him how?” asks the corporal.

Anger and fear, they simmer alongside the pungent mouthfuls of stew in Gendry’s stomach.

The more people that know, the safer I’ll be. Then if I die, they’ll know where to point the fingers.

“I was recruited to join the Night’s Watch in King’s Landing, when I was ten-and-five,” he says. “We were heading to the Wall.”

“Oh yeah?” asks the corporal. “And who recruited you? And why are you here and not at the wall?”

“A wandering crow picked us up,” says Gendry. “Yoren. And we were ambushed along the way—Lannisters. But there were others, dangerous criminals, they’d put them in cages—”
He’s lost their attention. Confused, he looks–they’re looking to the older soldier. “Five and ten,” he mutters. “You’re what, twenty-one now?”

“Twenty.”

Gazes return to him. “Princess Arya-- she was with this batch of recruits for the Wall?”

Gendry’s eyes widen. “How did you…”

“Soldiers know things,” says the corporal. “Like as how the new smith’s come at her calling.”

“Did she really pose as a boy?”

Gendry nods.

“You knew?”

“Later,” he says. “But Jaqen H’ghar, he was in a cage because of how dangerous he was, and then-”

More looks exchanged.

What is going on?

“If you tell me your side of the story, I can tell you mine,” snaps Gendry.

Reluctance, on some faces.

“Soldiers know things the keep gossip doesn’t,” says the corporal. “It doesn’t get to them skirts in the kitchens.”

Gendry nods. “You have my word.”

“Commander Jaqen came out one day, maybe two…three moons ago?” The corporal looks to a thin, hollow-cheeked man to Gendry’s right.

“Three,” agrees the thin man. “Asked for any that had known, or maybe were family, to the men that went to King’s Landing with Eddard Stark. Found one--Mossey one-eye. Lost the eye to a goldcloak during the first attack on the street, Mossey was left for dead, thrown into the dungeons in the round-up, after.”

What does this have to do with Jaqen H’ghar?

“Commander Jaqen asked a lot of questions. About where he was in the cells, what he’d heard. Described things. Like he’d been on the inside hisself. Asked if Mossy had seen Eddard Stark being dragged in.”

“Anguished like,” adds the corporal. He looks Gendry in the eye, holds his gaze, steady. “On your honor,” he says, “you swear Commander Jaqen was in the cage of criminals taken from King’s Landing?”

“Yes,” he says, “like a dog, with the most vicious of the lot, the ones even the soldiers wouldn’t touch, I--”

Gendry’s lost them again. “What does that mean?” he demands.
“Means Mossy was telling the truth. Mossy saw him. Commander Jaqen. Lannisters had worked him over. Bad. Threw him in the deep cells, the ones with the rats and the shit-water to the ankles.”

He looked perfectly fine in the cage. Not a scratch on him. Mossy one-eye doesn’t see too well, I’d say.

“Braavos alliance doesn’t just come out of nothing,” adds the corporal. “Eddard Stark, he’d hired another Braavosi—used to be the First Sword.” He looks to Gendry. “That’s like Commander of the Kingsguard. Meryn Trant killed him first.”

“So what it means,” says the old man, “is that the Lannisters rounded up anyone that could have freed Lord Stark. Killed them, or locked them up. And Commander Jaqen has to live with it, that he was held in the same fucking dungeon the entire time, and there was nothing he could do to save him.”

Gendry puts his spoon down. “That’s ridiculous. It didn’t happen like that. Arya…” he trails off.

“She really beat the shit out of a boy for trying to take her sword?” asks the man with the thin face.

Gendry nods, absent. “Yoren took it out on her—beat her like she was a boy herself. I didn’t know, I would have said something.”

A snort, from the corporal.

Gendry looks up. “He knew. Jaqen H’ghar knew she was a girl all along. He enticed her, spoke like a highborn foreigner, tricked her into giving him water. Into opening the cage when we fled.”

Should have let him burn to death.

The man to Gendry’s left, he nudges the smith with an elbow. “What happened next?”

Gendry’s mouth twists. “Soldiers know things, right? Why ask me?”

“Cuz you were there,” says the man with the thin face. “Counts, smith, you were there.”

It gives Gendry some hope. The eyewitness account matters with these men—they as much as said they didn’t like unsubstantiated rumor.

“We were caught,” he says, “me and Arya and a couple of others that escaped. No idea where he was until they took us to Harrenhal, in chains. And there was Jaqen H’ghar, clean as a whistle, wearing Lannister colors and getting saluted left and right.”

Men look taken aback. Seriously taken aback.

“Didn’t knew he wore Lannister colors there—thought he was springing the Princess. What’d he say he was doing, smith?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Arya talked to him.” He looks up. “But that’s how I know he is an assassin. People started dying. By the end of it, she asked him to, and he’d slaughtered half the garrison because he is a filthy, child-loving, murderer.”

A man whistles quietly. And now there are more than a few looks directed Gendry’s way. Looks filled with amusement.

“You don’t like him, eh boy?” asks the grizzled soldier.
“Why would I?” asks Gendry.

A few snorts. “Suppose you wouldn’t at that,” says the corporal. “Hard man to compete with, Commander Jaqen, if what you’re saying is true, that he slaughtered half a Lannister garrison on Princess Arya’s say-so alone.”

Gendry grits his teeth. “It’s not like that,” he says. “If he was on her side, if he’d been hired by the Starks, what was he doing wearing Lannister colors? He wasn’t captured, he wasn’t forced into it.”

The trainee is the only one nodding, taking Gendry’s side.

“Who was commanding the garrison?” asks the corporal.

“Tywin Lannister,” mutters Gendry.

The thin-faced soldier snorts, throws his spoon down on the table. “Smith’s as dense as his hammer.”

“Ah, let him be,” says the grizzled soldier. “Man’s in love.”

Gendry grinds his teeth.

The thin-faced man slaps him on the back. “Don’t worry lad, we’ll keep your secret. Like as not it happens every other week, one princess or the other, some new lad always takes a shine to ’em. Pretty as peaches, our princesses.”

It seems the men have softened towards him.

Some new lad every other week? How many men are there dangling after Lady Arya?

“Think, smith,” says the corporal, “Commander Jaqen was an assassin, so say you. So fair, maybe he was. Elite guard, like the other one, Forel, it sounds like to me, but who knows? But he goes, wears Lannister colors in a garrison commanded by Tywin Lannister. What was Commander Jaqen doing there, eh, after Lannisters put him in a cage?”

Gendry sees the thrust of this. He swallows the last of his stew, “well, corporal,” he says, “if he was there to assassinate someone, like you think, why didn’t Tywin Lannister die? Why did Jaqen H’ghar slaughter all those infantrymen--men like you, men that had families--instead of going after Tywin Lannister?”

A few looks.

“Blew his cover,” says the grizzled soldier. “Some may disagree, but I say getting a Stark out alive is more important than making a Lannister dead.”

The corporal snorts. “Nobody fucking disagrees, Marcus.”

“Yeah, well it wasn’t just Princess Arya he got out,” says Gendry. A last effort. “A bunch of other criminals in the cells in Harrenhal, rough men, sprung them too, loosed them out on the countryside to loot and pillage from innocent folks.”

His words haven’t had the effect he wants them to. The trainee looks confused. The other men, they’re exchanging significant glances.

“What kind of men?” asks the corporal. “What did they speak like?”

“It was him,” says the grizzled soldier.

“Huh.”

“Figures.”

The corporal turns to Gendry. “You may not as like him, smith, but you’ve handed us pieces of a puzzle old Stark hands have been scratching their heads about for a long time.”

“What do you mean?” Gendry asks.

“Who freed the Northmen in Harrenhal,” says the thin-faced man.

The corporal throws down his mug; ale’s mostly gone, it doesn’t slosh over the rim. “Fucking waste,” he says. “He saves her, she saves him, years fighting side-by-side across Essos, a Stark man from the start. Now they’re out here, she fights with him on the front lines, dead things as far as the eye can see. Side by side. And then she is forced to marry, like as she’s a fucking helpless flower from Highgarden, as good as sold to the Sealord in Braavos. And he’s going to have to stand by and watch it happen. Where’s the justice in that? Where’s the fairness, I ask you?”

Men are shaking their heads.

She deserves a king. A man worthy of her. Not an assassin. He was never a Stark man. A Stark man wouldn’t have left her alone after Harrenhal, he’d have taken her to her family.

He doesn’t say anything. Just sops up the last bits of stew with a piece of bread.

“Starks,” says the grizzled man, sadly. “They won’t make the same mistake again, as King Robb did, marrying for love. The bread we eat, the swords, the armor, it’s all coming because of the alliance with the Sealord. Starks got no gold--stolen, scattered by the Boltons. Starks sacrifice. All they’ve got--Hounds’ Mistress sold her--”

“So why doesn’t she marry the Sealord?” demands the corporal.

“Barren,” says the man with the thin face, quietly. “After what that dog did to her.”


Gendry feels like there is a vast gulf between himself and these men--of what they know, what they believe in, who they put their faith in.

I am not one of them. I will never be one of them.

“Fucking waste,” mutters the corporal, not looking up.

The thin-faced man nods. “I’m a praying man myself,” he says. “I ask the face in the tree. Keep my little ones safe. All of you’s down, dead, if you get killed, so as not to come back. I add a prayer now and again, when I remember--that Princess Sansa get all her things back, the dresses and the jewels as the like she sold to feed us. Ain’t no use asking for love, she wouldn’t want it. But there’s still hope for Princess Arya. So I ask the tree, I say, make it so Commander Jaqen gets her with child, so as the betrothal can be broken.”

Gendry balls his fists under the table. Red rage rises in him, fury from what source, he cannot
fathom.

So it’s true. They are lovers. And everyone knew it all along, except me.

“Maybe you can start doing the same, corporal. Old gods listen .”

The corporal shakes his head. “Don’t believe, Kurt, not any more. My little ones are all wights, out there somewhere.”

The grizzled man slaps the thin-faced man on the shoulder. “You keep on praying for us. Maybe we won’t come back then at least.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey All!

I'm so sorry to have worried all of you, thank you D_G for the pings :) I haven't on a03 for a couple of weeks.

I apologize for the very short half-chapter. Problem is, I have some very pressing work commitments for the next couple of months, and I'm not sure what kind of time I'll be able to devote to this. I'll try to update, there's a bunch of chapters that need to go out, but all of them need hours and hours of work, hours I don't have :( On the plus side, if I do get all my work-related writing and other stuff done in time, this story will be finished by Dr Faye at the end...but yeah, I'm on the home stretch of that little real-life project, and the heat is...furnace-like.

So, to summarize, updates may be sporadic and short. I want to do this piece justice, so I won't sacrifice quality, would rather take a bit longer.

Love you all, and thank you for the support and the...the everything.

See you soon!
Mercy

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

Hey all! I'm back! Exhausted, but back. Submitted my dissertation yesterday. I apologize for the waaaayyy longer-than-expected delay, sh*t just...kept getting delayed.

Nevertheless, I'm back, and alive, and here's a token chapter. A bunch of stuff needs to edited, I'll be posting a couple of times a week--the sizes of the updates will slowly go back up to normal.

Missed this place, man, so much freaking catching up to do!

SILVERHAND

He looks down at the misshapen lump of pewter that chafes at his wrist with every movement. Its precursor, the elegant, golden thing that passed for a hand has been used to pay the smugglers.

At least the pewter has the decency not to pretend to be something it’s not.

“My lord…” Bronn trails off.

Jaime sighs.

A thousand variants of this conversation, started, then abandoned--the Lords’ Rebellion wants a figurehead, a...continuity.

Bronn sighs.

Chains, unused, lie curled upon the dock, rosettes of brine, and frost, forming upon the dark iron of their links.

“They’ll have you at White Harbor in a tenday,” says Bronn.

How much further, then, to the wall? Leagues, miles--these physical measures of distance between two places hold no meaning when it comes to winter and war, and the North is rife with both.

And rife with the undead.

Jaime’s mouth is a grim line. “White Harbor,” he says, his words halfway between a raps and a croak. “Ten days.”

SANSA
A day away from home, and it is the furthest she’s been from Winterfell since the Battle of the Bastards. The landscape is transformed—no trace of bare hillside or tree. Everything is snow.

_Fitting_.

Four ride behind her, two take the lead.

Daorys rides beside her. They still don’t have a plan, apart from ‘don’t let Zural find out’

“Will you answer me a question?” asks Daorys, finally.

“No,” she says. “But I will trade you—an answer for an answer.”

He snorts. “As you wish.”

She has a thousand questions she’d like an answer to. But all the ones at the forefront of her mind are the sorts of questions any self-respecting spymaster will discard as a waste. Like, “How do you think this little love-story of yours will turn out, hmm? She’ll leave you and Jaqen will hate you forever, that’s how.”

“Jaqen marrying Arya,” she murmurs. “The first time the Starks have grown, instead of being diminished.”

A test: Zural had not reacted well to Jaqen being considered Stark, by any measure. But Daorys just nods.

Suddenly, she is weary. Immeasurably weary. “Ask,” she says.

Daorys is looking ahead, staring, fixated, at the backs of the riders before them. “Who was your second kill?” he asks.

Her teeth clench. “My husband.”

He nods. “And the first?”

“That’s two questions,” she snaps.

“Owe you two answers,” he says. His tone is reasonable.

She must needs study the landscape to each side of them for a while, let the wind scour her face into numbness.

“My best friend,” she says, eventually. “Her name was Jayne. Jayne Poole.” _Where did Petyr find her?_ “Petyr sent her to Ramsay, made her pretend to be Arya Stark. He said it was to buy us some time.” She shakes her head. “We didn’t know what had happened to her, we presumed she went missing along the way…” she hesitates. “Ramsay kept her. Locked up in a room, and you could hear her crying, sometimes. A month after we were married, he took me there, showed her to me.”

_Oh, how she begged._

A silence, unfinished thoughts hanging in the air. She snatches at one of them.

_A faithless assassin. What judgement dare he pass upon me?_
“Ramsay made me rape her while he watched,” she says, reminiscing. “I wept, and then pretended to fly into a rage, I was weeping and beating her, and my hands found themselves around her neck, and I strangled her and he was laughing and laughing, and by the time he realized it, it was too late—I’d strangled her to death.”

A little bit of the secret triumph of that long-ago moment has leaked into her voice.

*She was my friend.*

“Well done,” says Dorys softly.

She looks at him, an unspoken question furrowing her brow.

“You gave mercy,” he says.

Earned none for herself, though—that’s the day Ramsay gave her the wound that didn’t heal. He’d been careful not to hurt her too much before that, at least not something that would need the Maester, to keep from word getting back to his father.

“You haven’t told Arya,” observes Daorys. “Or Jaqen.”

“I’d tell *Jon* before I told Jaqen,” she says, very matter-of-fact. “He married into the *honorable* Starks. Adding rape to Ramsay’s murder will certainly disabuse him of *that* notion, ‘mercy’ notwithstanding.”

Daorys shrugs. “As you will.” He appears to be thinking. “But,” he says eventually, “I feel compelled to point out that your logic is flawed.”

She narrows her eyes at him. *Don’t you dare tell me what I should or should not tell Jaqen.*

“If you are forced to lie with someone,” he says, “and neither of you has a choice, it is the both of you that are raped.”

She blinks; she must avert her eyes. She finds herself staring down at her hands, curled loosely around her reins. “If I convert to your faith,” she whispers, “will I believe that too?”

*Mercy.*

“I was expecting the order to be different,” Daorys offers, lightly.

She seizes upon the distraction.

“Order of what?” she asks.

“Ramsay first,” he says, “then Jeyne Poole, found locked in a tower after you retake Winterfell, the poor girl too far gone for rescue…” he shrugs.

“You knew. That Jeyne was held in Winterfell.”

“She was pretending to be Arya Stark. That name attracts our attention.”

He doesn’t elaborate. He doesn’t have to. *How much does Jaqen know?*

“So,” says Daorys, a false smile plastered on his face. “How ruthless *are* you capable of being, Sansa Stark?”
You should know the answer to that.

Her mind races through the threads of this conversation, the hints before it, draws it all together into something resembling sense. “What does Jeyne have to do with Stark gold, and the Iron Bank?”

The smile on Daorys’s face turns grim. “Everything.”

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Drums

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

A very long time in coming!

Info and data and request in endnotes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BRIENNE

The courtyard before the King’s Tower is packed cheek to jowl. Soldiers. She can almost hear the blood in their veins pounding, pounding like drums no longer muffled by the snowdrifts.

The drums of war.

King Jon stands in front of the doors, swathed in black fur, gloved hands resting lightly on the hilt of his longsword. Sandor Clegane clasps forearms with the King, is drawn into a rough hug.

“Return safe, Sandor,” says King Jon.

Brienne’s attention drifts.

Clegane spent most of the day before debriefing Brienne on her duties. Telling her the secrets she had unknowingly given oath to protect.

Jon Stark is a Targaryen. The Dragon Queen knows. Jon Stark is a threat, even to the woman he is betrothed to.

Sansa Stark is the Spymaster of Winterfell. Cersei Lannister knows. Sansa Stark has a higher price on her head than the King in the North.

Secret heirs to kingdoms, the strong women that stand behind them...a troubadour’s tale in the making. Honor is served, in serving such. A tale a knight can be proud to have played a part in. A tale that doesn’t end in disaster, in betrayal and foul magic, and assassination.

Brandon Stark leans on a crutch, ensconced in furs. A raven perches on his shoulder. “The way is clear,” he says to Clegane. “Fair skies will be yours, I think.” A grin.

Brandon Stark is a warg. The Night’s King knows. Brandon Stark is a threat to the Army of the Dead.

The Princess Arya leans down towards her younger brother.

“Cerwyn is late,” she murmurs.

Sour distaste fills Brienne's mouth.

Arya Stark is a Faceless Man.
Magic, and murder. It seems no tale in Westeros is devoid of either.

“Can...can they be saved?” she had asked Clegane, of the two youngest surviving Starks. The Hound is the last man that would make such an attempt, but at least he would recognize the intent of the question.

*Can they become Starks again?*

Clegane had snorted.

Answer enough.

The unease swirling around her “promotion” persists. Grows.

*Was it pity I read on the Hound’s face?*

Jon Stark’s gaze sweeps the courtyard, his dark eyes weighing the sincerity of his troops.

No, not Jon Stark.

*Jaehaerys Targaryen.*

*That*, at least, she can comprehend. Eddard Stark, honorable to the end, choosing to dishonour his own name to save his sister’s son. Could there have been a nobler act? And again, she feels a pang of sorrow, for the woman that believed in her.

*Oh, Lady Stark, what would you make of your children now?*

What *can* anyone make of an assassin and a witch?

“Ser Sandor!”

The loud cheer startles Brienne out of her mournful introspection.

The Hound is mounting the nineteen-hander, a bay, two hostlers are hanging onto for dear life.

*Where did they find such a monstrous horse?*

“Ser Sandor!”

“Ser Sandor!”

Northern men and women, hoisting their bladed in the air, cheering *Sandor Clegane*.

Clegane rips the reins out of the hostlers’ hands, wheels the bay around to face the courtyard. He raises a mailed fist in the air. “The North!”

The answering cacophony is thunderous.

“The North!”

“Stark!”

“Stark!”

“The White Wolf!”
“Wait!” another shout--this one cuts through the air. “Wait!”

Brienne’s head turns, along with others’ towards the archway to the right. Maester Samwell is trundling towards the assembly, something in his arms. A long shape, wrapped in ratty blankets…

A sword?

Silence spreads. People shuffle from foot to foot, craning their necks to see. Brienne, standing on the steps to the right of the King, has a clear view.

The Maester reaches Sandor’s horse. Tarly is not really a small man, but he is dwarfed by the size of the mount. He unwraps the blankets.

A sword.

“Valyrian Steel,” pants the Maester, holding the hilt up towards Sandor.

Even Clegane’s scowl has slipped. As well it should.

“Are you mad?” Clegane demands. “It could get lost out there!”

The Maester grins. “Then don’t lose it. That’s my family’s sword, it is.”

The pommel is etched with what looks like fletching, the guard…

Heartsbane. That’s Heartsbane. The ancestral sword of House Tarly.

“Maybe White Walkers around,” continues the Maester, his tone eminently reasonable. “You’re the northernmost legion, closest to the wall. If they come, they’ll come for you first.”

Maester Samwell. Samwell Tarly? The heir to House Tarly had been named Samwell, she dimly recalls. But there had been some scandal, a new heir...Brienne hadn’t paid much attention--

If the Maester is the disowned Tarly, the reason seems clear enough--the Maester has a woman. And a child. Given the disposition of a man like Randyll Tarly, treating a lowborn leman as a wife would certainly get a son disowned. Twice-disowned, since it is obvious said son provided for her and her child even after he became a Maester, kept them with him in defiance of all custom.

It raises Brienne’s estimation of Maester Samwell--House Tarth has never seen eye-to-eye with the likes of House Tarly.

But then how does the disgraced heir to Randyll Tarly suddenly have rights to give away the ancestral blade?

Clegane must have said something, low, because the Maester is shaking his head. “It’s a loan, mind,” he says, his tone at odds with the firmness with which he presses the hilt of the blade into Clegane’s hand. “Just bring it back, is all, alright.”

Clegane grunts. “Too much damn fuss,” he mutters. But the Hound takes Heartsbane. Then, without another word or further ceremony, Clegane digs his heels into the horse’s flanks. The horse shies, whinnies, dances sideways. The Hound swears. Hurriedly, a path is cleared through the crowd, leading towards the gates. A moment later the horse finds its legs, and with a great snort it lunges forward, in the direction Clegane wants it to go. Out of Winterfell, towards the front, and the hordes of undead waiting there. Towards Sandor Clegane’s own death, like as not.

The man never lacked courage. Only decency.
War has come to the North. Or the North went seeking it, and war allowed itself to be found and dragged back to Winterfell.

Either way, war is here.

ARYA

Brienne is trying to draw her into a conversation.

Cerwyn is not here, the Wind whispers.

Brienne of Tarth lengthens her stride, her tone strident to match her steps. The knight seems to have an issue with the order of the mobilization—Winterfell is being emptied of fighters before any of the other holdfasts. The men that trained in Winterfell, that even now are packing up their camps from the ruins of Wintertown, they will range the furthest North, and hold the line at the very head of the defence.

“Why was I not consulted—”

“You didn’t want to be a commander,” she explains to Brienne, absently, as they walk towards the stables. “Only commanders vote.” The Wind is malicious. “You gave up your right to have a say, Lady Brienne.”

The knight blinks. Brienne is trying to understand—Arya’s hostility, the way the North works, her own place in the scheme of things.

Dead, dead, dead, dances the Wind as it swirls snow around their steps.

“All that’s left to defend Winterfell are irregulars …” the knight trails off.

“Sansa’s Sappers,” corrects Arya. “Not strong, but smart. The ones that are too smart to obey orders without asking ‘why’, the ones that won’t just lay down their lives on some noble’s say-so,” Thieves and brigands and scholars and girls with too much imagination. “Sansa likes working with smart people.” A sidelong grin: Sansa doesn’t want to work with you.


Arya cuts her off with a dismissive snort. “I don’t give a fuck about your one-sided feud with Sandor”. They are crossing the Eastern courtyard, over the gabled vaults of the Stark crypts underground.

One warning. For the bones of our mother, who placed her trust in you.

“I care about that sword at your belt.”

Almost involuntarily, the knight glances down, then back up to Arya, her thick brows knotted in concern.

Maybe she did not know. Did not want to know?

“That,” says Arya, with a pointed look, “is one half of Ice. My father’s greatsword. They cut off his head, then melted his sword down to make two Lannister blades.”

The knight’s expression clears.
“You knew,” says the Wind.

The knight looks away. “All I know is that it was Jaime Lannister’s sword,” says Brienne. “Oathkeeper."

The Wind giggles. “Oathkeeper? Really?” she shakes her head. “Gendry thinks the one you wear is called Widowmaker.”

Brienne opens her mouth, closes it.

“I know, I know,” says the Wind. “That was the other one--Joffrey’s blade. And not Widowmaker, Widow’s Wail, for Catelyn Stark’s grief.” She grins at Brienne. “Doesn’t much matter, both came from Ice.”

The silence between them is brittle. “I…” the knight sighs. “It was given to me. Lady Arya, if I could return your mother to you, your father--”

“Jaime Lannister,” muses the Wind. “Do you get wet between the legs, Brienne of Tarth, when you think of that man?”

The knight’s eyes widen with affront.

“I think of him a lot,” the Wind confides. “Bran loved to climb the stonework when he was little. Got pushed off a tower because he caught Jaime Lannister buried in Cersei’s cunt.”

Brienne’s looks away.

The Wind grins. “So you knew that too.” She quirks an eyebrow. “Did you learn of it before or after you accepted his blade?”

“Jaime confessed,” says Brieanne, avoiding the question. Her tone is subdued.

Before, then.

“How nice of him,” says Arya. You know it all. And still you dare carry that sword in my family’s stronghold, and pretend you serve Starks, and honor.

Count your days, Brienne of Tarth.

Winter will not abide Ice in the hands of one it has not touched.

Not for much longer.

**DAENERYS**

The fleet has been split. Yara’s fast warships will rendezvous with them at the Fingers, in a sheltered bay known only to the Ironborn.

There is ice in the water.

*The North is getting closer.*

Her excitement mounts, though she strives to present an even mien. Every day now, she stands at the prow of the barge-like flagship, and looks out, towards where land should be.
They passed Dragonstone a few days ago. A pang of longing, quickly hidden.

Next will come the Whispers, then past the Bay of Crabs, Gulltown.

Then the Fingers.

**PETRYR**

The air smells of charr.

Some bravo set a warehouse on fire. An unimportant warehouse, as such things are counted in Braavos. Still.

The boy paces up and down before the hearth, the scar on his cheek standing out, lurid. He hasn’t taken off his sword, even inside his own home.

Petyr ignores the heir, turning his attention to the boy’s father, the *real* power behind the Vash cartel.

“...a bit old,” the man is saying. “Surprisingly fertile, for a woman with her predilections.”

“...Cersei’s *fertility* was never in question,” says Petyr, leaning back in the overstuffed chair. *Just her sanity.* He considers the snifter of spirits in his right hand. “Even gave Fat Robert an heir--not *her* fault the child caught a fever from his wetnurse.”

The nurse had fled, if he recalled correctly, rather than wait for Cersei’s wrath to fall upon her. Not that Cersei was wrathful.

*Jubilant, it seemed like, back then.*

But then, the full extent of Robert’s infidelities had just come to light.

*Shut up about it and do your duty to our house* --that was all Tywin Lannister had had to say. Ancient history.

It is Cersei’s most recent lack of restraint that people are taking a note of.

Merchant Vash shrugs. “If I were a betting man, I’d say it’s her brother’s again.”

Petyr smiles, sly, inclines his head towards the older man. “I’ll be happy to take that bet--were you a betting man, that is. It’s the Greyjoy Pirate’s seed that’s taken root in the Queen.”

**EURON**

“Nothing like the smell of a burning shantytown to wake a man up in the morning,” says Euron, grinning at Cersei over his shoulder.

She is beginning to lose some of her grace, her steps more uncertain than they were just a couple of weeks ago. But Cersei Lannister has lost none of her allure, not a whit of it, as she walks up to his side, looks out from the window.

Flea Bottom is burning.

“They started it, not us,” she says.
“That they did,” Euron agrees. The spark of rebellion...the people of Flea Bottom should have remembered the Red Keep is made of stone. Stone does not burn.

Thatch does.

A good harvest, all in all. Close to four hundred souls, would-be rebels as far as the remaining Lords are concerned. “Casualties”--burnt to unrecognizable ash, or buried under the debris, as far as their families are concerned. All nice and tidy. Some of them will die, of course--no cargo survives a sea voyage entirely unblemished. But some eighty percent of them will make it to the slave dockets of Volantis.

That’s a lot of gold, these days.

The Dragon Queen doesn’t understand the nature of supply and demand.

“Not all queens are made equal,” Euron says, “I’ve been told my niece managed to separate the Targaryen girl’s flotilla from her warships, somehow. Just plain divided the fleet in half.” His tone is false-incredulous.

“My Hand has had reports of something similar,” Cersei murmurs.

“Should I set out today, my love, and bring the cunts to heel?”

Cersei’s mouth twists. “A divided fleet...it behoves us not to look gift horses in the mouth.”

Euron gives her an ironic bow.

“And while you’re gone,” says Cersei, a hand absently caressing her growing stomach, “I’ll do some...house cleaning.”

Euron follows her gaze, down past the high walls of noble houses, down past the merchants’ quarter, the wide avenues...down to the dying orange flames that still lick at walls, here and there, like a predator licking at the last drops of blood off the hide and bones of a corpse it has already devoured...down to the docks beyond, where boats are being put to sea--boats the people of King’s Landing should no longer have had. Pleasure craft, flower-sellers’ rafts, fishing boats, even a small merchantman flying no colours.

“Ah, the smugglers,” grins Euron. “Looks like the fire flushed all the rats out of hiding.”

Cersei purses her lips. “Pity I have to kill them, now that they’re acting so openly.”

Euron is philosophical about it all. “You won’t need smugglers selling you Dornish red when I give you all of Dorne on a golden platter.”

“Use the platter for Daenerys Targaryen's head,” says Cersei, abruptly turning away from the window. “Dorne is yours to do with as you will.”

Euron smiles fondly at the mother of his son-to-be. “And do with it I shall, my love, do with it I shall.”

*All that Dornish beauty...far more suited to the tastes of Essos slaveowners than most of the pale, unwashed Westerosi.*

No one’s ever enslaved an entire nation before. But then, nobody has accused Euron Greyjoy of having *small* ambitions.
And off to the Fingers we go.

JAIME

King’s Landing–Flea Bottom–burns behind him. Almost, he calls out to the man at the helm of the merchantman: “Turn back, take me back.”

But the helmsman, a turgid Northerner, has not Bronn’s skill at interpreting Jaime’s grunts and hisses. The man will not understand.

Trapped in his prison of silence, Jaime Lannister can do naught more than huddle at the base of the boat, surrounded by the ragtag flotilla of smugglers’ vessels leaving King’s Landing for the last time.

Bronn may understand more than just Jaime’s half-formable words–Bronn didn’t push for Jaime to lead the rebellion.

Because a symbol would have been needed, to prove Jaime Lannister’s change in loyalties.

A sacrifice.

Euron Greyjoy’s spawn.

A just reward, a balancing, in some religion’s fucking holy book, for the killing of the Targaryen babe at the Mountain’s hand?

Perhaps.

I loved my children.

True.

Jaime Lannister had been a harder man when he was young. Enraged at the disrespect towards his sister, madly in love with her, madly trying to uphold his oath of celibacy–and even then, he had not been able to bring himself to harm her son, no matter who the father had been.

I loved her children.

More true.

GENDRY

Her hair tickles his forehead; she places a soft kiss upon his lips. Her mouth moves downwards.

Gendry awakens with a gasp, impossibly hard, longing at the tip of his tongue. He groans, turns to his side, trying to sort dream from reality.

“Fuck,” he whispers. “Fuck.”

The image, the sensation of it, it persists.

Hours pass, it feels like, as his mind drifts between waking and sleeping. And every time he sleeps,
he can feel the touch of her…

“Fuck!” savage now, Gendry rises, pushes his sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes. He swings his feet over the side of the bed, finds his discarded britches by feel. Pulls them on. Finds his boots.

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The cold shocks him fully awake—he’s halfway to her wing, hasn’t quite realized where his feet are leading him.

With force of will he wrenches himself around, redirects his steps.

*Get something to eat. I’m hungry, is all, and who wouldn’t be, night all the time don’t know if it’s time to eat or sleep.*

The small kitchens that serve the keep’s workers, just south of the smithy, are deserted. Almost.

A scullery maid is scrubbing down the large slabs the bakers will use in a watch or two to set the day’s bread to rising. She looks up at him, startled, he thinks, then goes back to her work. But he can feel her gaze on him as he scours the pantry, cuts himself a piece of cheese, some sausage.

He turns, gives her a smile.

She giggles.

Carefully, he places the cheese, the sausage, on a sideboard.

*Guess I wasn’t hungry for food after all.*

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The girl—he doesn’t know her name—begs off, leaves, goes where he doesn’t know.

*Used her, bent her over the counter, took her like…like…his thoughts stutter. Like my father took my mother, most likely.*

His mother had been a serving girl at the Red Keep, he’d heard, before they turned her out when she started showing. Had to turn to whoring to put bread in their bellies. No chance of something like *that* happening at least—at the end Gendry spent himself in the scullery maid’s mouth, trying, frantic, to recapture the dream, to replace it with something real.

Hot shame dogs him all the way back to his own chamber.

**AEGON**

His royal “cousin’s” tantrums follow a pattern--Aegon has had the better part of a moon to observe Arianne Martell’s behavior in the cramped quarters of a merchant ship. Her escalating outbursts, the withdrawn silences, the sullen re-emergence from ‘her’ cabin…

*She behaves like an addict.*

He grins to himself.

*Addicted to drama.*
He looks over the prow of the ship, onto the black waters of the harbour, to the torchlit docks beyond. The fetid smell of sewage and oil lingers in the air.

Arianne’s in the “hide and mope” stage now, over a triviality he hadn’t even bothered to register. A terrible time for the ship to make landfall, for the sake of his equilibrium at least (best if it was done when she was in a good mood). But tides wait upon no woman’s temper. And, truthfully, he’d had about as much of the voyage as he can take.

_Time to get a’Kinging._

To Aegon’s surprise, Arianne meets him at the foot of the ladder leading to the fore-deck. She’s dressed for travel, no hint of petulance about her red-painted mouth.

“Good, you’re ready,” she says. “I’ve instructed the stevedores to have our baggage delivered to the Pyramid at first light.”

His mouth pulls a little to a side. “We will have a long wait then, dearest.”

She blinks, then seems to recall that the unending night is not just a product of their journey, but the state the world finds itself in this season.

_There may never be another “first light” in our lifetimes._

Her lips thin.

He forestalls her arguments by offering her his arm. “Shall we?”

“The baggage…”

“I’ll have it taken care of,” he answers loftily, catching the eye of one of the deckhands over her head. The man nods slightly. As arranged in the days past, the baggage will be delivered to an inn the captain has recommended. Then, should they be well-received at the Pyramid, their possessions can be moved into loftier quarters.

Arienne doesn’t consider the prospect of failure, not after the Iron Banker’s performance in Meereen. That, and the gold he carries, has shifted the dynamic between them somewhat. No doubt that lies behind some of the tantrums she throws.

Followed only by four of the ship’s brawniest sailors (dressed in matching tunics and hose, something that may pass for livery amongst those unfamiliar with Westerosi custom) and a single porter carrying a small chest (a gift, for the man whose rule Aegon is here to usurp), they disembark.

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There are no palanquins to be had, or carriages, or porters with shoulder-seats. They must needs walk.

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Arienne holds a perfumed kerchief to her face; Aegon takes in the dust-choked street, the despair, the huddled, unmoving shapes against the side of the road with blackened faces and hands. The sailors are as wide-eyed as the him and Arienne at the state of the city beyond the docks.

A bitter, dry laugh from the Meereen porter. “Women go,” he says, “women come.”

Arienne’s head turns, sharp, and Aegon cannot miss the cold fury in the gaze she fixes upon the porter. “Speak plain,” she commands.

The porter shrugs. “The Mother of Dragons left. The White Mare came.”

Plague.

Arienne hastily draws the kerchief back over the lower half of her face. Aegon himself is not afraid of sickness, of course, not after washing corpses in the House of Black and White for months on end.

“The Mare is still here?” he asks the porter.

The man shakes his head. “Red Priests drove her out. But the dead, and the poor, they always stay dead, and poor.”

Ain’t that the truth of it.

There is a furrow between Arianne’s eyebrows. “If there is plague…” she trails off, takes a short breath. “Perhaps we should keep going east—Qarth. That is also a city ripe for—”

Aegon forestalls her with a raised hand.

“My aunt claimed this city in the Targaryen name. That she—or her Viceroy—cannot do their duty and see to her subjects’ welfare does not bode well.”

Doesn’t get easier than this, Arienne dear, the plague’s handed us the city on a platter.

He extends his arm once again to Arienne. “Come, dearest cousin. Let us see what explanations the esteemed Daario Naharis has for corpses lining the streets.”

-------------

As the winding avenue climbs towards the Great Pyramid, the living slowly replace the dead.

Beggars.

Some of them extend a hand towards him, piteous. Others silently follow his passage with expressionless gazes.

Aegon bites his lip, wrestling with himself.

Buying their goodwill is just as important as buying that of Daario Naharis, he justifies, as he brings his entourage to a halt by the simple expedient of halting himself. And it’s not my gold in the end, is it?

He gestures to the porter, then, using the key that hangs about his neck, unlocks the chest the man carries, and flings back the lid.

Arrienne hisses. “What are you doing?”

Her gaze is fixed on the contents. Even the sailors are looking at him sidelong, and they know what’s in there, they helped him make it look convincing, in exchange for a handful of gold and the story.
“Just enough gold to show well,” he murmurs, sweeping aside the top layer of coins. There’s mostly silver underneath, for about half a handspan, then nothing but copper. The chest is all they’ve left; Daario Naharis doesn’t know that.

Aegon digs deep, pulls out a handful of Volantis copper coins.

“Aegon…” Arienne looks unsure.

He walks away, back the way they have come, all the way down to the base of the hill. Arienne and the others, they have no choice but to follow him.

At the base of the hill, he starts handing out the coins.

Once or twice the man he tries to hand a copper piece to turns out, upon shaking, to be dead. Aegon shrugs and moves on.

By the time the chest is half empty, they have reached the base of one of the lesser pyramids. *No shouting, no throng of street-children following the man giving out the coin.*

The lack of response from the beggars would be unsettling, had most of them not whispered benedictions onto him in his slow progress up the street.

Just a few more left.

Aegon straightens, sweeps his hair off his face, and catches Arianne Martell’s narrowed eyes.

“You may just be your father’s son,” she says.

He smiles, bitterly. “I have no father,” he says. *Let her take that as she will. But I will have a crown by the time this game is played out."

He reaches, one last time, for the chest. 

*Just a few more.*

Arienne commands the sailors at her side to start waking.

The torch-bright Great Pyramid rises, close now, above the dust-haze of the streets. The air is cold, and dry, and the sharp stars scatter indifferent, insufficient, light overhead.

Aegon crouches before the last group of beggars. Grey eyes, peeking out of the hood of a tattered robe.

He stops breathing.

*The Healer.*

*It cannot be.*

The waiflike face before him does not waver; it is still her, the sister of the philtre.

*Contact? After so long? But she doesn’t leave Braavos, does she?*

“Sister…” he clears his throat, hopes it’s not too late. She *will* know it’s him--all Faceless Men can recognize one wearing a death-mask. Hopefully she won’t decide to kill him. He drops some coins into her lap.
She mumbles at him, the same benediction the others have.

She mumbles.

She has no tongue.

Horror curls around his spine; he draws back.

“Sister, what has--”

She breaks eye-contact. Then she rises, suddenly, gracefully, and backs away from him. He reaches out, his fingers clutching at her robe.

“Sister, do you go home?” he asks. He doesn’t know what to ask, what to say.

The waiflike Healer never leaves Braavos. She ministers to the sick and the injured, she teaches.

The Healer is missing her tongue.

Hands, upon his shoulder, and the Healer slips out of his grasp.

“Aegon, why are you touching it?”

He turns, helpless. “I…”

Arienne Martell shakes her head at him. “You’ve gone mad.”

“I…”

With strength belied by her small frame, Arienne drags him to his feet. He allows himself to be dragged, his head twisting to search for some sign that the Healer is watching.

Nothing.

And, though he cannot tell whence the certainty comes, it creeps over him nonetheless: the Faceless Man is not here for Aegon, or the mask he carries. Nor is the Faceless Man here on a mission.

Something very wrong has happened in the House of Black and White.

The streets are cold in Meereen. Colder than in Volantis, or perhaps it has gotten cold in Volantis in the month it took them to come here.

He has to find her again.

ARYA

A dream. A memory.

She pours the wine.

The others sit in silence around the table--in the dreaming it wears the guise of a map of the world. Pinpricks of light dance, slowly, across its surface: Faceless Men. Two, in Winterfell, glowing a pale white; a scattering to the South, a lonely point of light in Meereen.
A blaze of white centered on Braavos, surrounding a knot of red.

*Our renegades, asleep.*

She pours for the Courtesan.

“Braavos riots to the name of Arya Stark,” says their sister.

Arya finishes pouring, takes her seat. “It surprises me,” she says. “Tormun Fregar is not one to lose control of his city like this.”

The Old Man steeps his fingers. “It surprised all of us,” he says. “But it has happened--the cartels have turned against the Sealord.”

“The cartels?” Arya colors her tone with incredulity. “But they should be in Tormo’s pocket! Nerin Vash is Tormo’s lover for fuck’s sake.” If nothing else, the heir to more than sixty percent of voting stock in the Vash cartel should have more than enough influence to prevent riots at his lover’s behest.

The Old Man looks thoughtful. “We have...fallen behind current events in the city,” he says.


The Old Man ignores her. “We are catching up,” he says. “And it seems Nerin Vash is no longer in the Sealord’s favor. Whether that came before or after the duel...”

“Duel?” asks Arya.

The Brother of the Patchwork Face snorts. “A mountain out of a molehill. A street duel with a bravo, which the boy lost, gained a scar in the process. Seems it started there, the rivalry between the overindulged cartel youngsters and the bravos.”

*Overinduluted cartel youngsters with voting stock.*

Arya connects the rest of the dots. “Nerin Vash went up against a bravo in a street duel...a bravo somehow linked to Syrio Forel?”

The Old Man nods. “And therefore...”

“Linked to Arya Stark, Syrio Forel’s last student,” she finishes.

No man is entirely predisposed towards his lover’s future wife to begin with...an ember of an excuse, fanned into flame by a scar, some words...

“Arya Stark,” she says, looks up at the others, “has an enemy in Braavos, does she not?” She smiles, grim. “Baelish is behind this. Somehow. The man needs to be managed.”

“We do not have the resources,” says the Courtesan. “Not enough of us to mind the renegades and take contracts and act as chess-pieces in your political games, Bride of Death.”

Arya freezes.

... “your” political games...
“You no longer wish to take the part of Arya Stark for the Sealord of Braavos,” she says quietly.

The Courtesan is ideal for the role, had even volunteered, amused by the deception-in-a-deception. “Every whore should marry once, just to see what the fuss is all about,” she’d said.

That had been months ago.

The Old Man looks grim. The others show no reaction.

So she told them. Them, but not us, until now.

The Courtesan nods, calm, as if she has not just undone months of planning. “It is no longer a priority. If it is Baelish behind the unrest in Braavos, he has done us a favor. Our attention needs to be focused inwards.”

Arya leans forward. “Our renegades sleep, for fuck’s sake, how much focus does that take?”

“Enough,” says the Courtesan.

“Sister…”

“I will play your games for you,” says the Courtesan, “when the House comes to its senses, and lets the sleepers sleep.”

Blackmail?

“Negotiation,” says the Courtesan.

Jaqen sighs, rests his elbows on the table. “If no remedy is found,” says the God, “our brothers-that-were will sleep under our watchful gaze until the end of time. But I will not allow them to be put to sleep.”

“Very watchful, your gaze.” The Courtesan gestures towards the map. Towards a bright red spot, diffuse, covering the entire city of White Harbor.

Zural. Whom we cannot reach.

He could be anywhere.

“It will be dealt with,” says Jaqen, some impatience leaking into His voice.

“Speaking of which,” the Courtesan’s tone is neutral again. “Why is your pet renegade allowed to partake in the dreaming?”

A small change in the corner of Arya’s awareness, in the corner of the room. He who was once known as the Hunter, he will not join the discussion. But he is present, his expertise ready to be called upon.

The Courtesan assumes a sly smile. “The wife you bought with a veto not good enough for you, teacher?”

Pain. There is pain here, so much pain. Why?

There is something Arya is not getting here, something she doesn’t understand. “Negotiation,” she says, hesitant, “You want--”
Jaqen cuts through the words with a sharp, abrupt gesture. “We are not Braavosi, to negotiate and trade amongst ourselves.” The God lays both hands on the table, palms facing upwards. “I would understand, sister, if you would so permit.”

The God has read His student rightly, it seems—all trace of belligerence disappears from the Courtesan’s face. She nods, slowly.

Jaqen waits.

“Renegade and murderous and cruel beyond all sanity,” she says finally, “my mother was a good mother to me.”

We know, Arya thinks. And before the end, when she was too far gone to do it properly for herself, it was you that covered up her traces, cleaned up the gore, burnt the clothes of her victims.

There are very few loves in the world as pure, as needy, as the love of a child for its mother.

The Hunter left you his coin after it was done, as debts owed to one who had once been a sister.

“For love of my mother, I came to the House of Black and White,” says the Courtesan. “Seeking the woman she had once been.” Her mouth twists. “Of course, I forgot her the moment I became a Faceless Man.”

Silence.

Jaqen listens.

When no more is forthcoming, “You paid a very heavy price to become us,” agrees the Wind. “Your mother’s name, the look in her eyes—all purged from your living memory. Even the sound of her voice was taken from you.”

“You think it only fair that all renegades be equally forgotten?” asks Jaqen, neutral.

There is no fairness in death.

“I will never die,” says the Courtesan.

Jon’s words from the day before come back to Arya: “But I will never die,” he had said, “because you will remember me forever. And the little Arya Stark I gave Needle to, because she wanted a sword of her own—she will forever be a part of your memory of me. And so she will never die either.”

The mother is dead; a child is allowed to have a very keen expectation of fairness.

It must be nigh unbearable for her.

The Wind places a hand on the Courtesan’s head. “To force the House of Black and White to hope—it is a very cruel thing I have done to you, sister.”

Varro’s continued existence is a symbol of the hope embodied in those that sleep in Braavos—that a renegade may return to the brotherhood, regain their sanity, that a hungry man may become a Faceless Man once more…

The Courtesan wants the House to abandon all hope.

Gently, the Wind runs her fingers through her sister’s river of shining black hair.
Arya Stark would weep, if everyone else’s mothers and fathers and brothers were restored to them. She would weep, and there would be no consolation for her in any of the things of the world.

“Forgive,” says Jaqen. “Forgive. I cannot...I cannot remember her. Cannot remember any of them. I have tried. I do not know how.”

There is no fairness in death.

For the first time since he was recognized as renegade, the Courtesan looks directly at Varro. “End yourself, brother-that-was. Even the Faceless deserve mercy.”

The Wind giggles. “Whoever sold you that lie, sister?”

The Courtesan meets the Wind’s eyes. “The man that recruited me.”

SANSA

She cannot sleep.

The small waystation is drafty, snow blowing against the rough-hewn logs that make up the enclosure.

The fire goes out. One of Sandor’s men pokes at the embers, keeps them alive for the morning.

Daorys rises, exchanges a quiet murmur with the man on watch. Leaves the waystation, latching the door shut behind him.

He does not come back.

After some time, Sansa rises as well. She has an answer ready, should the guard ask where Her Highness is going.

Her Highness needs to piss, same as everyone else.

But the guard does not ask, simply gives her a nod. She unlatches the door, and steps out into the cold.

Daorys stands just out of sight of the waystation’s door. The wind plays around him, entirely at odds with the way the wind blows near where Sansa stands. His arms are outstretched, and eddies of snow twine around his legs, encircling him in a vortex of white.

Magic.

She steps closer.

His eyes are closed, his face turned to the sky. There is an expression on his face--something she cannot quite encapsulate, halfway between anguish and longing.

She watches; her feet grow steadily colder. But before she has a chance to worry about frostbite, the wind dies down.

Daorys opens his eyes, blinks.

His head whips around, his gaze bores into Sansa.
“What was the purpose of that spell?” she asks.

Daorys walks slowly towards her, and the door to the waystation. “A reminder,” he says, his voice uncommonly harsh.

“A reminder of what?” she asks.

“The price of my existence.”

BRAN

The Three-Eyed-Raven should be far too wise a creature to feel resentment.

He’d wanted to watch the deployment with his own eyes, not a raven’s. Jon, Arya, Jaqen, even baby Samwell have ridden out (the last perched on the front of Maester Samwell’s saddle).

Bran tamps down his discontent at being left behind.

There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.

With a sigh, he returns to flattening out a sheet of scrap metal—later, Smith Waters will teach him how to turn that into arrowheads and spears.

A loud caw, just outside the smithy.

Bran inhales, looks up.

Riders.

Less than ten strikes of the hammer, and he hears rapid footsteps outside. A heavy tread.

The door to the smithy is flung open.

“Ser!” a guard. “Riders have been spotted. Their banners bear a black battleaxe.”

House Cerwyn is here at last.

“So?” asks Smith Waters, “what does—”

“Gendry, help me,” says Bran.

Gendry looks taken aback—Bran has never addressed him as anything other than “Smith Waters”.

“Help me rise!”

The guard moves faster than the perplexed smith, helps Bran haul himself up towards his crutches. Quickly, Bran gets the pieces of wood balanced under him. He grins at the guard.

“You are hornbearer for today,” he commands.

The guard gives a short bow, a worried frown marring his forehead. “Yes, your Highness.” He glances down at Bran’s soot-stained leather apron. “You will need…”

Sandor’s trained this one himself. Or Jaqen did.
Bran nods. “Smith Waters will escort me to the Great Hall. Go find Gilly, ask her to please bring my audience clothes.” He thinks a moment. “And my axe.”

**GENDRY**

*What is going on?*

Bran refused to answer questions on the way, the boy saving his breath for swinging himself as fast as possible towards the Great Hall. All Gendry and his other apprentice, Darcy, could do was follow.

Now a whirlwind of activity surrounds the boy--Maester’s lady, two others, in a tizzy to get him dressed in “proper” clothes.

*Boy.*

*Your Highness.*

Bran. Short for Brandon.

Brandon *Stark.*

*My apprentice?*

It’s ridiculous.

Gendry looks down at himself, the large hammer still in his hand.

Brienne of Tarth stomps into the hall.

“We need guards,” says Bran to her, his voice suddenly full of command.

Brienne of Tarth looks just as confused as Gendry. So, of course, Gendry does his best to wipe the bemusement from his face.

“Cerwyn has not answered Jon’s call,” says Bran; the patience in his voice sounds put-on. “Now they come, when the King is not at Winterfell?”

The lady knight’s expression clears. “I’ll have a squadron positioned.”

Bran nods, turns to the guard. “Horn of Welcome,” he hisses under his breath.

The guard gives another sharp bow, then leaves.

*That one looks like he knows what’s what and who’s who.*

Gendry decides to give the guard a stern nod as the man brushes past him: *yes, I too know what’s going on, I’m in on it.* Then he takes up a post near the wall, hammer at the ready, and does his best to *surreptitiously* lose the smithing apron. Darcy strips off hers, just as quickly, and takes Gendry’s as well. Then she drops them on the ground and kicks them under the big chair Brandon Stark is being seated on.

*Big chair.*
Throne.

_Crown Prince_ Brandon Stark.

His thoughts are interrupted by the matching stomp of feet. Fighting men, sounds like a score of them.

The doors to the Great Hall are flung open by the serving women; Gendry catches the small gesture Brandon Stark makes with his fingers towards Gilly. The Maester’s lady nods, then quietly withdraws.

“Welcome to Winterfell, Lady Cerwyn,” calls out Brandon Stark.

The woman at the head of the armed contingent-- _very well armed contingent_-- walks forward. Dressed in a green wool riding-habit, she stands tall, her silvering hair tied back in severe braids. The aura of haughtiness is belied by the worried, pinched look in her eyes.

Gendry shifts from foot to foot, relaxing his hold on the hammer haft.

“Forgive the strained welcome,” says Bran, “but let me introduce to you Lady Darcy Glover, Mastersmith Waters--”

“Your brother is not home,” says the Lady of Cerwyn.

Brandon Stark _smiles_. “No. Winterfell is reduced straits today, as you see. We are very glad you will add to our number.”

“Seize him,” the Lady commands.

_Wait, what?_

The Cerwyn men move forward, quickly, even as Gendry’s feet are taking him towards the throne. Bran’s eyes roll back in his head, white-in-white; the boy slumps.

A sudden, loud cawing-- _ravens_ burst into the room, a swarm of them, pecking and clawing at the armed men.

Gendry finds himself before the throne, between Brandon Stark and the encroaching soldiers.

The familiar feel of threat, of rage and heat and strength grips him.

Nothing makes sense.

He lashes out with the hammer. Feels it make contact with something. A wet thud.

_That man’s never going to get up._

Senseless.

He starts laying about himself with the hammer.

Someone’s knee.

Just one senseless strike after another.

----
When he comes to, he realizes Winterfell’s own soldiers have come. Cerwyn’s forces have been overwhelmed.

His hammer-haft is wet with blood. There is something drying on his face, a sharp pain in his chest.

_Cracked a rib, somehow._

He doesn’t remember how.

_This is why I never want to be a fighter._

One by one, the remaining Cerwyn soldiers are restrained, and led away.

----

“She wasn’t planning on hurting me,” says Bran thoughtfully. He looks a little sad. “They were ordered not to draw.”

“She wanted a hostage,” says Darcy

_Lady Darcy Glover._

Gendry feels a little sick to the stomach.

But Arya’s brother is safe. He wasn’t hurt, wasn’t taken.

_Brandon Stark, the Crown Prince of the North._

But “Bran the apprentice” seems firmly ensconced in Gendry Waters’ thick skull.

“Success or failure,” says Bran, “she signed her death warrant the moment she moved against me.”

“Not if she’d had you as a hostage,” says Darcy.

Bran sighs. “Jaqen would have laid waste to Cerwyn, and all the land ten leagues in every direction, had she actually managed to kidnap me.”

Gendry’s response to _that_ name is beyond the smith’s control. Hot and cold; a sudden sweat.

_Jaqen would have laid waste to Cerwyn._

Bran says it so...so casually, as if it is merely a fact of the world, as if he is stating that “yes, water flows downhill.”

But Gilly chuckles. “Jaqen? Come, now. He’d have sneaked in, he would, taken you back without anyone knowing, left a body-double or something in your place who’d get up and slit Lady Cerwyn’s throat the next time she came to ‘check up’ on you.”

_They discuss an assassin’s antics with amusement._

Gendry swallows. Grits his teeth.

_Nothing fits._

Maester Samwell is a kind man, a family man! King Jon is a good king--Gendry’s seen and heard of quite a few kings, including all the stories of the man that sired him--King Jon is nothing like
those men. He cares for his people, always has a friendly word for Gendry, for others, low or
highborn.

Arya is...not pure, he thinks, not a ‘right and proper lady’, but so what? She has a good heart! She always did!

And they all know what Jaqen H’ghar is. They talk about it. And nobody seems to care?

Nothing fits.

“No, it’s Lady Arya that Cerwyn would have to watch out for,” says Gilly, bending down to pull
out the smithy aprons from under the throne. “Jaqen’s very even-tempered.”

Bran snorts. “Jaqen is not ‘even-tempered’,” he says. Gendry cannot help but look at the boy—the
Prince. There is a grin on Bran’s face as he looks to the Maester’s Lady. “Impetuous Arya,
unreasonable Arya. Hot-tempered Arya—those two play it very well.” Bran shakes his head. “Arya
is cold, and calculated. Jaqen is...” he looks down, suddenly serious, “a fire in the deep.”

Gendry is still rolling the words around in his head as guards—guards—guards, not soldiers—come
in, followed by Lady Brienne.

“Your Highness, the interlopers have been secured,” says the knight. “You should retreat to your
rooms as we secure the keep,” she adds. And, for the first time that day, Gendry sees Bran falter.

“I don’t want to go to my rooms,” Bran murmurs. And he looks, expectantly, in Gendry’s direction.
Gendry checks behind him, just in case the Prince is addressing someone else.

No. Just me.

He is out of his depth. But Crown Prince or not, the boy he’s spent near on a fortnight training is
looking to him, Smith Waters, to figure out what to do.

“Right,” says Gendry. Clears his throat. “Back to the forge.” He gives Lady Brienne the most
forceful look he can manage, quells her argument. “Smithy is easier to defend than this hall, if
there’s another attack.”

After a moment, Lady Brienne nods, albeit reluctantly.

“I was almost kidnapped,” says Bran. “I still have to work today?”

“Talk to me when you actually get kidnapped,” says Gendry, giving the boy Gendry’s best
impression of his old master. “I’ll give you a half-day off.”

A part of him waits for the reprisal; it does not come. Just the muttering, too low for him to make
out the words (typical of all apprentices), as Bran reaches for his crutches again, and levers himself
up from the throne.

“You,” says Gendry, greatly daring, to Darcy, “get the aprons cleaned—the floor under that great
big chair is filthy.”

---------------------

Afternoon is turning to eventide.

The forge is hot, and Gendry has moved on to punching out the flat handspan spearheads that are
next on his list.
He can do close to sixty every watch—it’s not the punching-out of them that is a pain the arse, it’s the sharpening.

He’s handed that over to the Crown Prince.

The boy cannot operate the grinding wheel’s foot-pedal. Took a bit of doing, but they’ve put together a length of wire and rope, hoisted it over a pulley from the rafters. One end of the wire wraps around a counterweight hanging over the pedal. The other end is twisted into the strands of the rope that dangles near Bran’s head. Now Bran pauses every few breaths, when the wheel looks like it’ll slow, and he pulls on the rope.

The wheel whirrs up again.

Satisfied, Gendry returns to the punching.

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Horse-hooves, on the stone flagstones leading up to the smithy.

Gendry reaches for his hammer.

Bran looks up. “Jaqen and Arya…” the boy trails off. “Most likely.”

Deep breaths, Waters, deep breaths.

The hooves stop just outside. Someone drops down from the horse. Then someone else does.

Two, riding double, one much lighter than the other.

Seems Bran was right.

Another thought: Jaqen H’ghar is hiding who he is--would never have heard him, getting off a horse or doing anything else, otherwise.

The door is flung open--Arya is the first in. She gives Gendry a half-hearted smile, then envelopes Bran in the hug, which the boy pretends is too much fuss.

That’s as it should be.

Unease swirls in his belly, and Gendry looks up to see the assassin enter the smithy.

My smithy. My place.

For a moment the assassin has eyes only for the Starks. He appears relieved, though for the life of him Gendry can’t say how he thinks that, since the assassin’s face looks to be carved of stone.

Then Jaqen H’ghar turns to the smith.

Gendry’s hand tightens on his hammer.

The assassin gives Gendry a deep nod, almost a bow. “Thank you,” he says gravely, no trace of mockery or sly insinuation anywhere.

Gendry flexes his grip, sweat making the hammer’s handle slippery to hold. Awkwardly, he clears his throat, then says something. Not sure what.

>You spilled blood to protect his sister. Does that make us blood brothers?

Almost hysterical, and trying to hide it, Gendry wonders if there is some kind of ritual in the North like they have in King’s Landing, where rich merchants pay a septon to come in and cleanse ground something evil’s trod on. He’ll have to ask if the Weirwood has a priest or something of the like, get the smithy purified by the Old Gods once Jaqen H’ghar leaves.

He clears his throat again. “You should get rid of your guard-commander,” he says. The first thing he can think to say.

Arya whirls around, away from her whispered conversation with Bran.

Relieved to have something other than Jaqen H’ghar’s sudden graciousness to focus on, Gendry tilts his chin towards Arya. “Cerwyn came fast, before the guards--lady knight didn’t call for the soldiers, though we’d just walked past a squad doing drills in the courtyard. Lady Gilly had to do that, bring the fighting folk. Knight came late--seems she went looking for guards wearing the new uniforms.”

“How interesting,” says Arya.

Jaqen H’ghar gives her a cautious look. “One can only assume Lady Brienne wanted to give Lady Cerwyn an impression of strength, given our reduced numbers--the new uniforms look very impressive, far less ragged than whatever-it-is Sandor and I had clothed the guards in.”

Arya sneers. “They’d have to be there to look impressive.” She glares at Jaqen H’ghar. “Tell Jon to dismiss her.”

*Assassin has more influence with the King than the Princess?*

Jaqen narrows his eyes at Arya. “Tell him yourself.”

Bran pipes up from the corner. “Arya won’t ask herself--Jon knows her. He’ll know something’s up if Arya asks for Brienne’s dismissal. Then when the knight’s body turns up…”

Both of Gendry’s eyebrows rise.

Arya rounds on him them. “She knew all along she had one half of Ice. Got it right from Jaime Lannister’s hand, after she knew he was the one that had pushed Bran off the tower, started the War of the Five Kings. I made sure Sandor told her, showed her the letters we took after the Freys were brought to justice--Jaime Lannister arranged for the Red Wedding to happen. Picked the music himself, one of the Frey girls said.”

Gendry is at a loss for words.

“A woman can justify much, for the man she is in love with,” says Bran Stark.

Gendry feels sick again. It’s very clear Jaqen H’ghar has the influence he does because everyone assumes Princess Arya is in love with him.

“Brienne of Tarth will watch Jon’s back during the battle,” says Jaqen H’ghar quietly. “Ice, halved or otherwise, in her hand, will protect a Stark once more. She will die before she allows him to come to harm. That is is her purpose.”
Arya has bared her teeth in a silent snarl. “Intentions don’t matter?” she demands.

“No,” says Jaqen H’ghar, intent upon Arya’s face. “Jon matters.”

Gendry looks away.

Nothing fits.

MELISANDRE

The ice doesn’t matter. The ragged edges of her wounds, blackening with frost, itching, itching, they don’t matter.

Only Jon matters.

A day ago? A week? She cannot tell, but some time ago she fell through the crust of snow and ice. Into what looks like a man-made tunnel.

Left, or right? Which way will take me to Winterfell?

The Lord of Light has been silent since He resurrected her.

Melisandre of Asshai picks a direction, setting the ruin of her feet upon the smoothed snow floor of the tunnel. For a moment, she wonders what she looks like, dead and frozen for far longer than Jon Snow had ever been. Then she realizes it doesn’t matter.

Only Jon matters.

And the shadow that stands behind him.

Chapter End Notes

So, firstly, I need to apologize to everyone -- so many personal and professional things on my plate, I've seriously fallen behind with reading, with commenting, with writing, with replying to comments. I'm incredibly sorry to everyone whose fics I havn't read and/or haven't commented on, to everyone that's commented on here...apart from the PhD finishing up, new job, my partner and I have a new addition to the family as well, which is taking up about 120% of available time...timelines are tight.

Secondly, I'll do my very best to catch up--priority being "write, reply, read, comment", in that order. Thank you so, so much to everyone that has put their time into reading this work, into supporting me and writing to me and writing for me to consume :) I'm doing my very best to repay the favors.

Lastly, I'm playing with the idea of opening up this story for a controlled collaboration--i.e. I have a detailed outline, quite a bit written here and there, pivotal scenes etc. but there is a lot of work in between that is NOT written. Important character arcs (like Cersei, Aegon) that need creative input, wars that need to be written in, love stories that need to culminate...dunno, are people interested in doing mass collaborations on this piece? I want to get it finished, the story and the readers deserve it, I think, but if it's left up to me alone it'll take YEARS. The original world was never mine to begin with, and I'd be happy to involve more people on the project.
I'm envisioning something like shared google docs, folks write the scenes as they wish based on the *very* detailed outline I have so far...full credits and co-collaboration credits, obviously, and I'll do all the editing and putting the pieces together to make things flow...that's the only way I'm seeing this story get finished this year.

Let me know what you think.
SANSA

She enters White Harbor through the Lord’s Gate, even as her retinue rides in from the West. The timing of it means far too many watches have passed after the noonmeal to make parley with the Iron Bank.

After a small, almost-formal dinner with the few nobles of the Manderlys’ inner circle, Sansa walks arm-in-arm with Wylla down the wood-panelled main hall.

They are “gossiping” of womanly things.

“...than a trebuchet, might as well use the pitch we’ve been stockpiling…” Wylla pauses as the Manderlys’ Maester hurries towards them, bows.

“Your Highness, My Lady,” says the Maester. “Your Highness, your medicated bath is ready.”

Sansa makes a face. “And you’ll report to Maester Samwell if I don’t take it, won’t you?”

The Maester gives a judiciously respectful nod.

At Wylla’s raised brow, Sansa rolls her eyes. “I’m healed, mostly,” she says. “But Maester Samwell insists on--”

“Of course he does!” says Wylla. “Sansa, you need to take better care of yourself!”

It takes Sansa some doing to convince Wylla that company would be detrimental to Sansa’s dignity, but in the end she and the Maester leave the Manderly daughter in the public halls, and hurry towards the guest suites, where the Stark party is lodged.

“The Braavosi was spotted leaving their embassy early this morning,” the Maester says to her as they pass through yet another portrait gallery. “Before the first of the riders from Winterfell came through the West Gate.”

The Manderly maester, like many others, is one of Sansa’s agents.

“And?” she asks.

“Hasn’t been seen since,” he says.

“Ser Davos missed dinner,” she observes.

“The Hand has retired to his own townhouse. Seemed tired.”
Davos is old. He should be advising Jon from Winterfell, not riding from city to town to village banging the drum.

Needs must. She herself leans on Davos to provide the supplies for the Sappers and Saboteurs; never asks where they come from, or whether the Starks have received their share of the tariffs. A lesser man would have grown rich off such studied inattention. Davos seems to have beggared himself--she heard he sold his last ship, a small merchantman, to a “friendly rival”. Just before the last wagons of pig-iron were delivered to Winterfell’s smithy.

“And Prince Daorys?” she asks.

“The Prince was seen a half-watch ago, near Fishfoot Yard. Asked one of the guards where the ‘best whorehouses’ were. Seemed drunk.”

“Hmm.”

“He was on foot,” adds the maester.

He’s going after Zural.

ZURAL

He stands at the mouth of Sweetwater Dock, looking out over the black, ice-tipped sea. A ragtag flotilla of smugglers’ ships has limped into Northern waters; one by one the boats are docking, letting people off.

Every man, woman, child--they’ve started to look like the Hunter to Zural.

Flee!

The half-hysterical thought dances in his head, gleeful; a vengeance-ridden ghost celebrating over a foe’s grave.

Zural snorts at the image.

The madness has taken him swiftly, more swiftly than it takes many others: the hallucinations follow him now wherever he goes, the letters of his name carved into rock and wood and stone.

It is time to do something about it.

A man with one hand staggers off the drooping merchantman, much the worse for wear from the bitterly cold crossing. There is something familiar about the man, something…

Hold himself like a swordsman.

There is a sword on the man’s back--wrapped up. Too poorly concealed, too hard to access, for the man to be a Faceless Man in disguise.

Unless that’s what the Hunter wants you to think.

Zural meets the man’s eyes. The man hesitates, moves aside.

Not him. And how the fuck is he supposed to get on a boat coming from King’s Landing?
Zural grits his teeth.

_The Hunter will find a way._

A renegade must be honest to himself: neither contrition nor obedience, it was _fear_ that drove him to White Harbor to do the god’s bidding. Made him helpful to the Starks. Weapons, pitch, saltpetre—Davos Seaworth asked for them, Zural procured them.

Time and time again.

Until yesterday, when a raven came, bearing a message from the red-haired woman he is not supposed to think about: “_A warning, in lieu of the silver I owe you over our last hand of cards: Daorys rides to White Harbor._”

Jaqen has broken faith, sent the Hunter for Zural after all.

_Flee!_

_I am tired of being afraid._

Yesterday, he said “no” to Davos Seaworth.

Zural avoids the one-handed man, keeping himself out of the rings of light cast by the swaying lanterns illuminating the quay. Slowly, carefully, he makes his way to the listing ship, walks up the gangplank—a few grunts, a handful of coin.

Then Zural crosses the deck, and in complete darkness, lowers himself off the other side of the ship and into a small boat, one the smuggler uses to pull up onto remote beaches.

It stinks of crab.

Zural’s contact is huddled on the leeward side of the small boat, sacks of foodstuffs and casks of water between them. Ordinarily, Zural would make the voyage alone, ice or no. But now… between the hallucinations and the paranoia, he teeters on the edge of incompetence.

The smuggler will dare the journey with Zural, for his own purposes.

Without a word, Zural seats himself on the prow end of the boat, unhooks the second set of oars. The other man lowers his own oars into the water; seems to be a careful man—the oars make no splash as they slide smoothly into the water.

Zural approves.

Working in tandem, they pull away from the larger ship, away from the dock, away from White Harbor.

They will make port in King’s Landing.

The Hunter will catch up, eventually. Though it will likely not happen for a long time—at least a year, if Zural has half the skill he thinks he does.

Skill will deteriorate; a renegade’s skill always does.

Best put it to use before that happens, eh?

He goes to King’s Landing to do a last thing for his student. There was a list of names, once. The
list has been left incomplete upon the god’s say-so.

Zural the renegade goes to King’s Landing to make a gift of Cersei Lannister.

The why of it is not necessary to clarify--let Arya Stark think it is an apology, though he suspects she will know it for what it is: apostasy.

The apology has to be for Jaqen: Euron Greyjoy.

JAIME

Jaime feels the man’s suspicious gaze follow him all the way off Sweetwater Dock. The man has the look of Essos about him, insomuch as Jaime can tell by lantern-light--doubtful that he is one of Cersei’s agents, and even if he is, the Hand will suppress all word of a one-handed man making his way to the Wall. The man is probably just another lost soul, Jaime supposes, waiting for the smugglers to take him somewhere else on their boats.

Nevertheless, Jaime had visited White Harbor once before--a different life. Northerners have long memories.

He draws the hood of his tattered oilcloth deeper over his face. The sword--Joffrey’s “Widow’s Wail”, it is still wrapped and strapped tightly to his back, hilt hidden.

He has a few coins, a day or two’s worth of hardtack. Certainly not enough to make it to the Wall on his own. He will have to do it as a recruit, travel under the aegis of the Watch.

There must be a wandering crow stationed in White Harbor, given the times.

ZURAL

The boat is out a half-league from White Harbor when the smuggler rests his oars and leans back.

“So,” the smuggler says, and pulls back the hood of his anorak.

Zural’s stomach drops.

“From Ambassador to fugitive,” the man continues. “A rapid fall.”


The Hunter smiles a little. “You look like you haven’t been sleeping,” he offers. Soothingly, as if he is still a teacher, magnanimously finding an excuse for his student’s failure. Except that this man has never allowed Zural Mobhai any excuses before now.

A Faceless Man will not hold me to any standard anymore.

“It seems the God will no longer hold dreams at bay,” Zural explains.

“You dream?” asks the Hunter. Reproving.

Zural sighs. “Waking dreams--the hallucinations follow me everywhere.”
“What kind of hallucinations?”

Zural shrugs.

“What kind of hallucinations?” the Hunter asks again.


The Hunter snorts. “Figures you’d be a fucking stupid renegade.”

*As stupid a renegade as I was a Faceless Man, so no challenge for you, eh?*

*Flee!*

Nowhere to flee to, out here, except the deep.

“Stupid,” he agrees, “Hunter--”

“Varro,” the Hunter interrupts. “You have a right to use the name, no, student-mine?”

Zural’s mouth pulls to a side; a bitter smile. “Student?” he asks. “Still?”

“Always.”

*Lie.*

“You have come to kill me,” says Zural.

The Hunter blinks. “Teacher never turns on student.” His voice is rough.

The bitter, freezing wind blows about them; it tastes of brine.

*Like tears.*

The Wind may be watching.

“You have come to kill me.” Zural’s repeats.

The Hunter sighs. “No,” he says. “I have come to tell you a story.”

*Lie!*

“What is the name of this story?” Zural asks.

“I’m not a fucking Braavosi, to give things names.” Then it looks like Varro Massag relents. “*You* can give it one, if you like.”

*What is he playing at?*

Zural waits, silent.

“We can call it the Parable of the Penitent,” says Varro Massag. Settles back against the bench.

“You want to hear it?”

Zural nods, hesitant.

“So,” says the Hunter. “It begins...oh, about two hundred years ago.” A wry smile. “With possibly
the stupidest Faceless Man in the history of the order, and that’s counting the brother that was dropped on his head as a baby…”

JAIME

The Sept of Snows looms over the square, candlelight shining out like yellow stars through its small windows. It must be late--hard to tell, in the perpetual darkness--because there are very few people about. Jaime leans against a stone archway, under an oil-burning lamp, and watches for a few moments.

Cloaks belted tight about them, men and women near indistinguishable from each other, the few people in the square are hurrying, purposeful, about whatever task has brought them out into the cold.

Finally, Jaime spots a man that has a septon’s robe peeking out from under his furs. A tall man, the septon’s steps are less hurried than the others’. Jaime steps out from under the arch, intercepts the man.

“Excuse me, ser--” At least, that’s what he means to say. It comes out as a garbled murmur.

The septon stops nonetheless. “It’s cold, brother,” he says to Jaime, then points up at the sept. “There is warm food there. I’d take you myself, but…” he tries to move away.

Jaime grabs the septon’s arm. “Night’s Watch,” he tries to say. “Where?”

“I don’t understand you!” the man says, trying to shake Jaime off. “Go to the Sept!” he points, again.

Jaime’s ship voyage has been useful for more than just transportation--it has taught him patience. He lets go the septon’s arm, steps quickly in front of him to prevent the man from just hurrying off.

“How!” says Jaime. He flaps his hands like a crow. “Caw!” Then he pantomimes drawing a sword. “Caw!”

“Crow?” asks the man. Comprehension dawns. “You’re looking for someone from the Night’s Watch?”

Jaime nods, giving the man an exaggerated smile.

But the man shakes his head. “Won’t find a sworn brother away from the Wall these days.”

Jaime thumps his own chest, points North. “I want to join the Watch.” Thumps his own chest again, pantomimes a sword thrust. “I can fight.”

“A fighter, were you?” asks the septon. There is pity in his voice and pity in his eyes and Jaime is...oddly unoffended.

He nods. Points North again.

“King Jon’s got Wildlings manning the Wall for the most part,” says the Man. “Night’s Watch is not taking any more recruits, I heard.”

They’ll take me.
Jaime’s motions grow more frantic. *A supply wagon heading to the North, a cartload of criminals, anything!*

“I don’t understand you,” says the septon. His voice has a false, soothing quality overlaid on impatience. “I can’t help you! You want food, a roof for the night, go to the Sept. You want to fight, go join the King’s army. Now let me go, man!”

Jaime sighs, and steps out of the septon’s path.

**ZURAL**

It takes a long time for Zural to straighten; the vomit and the tears have frozen at the back of his throat, upon his face, he can’t pull his face muscles straight anymore.

Varro Massag has been a renegade for longer than Zural Mobhai has been a Faceless Man.

Varro Massag offers him a canteen.

Zural hopes it is poison; he declines. Instead, he swishes freezing, brackish water around his mouth, spits it out over the side of the boat, to wash out the sour taste.

He touches his breast, where the ache of his severing from the god sits, a cold dead lump of regret. Finds his motion being mirrored by his once-teacher.

“I am like you,” he says in wonderment. The thing is ironic enough to make a laughingstock of the gods: in one moment of error, he has achieved the thing he has been trying to for decades.

“Correct your perceptions, Braavosi,” and now Varro Massag’s voice is the cold, exacting thing Zural knows as “teacher”. “I was never a standard you should have measured yourself against.” Bitterness. “Knew some things--how to see pattern, how to hold a blade. Tried to give them to you.” His voice changes; he is looking out towards the ocean. “Held back the little things--the things that felt like they were disloyal—the bitching and cursing about Jaqen, the blood.” He grins, then, and offers the canteen to Zural again. “The drinking.”

“Learned *that* long before I came to the House, thank you,” mutters Zural as he accepts the vessel. Nothing warm in there--from the slightly sweet smell upon the wind as he uncorks it, it is mead.

Zural swallows. Chokes a little.

*What the fuck is in this? Horse piss?*

“The most useful things I knew, you refused to take,” adds Varro Massag.

Zural looks up, some shard of anger burrowing out of the depths of him, into the cold night. “How to hide from yourself?” he asks.

*How to be a renegade, and still be sane. Unafraid.*

“How high time you accepted what I have left,” says Varro Massag, as if Zural hadn’t spoken.

*If it could be learned how to be a Lorathi, I’d have been one long ago.*

“When those are not things that can be taught, I am thinking,” he says aloud.
Varro Massag’s eyes narrow. “Don’t know what it was you taught her, from where.”

Arya Stark is a Lorathi that is student to a Braavosi.

“Jaqen’s influence,” says Zural. “She was more than half in love with him before she was Faceless.” Bitterness escapes his control. “Could have been you had you not volunteered--” he pauses.

“Volunteered” to go to Asshai?

Varro Massag is a renegade.

The Hunter does not hunt for duty; duty is just another twisted name for compulsion.

No volunteering about it.

“Jaqen made you this way,” says Zural.


Zural ignores the obvious--what is he supposed to say? All renegades fear death. His thoughts turn to the less obvious.

“Jaqen used you, all these years,” Zural says. “Used you as he would not have used a Faceless Man.”

I was useful in White Harbor.

“Not equals anymore,” he muses.

“It’s complicated,” says Varro Massag.

“All renegades fear death,” says Zural. “We are slaves to our fear. Nothing complicated about that, to my mind.”

“Your mind’s not working right,” says Varro Massag.

Zural snorts.

With both of them not rowing, the boat lists in the water, bobbing upon the small waves.

“So what now, ‘teacher’?” asks Zural.

Varro Massag’s gaze is trained on Zural. “First,” he says, “I tell you another story--this one’s about a god. Then you decide if the story’s good enough to forgive me as payment for it.”

Zural doubts any story can be that good.

“Will you say the story in a random order,” he asks, “and make me put the pieces together while I run around blindfolded, dodging arrows?”

“Do you want me to?” asks Varro Massag.

Zural gives it some consideration. “No, on the balance,” he says finally. “Nostalgia is not worth the spectacle we’ll make of ourselves.”
SANSA

Come “morning”, the stables of the New Castle are almost empty, most horses given over to guards on patrol.

She watches Sandor’s men--the careful way they handle the horses, the quiet coordination between them.

The soldiers’ pay is due in three days. Other staff wages a day after that. The ironmongers and leatherworkers bills a day after that.

In five days, every lie holding together the infrastructure of the North will crumble.

Unless the sacrifice of my sister’s virtue proves to be worthwhile.

When she turns around, she finds Daorys lounging against a wooden post.

She contains her startelement. Contains her question: did you kill Zural?

Affection has nothing to do with practicality; Sansa still has some form of affection for Petyr Baelish and Zural only tried to kill her the once, and that too with a poison that brings no pain.

Daorys considers her; she refuses to rise to the bait, maintains her silence.

“You communicated with Zural Mobhai?” he asks, finally. “Warned him? In defiance of Jaqen’s command.”

She draws herself to her full height. “Last I checked, Jon Stark, not Jaqen H’ghar, was King in Winterfell.”

The Faceless Man remains expressionless. “Jon did not anticipate that his sister would initiate correspondence with her would-be murderer.”

A single raven is hardly “correspondence”.

She turns away, busies herself in pulling out pieces of jewellery from her pouch, to go with the luridly pink dress she has borrowed from one of the Manderly sisters. She finds the Bolton signet, taken from Ramsay’s left hand.

The ring is too large for her; she must wear it on her thumb, and hold her hand in a fist to keep it from sliding off.

She gives a little, half-chuckle. “You know, when I was a child, I thought all lords wore their signets on their left hand because there were rules to these things--like buttons.” Men’s buttons are always on the right. Now she knows better, of course. Rings are not buttons--rings interfere with a man’s swordgrip. Most swordsmen don’t wear rings at all.

Zural did. On his right hand.

Handedness is a tricky thing for fighters. Faceless Men don’t do things by halves; Arya is left-handed--she would have been taught by a man who also fought the same way.

“Should I wear it on a chain?” she muses, looking down at her fist.

“I did not come to White Harbor to kill him,” says Daorys.
You came to White Harbor because I brought you here.

There is no time to mourn ambiguity; the Iron Bank awaits.

She pastes a sunny smile upon her face, turns around to the Faceless Man. “Shall we?”

----

Davos meets them just outside the Old Mint.

The three walk swiftly through the slush underfoot, towards a large building off the square. Three stories, with an unassuming grey facade.

“Follow my lead,” says Daorys to Davos as they mount the steps. “Don’t...volunteer information.”

“Got no information to volunteer,” says Davos, his voice still carrying traces of disgruntlement.

The Faceless Man doesn’t respond, simply gestures for Sansa to lead. There is a large door, with a simple ring as knocker. She walks up to it, looks over her shoulder--Daorys has taken up station beside the door, out of view of anyone inside.

She raises her hand and raps the knocker on the wood of the door.

Once. Twice.

The door opens. “Yes?” asks a voice. A man, in black doublet and surcoat.

Davos clears his throat. “This is Lady Sansa,” he says. “She wishes to speak to a representative of the Iron Bank.”

The man shakes his head. “Forgive me, I do not understand--I believe you have the wrong house.”

The man moves to close the door.

“I am the Hand of the King,” says Davos. “We have business--important business--with the Iron Bank.”

The doorkeeper’s eyes narrow. “I’m afraid you have the wrong house. There is no bank here.”

A movement behind her, she half-turns to look. Dressed in a grey robe the same shade as the churned snow underfoot, the Faceless Man’s hood is drawn over his face, leaving his features in shadow. He looks like a septon come to collect alms for the poor.


The man in black, his mouth opens and closes, like a fish. “I...urm.” He shifts his weight from foot to foot, swallows.

Steps aside.

It’s working.

Wordlessly, Sansa gathers her heavy velvet skirts and sweeps past the entry. The Faceless Man and Davos follow.

Inside, the house is...intimidating. They are in a vaulted foyer, black marble, grey granite, black stone inlay making patterns on the floor. A vast iron chandelier hangs overhead, blazingly bright,
making the darkness framed by tall, slit-like windows on two sides look insignificant.

The reality of the moment crashes down around her. Sounds are sharper: the hiss of her skirt hem on the floor, the soft hiss of snow as it begins to fall again, the thud of the door closing behind them, cutting off the world...

“Please one moment,” the doorkeeper breathes. He disappears down one of the hallways branching off the foyer.

Another man enters the room through the second set of doors. He is also dressed in black, but the cut and fabric of their clothes is much richer than that of the ushers. A banker, then.

“Lady Sansa,” he says, “I apologize, but the manager of this factor house is not available.”

“If not for Lady Sansa, then surely he is for Princess Sansa Stark,” says Davos Seaworth.

*Stop talking, Davos!*

The banker gives them a thin smile. “I’m afraid not. The state of the alliance between the Starks and Braavos is uncertain, you understand…” He *sneers* at Daorys. “Clearly not all guilds receive information as quickly as the Iron Bank, alas, but I fear the time for cooperation between us is coming to an end.”

Cold fear, quickly suppressed. *What do they know that I don’t?* Of necessity, Sansa’s information about Braavos is out of date, and sparse at that--given that Zural is the Braavosi ambassador.

*Surely he would have said something, compulsion to kill or not, if things were so dire as all of that.*

A problem for another time.

The Iron Bank does adhere to the letter of the truth--there *is* no “Stark gold”, not after the Boltons looted Winterfell. That which was in the treasury belongs to Boltons now, as far as the Iron Bank is concerned.

*Names have such power... “Sansa Stark” is as true a naming of me as “Jon Stark” is of Jaehaerys Targaryen.*

But without a will, without her being named as beneficiary in any of Roose Bolton’s papers, the Iron Bank can choose not to acknowledge her right to the Bolton accounts.

And that is where Daorys comes in.

*And Jeyne.*

The Iron Bank can and will not profit from the slave trade. That the Bank adheres to principle had not been a surprise. That it adheres to a principle that interferes with profits…

*Compliance. Audit.*

Daorys had not needed to explain the “how” of enforcing the Iron Bank’s compliance. But a threat: to expose the Bank’s part in a slave trade, should they not cooperate. And Daorys, Arya had said, had the learning and experience necessary to untangle even the most convoluted of the Iron Bank’s methods of obfuscating the origin of gold.

*My name is Sansa Bolton.*
“I am here--” she begins.

The banker interrupts her. “The Iron Bank holds no gold that belongs to the Starks.”

Jumping to an unasked-for denial? A mistake on the banker’s part.

She casts a glance in the Faceless Man’s direction.

The banker brows furrow in irritation. “There is no gold. Really, Faceless One, the House of Black and White should not be concerning itself over--”

The banker stops mid-sentence as Daorys makes a cutting gesture with his hand. “I have come for an accounting,” says Daorys. His voice is quiet. Cold.

Sansa’s gaze flickers back and forth between the Faceless Man and the Iron Banker. She watches the banker pale. Swallow.

“Why?” the banker’s voice is near inaudible.

Daorys draws the hood of his cloak back, revealing the angular planes of his face. It feels as if the world has a nightmarish quality to it, fractured and still and moving dizzily all at the same time.

“My name is Varro Massag.”

**DAENERYS**

At long last, the fingers are in sight. A few nights before Yara’s faster-moving ships catch up with them. For now they will anchor, send parties ashore to take on fresh water--the sheets of ice in the water will make excursions to shore too dangerous from this point on.

*A tenday, and we will be in White Harbor.*

Anticipation sings in her veins.

She wants to meet the man that sends her poetry.

**SANSA**

*My name is Varro Massag …*

As if in a dream, she watches the acrid-smelling pool of urine spread, seep into the grouting of the marble tile.

The banker has pissed himself.

*That* had not been part of any plan.

*Who is Varro Massag?*

The obvious answer: Varro Massag is the dead man whose face Daorys always wears. And *this* specific mask, this name, it represents something to the Iron Bank. Something that terrifies them.
The moment stretches into two, then three. It is not allowed to stretch to four, however--another man in black enters the room, swiftly, walks up to them, bows. He keeps his gaze averted from the Faceless Man. *If I don’t see you, you don’t see me.*

“Please,” says the banker, “this way,” and ushers them down corridors, twisting and turning.

The banker that disgraced himself has been left out in the entrance foyer.

The room they end up in is dominated by a long table, made of black stone. Three cast-iron chairs are placed in front of the table.

A thin, hawk-nosed man sits on the other side of it. He rises, slowly, as they enter. At Daorys’s gesture, she takes a seat on the middle chair.

“Dead men,” says the hawk-nosed man, in Low Valyrian. *Thank you, Zural, for teaching me your tongue.* “The rumor is true.” His eyes are fixed on Daorys. He raises an eyebrow. “Or is it just a death-mask and a name?”

Daorys does not reply.

The hawk-nosed banker considers the Faceless Man; the banker is fingering a ring on this right hand’s little finger.

*Dragonglass.*

“We are in full compliance with your edicts,” says the banker, abruptly. “The Accords, as they are politely called. You must be aware the audit was carried out but two years ago, right after the Dragon Queen--”

Daorys cuts him off. “You hold gold that belongs to Petyr Baelish, Lord of the Fingers.”

The opening that should have been used earlier. Still, Sansa’s grip on the world firms.

“We hold gold for many Westerosi lords,” the banker allows. “Westerosi lords do not deal in slaves.”

“Jorah Mormont,” says Daorys.

Sansa contains her impatience. Daorys is veering off-script. Again. After his insistence that they stick to the letter of the plan.

*Why?*

The Iron Banker waves his hand, dismissive. “Jorah Mormont’s crimes are ancient history.”

*This man is afraid, like the other banker. But...something makes him feel he has the upper hand here.*


The banker opens his mouth. Closes it again.

A lie. It must be--Daorys has never met Jorah Mormont, exiled from the North before the winter. The banker leans forward. “And how does that concern Lord Petyr Baelish?” The banker looks to Sansa, “or is his the gold the girl wants? He really is her natural father?”

“My *what?*” asks Sansa. *Petyr, what are you playing at?*
But her exclamation has earned her a sharp look from the Iron Banker. Her mind races... *What did I do?*

*Oh.*

*I gave away my understanding of their speech.*

Sansa grits her teeth. She hates making mistakes.

“*I died,*” says Daorys, ignoring her misstep, the banker’s accusation; the Faceless Man’s gaze is lowered, focused on the tabletop...no, not the tabletop.

The Iron Banker’s right hand, which rests, palm down, *on* the tabletop.


*His voice.*

Sansa cannot keep her concern off her face as she looks towards the Faceless Man. His eyes are glazed.

*Something is wrong.*

“Jorah Mormont never used the Iron Bank,” continues Daorys. “His wife uses the Lyseni counting houses. Gerion Lannister was granted a loan before he bought slaves. After, his ship disappeared--the Iron Bank took a loss. Wrote it off. Tybalt Ambrin was robbed before he could deposit his gains. Illyrio Mopatis gave tribute to the Dothraki, slaves included. They passed through Volantis, but no gold from their sale ever passed through the Iron Bank.”

A truly agitated look is starting to crease the skin at the corners of the banker’s mouth.

The Faceless Man raises his eyes to the banker’s. “I am a pawn in whatever political games the House of Black and White plays, with guild or Sealord or Stark. But Varro Massag...Varro Massag is his own man. And Varro Massag came to White Harbor to rectify colossal error.”

Silence.

“Varro Massag died for the Iron Bank,” says the banker, finally. “And Varro Massag now demands an accounting against Petyr Baelish.” The banker slowly draws his hand off the table, onto his lap. “What is the justification?”

“Tywin Lannister paid three hundred gold stags to Petyr Baelish for a girl named Jeyne Poole,” says Daorys. “A ’steward’s whelp’ to send North and marry to Ramsay Bolton. He never married her. The gold was ostensibly paid to ’buy out her contract’ from Petyr Baelish’s brothel.”

This *is* news, from the look on the banker’s face. “There was never any contract to buy out?” asks the banker.


“The numbers in two ledgers,” the banker murmurs, his expression making no secret that he understands the implication--that Iron Bank has acted as middle-man to a slave trade.

“And what have those numbers leaked into?” Daorys asks, and given the Faceless Man’s tone, there is nothing rhetorical about the question. “Interest, leverage, capital, fees...how have those
numbers in the Lannister and Baelish accounts rippled out through the system?"

The banker’s hawk-nosed sharpness has given way to haggard resignation. “It will have to be unravelled, all of it,” he says. He considers Sansa. “And the Bolton funds—for that is why you are here, is it not—they will be confiscated.”

She won’t get a better opening than that.

“So you see,” says Sansa, “how an audit is a lose-lose proposition for everyone involved. It can be avoided—”

“Dragon by Dragon,” Daorys interrupts, as if Sansa has not spoken at all, “copper by copper, I will count my way through your ledgers. All of them. And then the Iron Bank will reconcile itself with the Accords.”

JON

They stand on pristine, white snow, and the towers of Winterfell loom dark behind them.

This is something between him and the Free Folk, something that is not done within the walls of his “southern” keep.

“You are very beautiful tonight, Val,” he says, stepping forward.

She smiles at him, serene and predatory all at once.

“King,” she says, her voice pitched to echo, “your word is true.”

All the Free Folk have been given sanctuary.

Weapons, and armor.

Some of them have been given a history they were missing.

Val was sister-by-law to Mance Rayder, King-Beyond-The-Wall.

Val is cousin to Smalljon Umber.

This is the compromise, the fiction, that him and Jaqen have spent so long crafting. Seeds, planted in a hundred minds, allowed to fruit and grow: that a man may be more than one thing. But there is a thing Jon has not told Jaqen yet—that the King in the North is considering a marriage for himself. Not love, but...attraction, faint, as if an echo of a true emotion. And politics, of course.

If Daenerys Targaryen delays any further...

Val Umber, the new Lord of the Last Hearth, turns and casts her words to the large crowd of Free Folk sanding around them.

“Hear me now,” she says. “I declare for Jon Snow.” She hoists her spear into the air. “The King Beyond the Wall!”

The fiction has taken hold. Now that the time has come, there is no opposition at all.

“The King Beyond the Wall!” One of Tormund’s men.
“The King Beyond the Wall!” One that followed no man at all until Mance.

There will come a time, if they win the war, that Mance’s son will come of age and challenge Jon in the Holmgang. Until then, Jon Snow will be King Beyond The Wall.

Jon steps forward.

“The North beyond the Wall is ours,” says Jon. “And our tormented dead walk upon it. Now the time has come to take back the land and bury our dead.” He nods, steps back.

Free Folk don’t need the kind of ceremony southerners have come to expect. Simple, direct. It took some time for the complexity of being two things at once to take hold: that they are free, they kneel to no one, and yet they hold land, fight, in the King’s name.

He nods to Val; she is the lynchpin upon which the fiction rests.

“The North!” she shouts.

“The True North!”

The cheers surround him.

Tormund’s hand claps him on the bank. “Now for those wages you promised us, eh, Your Majesty?”

Jon’s answering smile is a little thin. “In two days, along with the rest of the soldiers,” he says. And prays--hopes Jaqen isn’t listening--that Sansa and Varro can extract something from the Iron Bank.

SANSA

Sansa has been escorted to a sparse sitting room on the second floor of the factor-house. There is tea. And small pastries, evenly arranged around a platter.

From time to time, the refreshments are renewed.

She sits in a state of suspense, suspended between despair and uncertain hope. Her hope hinges on the belief that Daorys knows what he is doing, that he veered off into uncertain waters, leaving Sansa out to sea without an oar, for a purpose.

Who is Varro Massag? Why does the Iron Bank fear that name? J

And that casual, open disrespect…she knows Faceless Men are irreverent, but for even the banker to disregard social convention to such an extent, calling her “girl”…The Starks may be bankrupt, but they are not powerless, not with the largest and most well-equipped army in a generation at their backs. That, more than anything, leads her to believe that the disrespect was not deliberate ploy--it was as if in that room both Daorys and the hook-nosed banker simply… forgot what roles they play, showed their true faces.

Except, of course, that “Varro Massag” is not Daorys’ true face.

Trust. Trust. Arya trusts Daorys. All men wear masks. His is just more obvious than others’.

There is naught else she can do but trust, and wait. Make polite conversation about the weather
with the bevy of bankers that have been sent to “keep her company”, and try not to let her fatigue show.

Watches melt, flow, one into another. At some point Davos leaves to inform the Manderlys that the Princess has been delayed.

When next the pastries are changed out, an older, rotund woman in bankers’ blacks accompanies the servitor.

“Your Highness,” says the woman, gives Sansa a short bow. “I am the manager of this branch of the Iron Bank. Tiyene Lochas.”

Sansa smiles, thin. “I cannot say it has been a pleasure, Madame.”

“Not for the Iron Bank, certainly,” says the lady-banker. “You are welcome to depart at any time.”

“The Faceless Man told me to wait,” says Sansa.

The banker gives her a shrewd look. “What was it that the House of Black and White said would happen if you came here?”

*Careful, careful now…*

“I was promised a truth for a truth,” says Sansa.

“Ah yes,” says the banker. “The whereabouts of the Stark gold.” She smiles a little. “Well, you bartered for nothing--as we’ve already told you, your father, your grandfather, they disdained the use of the Iron Bank. The Starks never had any gold on deposit with us.” The manager reaches out, takes one of the pastries on offer. “I would point out,” the manager continues, “your treasury would have been safe, if they *had* utilized our services.”

“As it happens,” says Sansa, “my deal was not with the House of Black and White--they do not offer aid beyond the function of their guild. No, truth was offered to me by Varro Massag.”

“Varro Massag,” says the lady-banker, and Sansa can see the effort it takes the other woman to summon irritation enough to match her fear. “Who you brought to my branch to perform an audit.”

“And how is that going for you?” asks Sansa sweetly.

It is Tiyene Lochas’s turn to give Sansa a thin smile. “No one is dead yet, so it must be going well.” She takes a seat, on the severe, armless chair across Sansa. “As it happens,” her tone is a match for Sansa’s, “you wait for nothing. Even Varro Massag cannot find something that is not there in the first place.” She shakes her head. “All that upheaval--the records for Dorne have just been demanded--useless.”

“Then at least one purpose is served,” says Sansa. “The greater purpose, perhaps.”

The bank-manager raises an eyebrow.

“Ensuring that the Iron Bank does not profit from slavery,” replies Sansa.

Tiyene Lochas has the grace to look abashed. “Yes,” she murmurs. “And I understand Jeyne Poole was your lady-in-waiting.”

Sansa nods, not trusting herself to speak for fear of what she will say.
My friend, my...substitute, my victim.

The first spark of my defiance.

Something must have shown on her face; the bank-manager sighs. “My branch is situated in Stark territory, so it behooves me to give the Princess a warning--anyone who thinks they use Faceless Men towards their own ends, without paying a heavy price…” She tilts her head to a side, inviting comment.

Sansa picks up a cinnamon tart. It has been years since she tasted cinnamon. She puts it aside. “Why do you presume the alliance between the North and Braavos is about to fall apart?” she asks.

Tiyene Lochas pops another tart into her mouth, chews. Finally, she swallows. “It is no secret the Starks are bankrupt. The Braavosi cartels have woken up to the fact that this alliance gains them nothing.”

Sansa raises an eyebrow. “For nothing, the Iron Bank stations a factor-house in White Harbor.” A stab in the dark. “For nothing, that hook-nosed man came to the North.”

Tiyene Lochas gives Sansa a considering look. “Does he smell like something specific to you?” she asks.

Sansa grows cold.

The Iron Bank knows about wargs.

Not entirely unexpected, given that half the army knows about wargs, and the Starks and Mormonts and others, and that a warg will be stationed with each legion. But to know about their sense of smell…

Truth is, Sansa smelled nothing out of the ordinary. But the fact that the banker asked …

Magic. It can be nothing else.

Sansa quells her swiftly-rising panic.

Daorys can look after himself. There is a cracked stone wall in her sitting-room that gives testimony to the fact.

Sansa gives the woman an enigmatic smile. “As it happens,” she says again, “the North allies itself with the guilds of Braavos. I don’t see how the cartels can make or break the alliance.”

The bank-manager’s face shows some uncertainty. “The Sealord--”

Sansa waves a hand, dismissive. “Arya’s marriage to Tormo Fregar--a bit of a sentimental thing on both their parts, is it not?” She gives an indulgent smile. “It’s hardly as if ‘Sealord’ is a hereditary title, Arya’s children will inherit nothing the Starks don’t give them.” Sansa shakes her head, rueful. “But Jon could never deny Arya anything--gave her her first sword--he didn’t have the heart to withhold his permission.”

“Ah.”

“It would have been better for Arya to make a more...political...marriage,” continues Sansa.

“Willas Tyrell, I presume?” asks the manager.
Sansa titters. “Arya would likely run the poor, studious man through before the honeymoon was over! No, we brokered *his* hand to one of Oberyn Martell’s bastards.”

“I see.” The bank-manager’s uncertainty is growing.

Uncertainty costs her nothing to amplify--Sansa makes a split-second decision. “I wanted Arya to marry into the House of Black and White,” she says.

The Iron Banker stops chewing.

Sansa pulls in all the threads she has heard and overheard of the Faceless Men, and spins them into a so-unlikely-it-must-be-true story.

“The old man back in Braavos, and I,” she says, “we had *so* hoped Arya would see the merit of choosing power over sentiment. Hence all the Faceless Men he keeps sending over to Winterfell for ‘diplomatic reasons’.” Sansa sighs. “But Arya is not one to be swayed by a pretty face and a swagger--she takes more after Jon than she does Robb. She’ll keep her word to the Sealord.”

“Good to hear,” says the bank-manager faintly. She is processing the implications of Sansa’s words: that the Starks think guilds are more important than politicians and cartels.

*Are the Starks wrong? Should the alliance between the Iron Bank backed Daenerys and the House of Black and White backed Starks be allowed to fall apart because the cartels don’t like it?*

Absently, the banker’s hand reaches towards a fourth tart, then pulls back.

Sansa lets the moment stretch out.

A young boy, a bit shy of Bran’s age, rushes up with a kettle of hot water to refresh the teapot.

Sansa smiles at him. “I wish my page was nearly half as efficient,” she says.

The lady-banker snorts. “Take this one with you, he eats twice his share and then some.”

The boy grins.

“Your son?” she asks. There is a marked similarity in the shape of both Braavosis’ ears.

“Nephew,” says the manager.

“He reminds me of my cousin,” says Sansa. At Tyene Lochas’s quizzical look, she says, “Robert Arryn. It’s a pity Petyr was allowed to ruin the boy.”

The banker gets a pained look about the eyes at the mention of Petyr’s name. “It seems Lord Baelish has ruined a great number of things,” she says.

*The Iron Bank’s well-nurtured secrets, for example. By the time this day is done, I expect the House of Black and White will know every little thing the Iron Bank is hiding in their ledgers.*

All because Petyr preferred to keep his gold in offshore accounts and not under the mattress like less-clever nobles.

“Petyr, my natural father?” Sansa gives a delicate, ladylike snort. “He’s lost his mind.” She leans forward, picks up the tart she had set aside, earlier. “Thank you for the tea, young banker--” she looks to the boy’s aunt, “what is his name?”
“Micah,” says Tyene Lochas.

“Micah,” she says, “would you like to come to Winterfell and train to be a knight?”

The boy’s eyes widen.

Sansa takes a bite of the tart. Cinnamon is always a disappointing thing—it smells so much better than it tastes.

“All of my pages are expected to become squires once their voice breaks,” she explains to the manager, “then they are taken under the wing of a suitable knight, hopefully to gain spurs of their own by the time they reach adulthood.”

The manager’s brows are furrowed. “But Micah is not of noble blood.”

“Birth is less important than it used to be,” says Sansa. “With Arya being ‘adopted’ by Syrio Forel after father’s death, we had to elevate fosterage ties with guildsmen to equal status as blood ties.”

The boy is listening to all of this, rapt.

She raises an eyebrow at him. “What do you think?” she asks.

The boy smiles, shy, looks uncertainly at his aunt.

“I will have to ask his mother,” says Tiyene Lochas, a little dubious, but she reaches out, refills Sansa’s teacup.

Satisfied for the moment, Sansa demurs the offer of pastry, and sits back in her chair.

“Tell me more about Petyr,” she says. “What is he up to?”

Tiyene Lochas hesitates.

Sansa takes another dainty bite. “The more stories I hear, I swear, I am coming to believe the House of Black and White wholeheartedly—slavery taints everything it touches. Petyr was a brilliant man, once. Then came the wars, and the quality of clientele at his brothels started to drop…”

The door opens. A grey-clad figure slips through.

*Speaking of fools…*

“It is done,” says Daorys, his voice as flat as it had been when he’d told her to wait.

*What is done? The accounting, or the confiscation of the gold that should have been mine?*

Behind him comes the hook-nosed man. He doesn’t smell of anything at all.

He holds a small roll of parchment out, not to Sansa but to the bank manager. “This belongs to the girl,” he says in Braavosi.

*Yes!*

The manager reaches gingerly for the parchment.

Sansa waits, feigning nonchalance that fools no one.
Finally, the bank manager nods tightly, and reaches into the small scholars’ satchel she wears at her side. More writing, a seal, a signature, and Tiyene Lochas holds out a small piece of paper to Sansa. “Your balance,” she says. “Well played, Your Highness.”

Sansa does not smile.

*It was not a game to me, Tiyene Lochas, to wear the mantle of “Bolton” again.*

“Truths hurts,” murmurs Sansa, almost to herself, as she accepts the paper.

“It does,” says the hook-nosed man, in his strangely-accented Westerosi. “Today it has hurt the Iron Bank.”

Sansa raises her chin. “One must embrace pain, if one is to survive.”

*My name is Sansa Bolton.*

The hook-nosed man nods sagely. “That is how we survive.”

“Thank you for keeping your word, Ser Massag,” she says to Daorys, before she allows herself to look down at what is written.

Numbers. A great many numbers.

*This...this is not right.*

The sum written down on parchment far outstrips the wildest estimates of the missing treasury, even added to the Boltons’. Where there should be hundreds of thousands, there are hundreds of millions.

She looks to Daorys, confused.

*What have you given me?*

That is when she realizes Daorys is trembling.

**ARYA**

She sits cross-legged across from Zural; the posture is a melancholic echo of her first moons as a Faceless Man. The dreaming holds them in the godswood. Jaqen is present, in the sigh of the wind through the leaves.

“You did not send a raven, you did not contact an agent, you did not sleep, old teacher,” she says.

“One does not sleep when one does not wish to dream, Arya Stark,” says Zural.

Varro had to drug Zural, a dose four times that which is allowed, before her teacher slept. There is a drawn look about Zural’s eyes that is familiar to her, now, after dealing with so many Braavosi renegades. The air around him is disturbed; Zural’s nightmares have followed him here.

*You do not trust Him.*

“Even if it comes to pass that renegades can be made whole with the order,” she says softly, “you will not return to Jaqen.”
Zural looks up at her, eyes bright. “I did not choose to be a god, Arya Stark. Now...” A gentle smile. “Not even for you.”

She bows her head.

One cannot hold someone that does not want to be held.

She must try, nevertheless.

“I need you, teacher,” she says. “Jaqen does people. Varro does numbers. Neither play politics. The alliance was of our devising, yours and mine, and it is disintegrating. There are riots in the streets back home.”

Zural raises a hand, brushes it over her head. “I am here, child, you are to be forgiving me for being delinquent. I am here, for as long as my mind holds.”

“No longer?” she asks, and hates the childish tremulousness in her voice.

Zural does not answer; why speak the obvious?

“It is because you are Braavosi,” she accuses.

“It is so,” he agrees. A abrupt change of expression, to something she learned to call “focused calculation”. “I am given to be understanding you have renegades loyal to you,” says Zural. “Ones who owe nothing to the House now that the bond is broken.”

Renegades can do things Faceless Men do not.

Renegades can interfere.

She nods.

“So then,” says her teacher. “This is what must be done...”

VARRO

He almost falls to his knees as the door of the Bank’s factor-house closes behind them.

Sansa Stark is looking more than a little concerned.

“You have the gold,” he says roughly. “Leave. Go to the Manderlys.”

Instead, she stubbornly follows him as he staggers away from the Bank’s factor-house. An alley, out of the line-of-sight of the Bank’s windows, and Varro does fall to his knees, retching.

“Daorys?”

Out of the corner of his eye he sees her hand reaching for his shoulder, hesitant.

“Go away,” he whispers.

“And explain to my sister why I left her assassin-lover puking his guts out in an alley somewhere?”

Explain to Arya.
He’s past caring if Sansa Stark is watching; under the grey cloak, he fumbles for the ties at his belt, thrusts his hand into his smallclothes. Sansa Stark is stepping back.

Varro grips the ring nestled around his flaccid member. The air-made-metal sits quiescent under his touch.

She’s not watching.

“Arya!” he prays, hoarse. “Arya!”

A sudden silence. And then a howling wind, out of nowhere. He gasps—the ring is now icy cold, cold radiates outwards, his breath now freezes in his lungs.


Ice sears the poison in his blood, sears the oily taste at the back of his mouth.

There is no poison, of course, any more than there is ice forming within his arteries and veins.

Mind games.

Magic has returned to the world alongside dragons. Returned with a vengeance, if the Iron Bank’s obsidian mage has come out of retirement.

“Obsidian ring,” he adds.

Where there’s a ring, there’s a candle. Where there’s one candle, there are more.

“Tell Jaqen,” he says. *Jaqen needs to get over His phobia of Valyrian steel.* “Jaqen needs the steel on Him.”

*Or it will be like the last time, with Jaqen in a coma and the rest of us trying to track down the necromancer that did it, douse his candles. Enough wars on our hands, we don’t need one with the Mages on top of it all.*

The Wind wraps Herself around Varro, helps him stand. Ice has stiffened his spine, as much as her attention upon him has stiffened his cock.

He turns. Sansa Stark is watching him, eyes wide with shock.

“I told you to leave,” he rasps.

She swallows, masters herself. “More magic,” she says. “So that’s why the plan went awry? The hook-nosed man bespelled you?”

His jaw tightens. He nods. “My apologies, for not anticipating such. I salvaged what I could.”

Sansa Stark narrows her eyes. “You are very good at lying with pieces of truth.”

He shrugs; an Arya habit.

A stray thought: *you ignore the intuition of a god at your peril.* Arya was right in sending him. Had she come herself...gods are more susceptible magic than others. Arya’s truths would have been pulled out of her, and the truth of her, and Jaqen, has to be protected at all costs.
As it is, now the Iron Bank knows Varro Massag is both dead, and alive. Should the Bank ever want to test the House, all it needs to do is ask for a name…

*A good excuse for the Lorathi, to be rid of me.*

He chuckles a bit.

“Have you gone mad?” asks Sansa Stark. Very matter-of-fact.

“No,” he says. *At least, not any madder than I was this morning.*

“Only, you were groping yourself and calling out for my sister a moment ago, then speaking in some strange tongue, and now you’re standing and laughing.”

“Magic,” he says. “It distorts the mind. The effects will pass—have *already* passed.”

Sansa Stark looks dubious.

It is irrelevant. Now he needs to get her out of White Harbor before Zural wakes up.

**ZURAL**

The world suddenly dissolves into a nightmare, limbs and eyes, discombobulated, reaching for him. And then, like a fish that has been given just enough line, he is pulled back into the dream.

The whiplash of it is enough to make Zural’s head scream with pain.

When the pain subsides, he sees that Arya Stark is gone. In her stead stands Jaqen.

“No,” he says. “Not you. I have nothing to be saying to you.”

Jaqen’s eyes are dark, expressionless. “Then sleep,” says the God. “No dreams. That, at least, I owe you.”

Darkness.

Zural forces himself awake.

**SANSAS**

The impact of the little roll of paper the banker gave her does not truly register until the next watch, when she sees the chests. Iron-banded oak, each is a foot square and takes three men to lift onto the carts.

Gold—less than a hundredth of what her newly-opened account actually contains, but all the liquidity the Bank is willing to part with at short notice.

She still doesn’t know whose gold it is. Rather, she knows the greater truth: *this is Jeyne, doled out in wages to soldiers, to butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers.*

The gold is accompanied by an unexpected addition to their ranks: Micah, the bank-manager’s nephew.
Davos has already taken to the boy, picked out a horse for the child.

Daorys has nothing to say except “hurry it up”.

**ZURAL**

The rage takes him for a few moments.

_Sansa Stark was in White Harbor just a watch ago._

The hunger does not like being thwarted.

Zural Mobahi takes deep breaths.

One must reason with the madness, Varro Massag has said. Delay it, distract it. Twist it into something _useful_.

_I am done with being useful._

Rage.

**SANSA**

They are two watches out from White Harbor, well on the road back to Winterfell.

“Shall we trade truths again, Ser Daorys?” she asks lightly, two watches out from White Harbor, well on the road back to Winterfell.

“You have your gold,” says Daorys. “What more truth do you want?”

“Who was Varro Massag?” she asks.

“No one,” says Daorys.

“A slave, I think,” she continues blithely. “Enslaved because of the Iron Bank. He paid the House of Black and White for his vengeance. Very many bankers were ‘given mercy’. And because Varro Massag was a slave and could not own anything, he gave you his face in payment.”

Daorys says nothing.

“Am I right?” she asks.

“If you wish,” says Daorys.

So _that’s not it_, thinks Sansa.

“I gathered the hook-nosed man was using dragonglass somehow,” she muses. “His ring, that table, that inlay pattern in the foyer...and dragonglass can be used to kill White Walkers. What makes dragonglass so special?”

“Ask your brother.”

“Did you kill Zural?” she asks.
“Zural was dead long before he met you.”

Sansa grinds her teeth in frustration.

A last try. “The North has never seen the amount of money that my account now contains,” she says. “That is not the Bolton gold.”

“Boltons became slaveowners. The gold had to be confiscated. It will go into a fund set up for the manumission of slaves.”

“So what gold did you give me, Daorys?”

“I relocated the treasury of the Seven Kingdoms,” he says absently.

**ZURAL**

Renegades get stupider with every day that passes, it is said. All except Varro Massag, apparently.

A false trail, and Zural followed it like a fool, his mind focused on the red-haired woman at the end of it.

*Not to hurt, not to kill. I will apologize when I see her, that is all.*

Some part of him wonders why he doesn’t just send the apology by raven.

*Because there are Faceless Men watching for my missives. They will check for contact poison on the letter, and then it’ll all be useless, won’t it?*

He will thank her for warning him, and apologize, and they will part ways amicably. That is all.

“Do not leave White Harbor,” his teacher had said, before leaving Zural to his drug-induced slumber.

“What will happen if I do?” Zural had asked.

Varro Massag had sighed. “It will be a teachable moment, I suppose.”

Now Zural sits huddled in the ruins of a mill, listening to the wolves circling outside.

*Now* he understands the cryptic message Varro Massag delivered before Zural succumbed to the drugged mead: “When the howling stops, you know the undead are coming.”

**SANSA**

It takes until the next “day” for Sansa to find her voice again. “I’ve had to listen to Petyr bemoan King Robert’s excesses often enough to know the Iron Throne did not have access to this kind of gold.”

“Petyr Baelish, Petyr Baelish, Petyr Baelish,” murmurs Daorys. “Even knowing what that man is, people *still* believe the things he says.”

“I…Petyr had to borrow from the Lannisters to pay for Fat Robert’s tourneys…”
Even as she says it, she realizes how stupid it sounds. Now that she has had the running of a
country, it’s very clear that quarterly tournaments, no matter how lavish, could not have been the
sole reason the Seven Kingdoms went bankrupt.

“Bankruptcy is a question of balance sheets,” says Daorys. “Numbers in a ledger, easy enough to
manipulate when half the Lords around you, including the King, are functionally illiterate in such
matters.”

*I assumed. Even after knowing all that I do, I assumed …*

“I do not understand why Petyr Baelish would go to such lengths,” says Daorys, “and then leave
the gold—the physical gold—untouched in the storehouses.”

Jeyne’s story is testament to the fact that no physical gold has to change hands to destroy lives. The
Lannister-Baratheon tangle worked well to tear down Eddard Stark, and the Seven Kingdoms, off
of paper alone.

*Chaos is a ladder? Even back then, no matter what stories you told yourself, Petyr, you never
wanted to sit on the Iron Throne, you wanted to destroy it.*

“Robert Baratheon being incompetent—or unconcerned—I would credit,” she says. “But after his
death? Tyrion, Tywin, how did *they* not discover the truth?”

“I presume,” says Daorys, “it was because Joffrey got to it first.”

*Joffrey…*

She waits.

say that a convoy was commissioned, paid for—your father was to be persuaded to take the black,
go North to the Wall.”

*Joffrey was a coward and a bully; his execution of father was an action born of fear, and
impulsiveness, and a desperate attempt to prove to himself that his newfound power was real.*

“There are many questions left unanswered about those few days, when your father was in the
cells,” says Daorys. “Nevertheless, that was when the deposits to the Iron Bank started. Gold,
being deposited into Joffrey’s *personal* account, under the name of Joffrey Lannister, not Joffrey
Baratheon.”

*Fear that his parentage would be exposed and he would be dethroned?*

“Large deposits,” continues Daorys. “Equivalent to almost a tenth of the crown’s *total* income
every moon. Everything that should have been a surplus.”

“The people were starving,” Sansa whispers.

“Joffrey was a bad King, I think we’ve established that,” says Daorys.

Sansa is still trying to wrap her head around the size of it.

“Joffrey just… *took* the crown’s gold?” she asks. “That’s *embezzlement.*”

“And it is expected of Kings to rape and murder their own people, but not stoop to petty financial
crime?” asks Daorys, wry.
The question does not deserve an answer.

“Why…” she clears her throat, “how could you ‘relocate’ that money to me?”

Daorys opens his mouth, pauses, as if trying to rearrange his thoughts. When he speaks again, it is in a cautiously measured tone. “Policies—laws by another name—are tested only in their application upon outliers,” he says.

“Thank you for that insight, Maester Daorys,” she murmurs, “Now please, teach your grandmother to suck eggs.”

He gives her a sidelong glance. “Bank policy is that names matter. Names are a legal contract. Joffrey Lannister, not King Joffrey. A man in his persona as a private citizen. And so the account was not initially seized by the Bank to pay off the Crown’s debts like House Lannister and House Baratheon’s accounts were. Given how much gold was involved, and the fact that not everyone at the Bank was entirely in the dark as to its origins, the account would have been breached sooner rather than later, had Joffrey lived just a month or two more. But he died before the paperwork moved across the desks it had to, and the account went into probate proceedings.”

“Which means?”

“In the event of Joffrey’s death,” says Daorys, “his assets with the Bank are bequeathed to his heir—”

“Tommen,” she murmurs. “Or Marcella?”

“Irrelevant,” says Daorys, “Since all of Cersei Lannister’s children are dead.”

“She’s with child again,” says Sansa.

“Since the Iron Bank is a Braavosi institution, one applies Braavos law,” says Daorys. “A foetus is not a child until it is born. For the next, oh, three or four months, the rightful beneficiary to all these accounts is the highest ranking dependant of the House of Lannister.”

“Cersei,” says Sansa.

“The Head of the House cannot be a dependant of the House, by definition,” says Daorys. “With Lancel Lannister killed during the destruction of the Sept, the next highest ranking dependant of the House is…”

She calculates. “Joy Hill.”

“Back to Westerosi law,” says Daorys. “Lawful wives before bastards. With the death of King Tommen’s wife, the next-closest dependant of House Lannister is Sansa Lannister.”

Sansa blinks. “The marriage was annulled!”

“In the North,” agrees Daorys. “A kingdom separate from that ruled by King Joffrey, in the moment your brother Robb was crowned King. South of the border you are still married to Tyrion Lannister, as far as the Iron Bank is concerned.”

“That…makes no sense. I cannot be married to both—” she stops herself before she speaks a name other than “Lannister” or “Bolton”.

“Why not?” asks Daorys.
Because her name is now, by all rights, Sansa Clegane.

“What is a name?” asks Daorys.

“A legal contract, according to the Bank,” she retorts.

Daorys snorts. “Do you know,” he says, “the sixth Sealord of Braavos made his horse a city councillor. There was a monetary requirement to be appointed to the council, so a bank account was opened. To this day, the Iron Bank dutifully pays the annual interest into the account in the horse’s name.”

ZURAL

A cold snap has come.

His breath freezes before it leaves his lungs; he has lost all sensation in his extremities.

His teacher, helpful as ever, has left Zural yet another message in the mill-turned-trap: an unlit fire. On the assumption, apparently, that no Faceless Man would venture into the freezing wilderness without flint or firebox.

Varro Massag has miscalculated how quickly the compulsion would take hold of Zural Mobhai.

GENDRY

His heart aches for Arya, and for the sword--she is using Longclaw to nick off small pieces of metal from the tip of Dark Sister.

They sit on the floor of the smithy, carefully chalked diagrams on the floor all around them. Neither of them know whether the magical-looking runes and lines are real or quackery, some author’s imagination. But having them drawn can’t hurt if they are false, is the reasoning. It seems sound to him.

“My father’s sword would have worked better,” she says quietly. “Ice would have served us, no matter now sundered.”

He purses his lips, doesn’t say anything.

Withholding that blade from the Starks--it is poorly done of Lady Brienne.

Arya shrugs. “So be it.” She gathers up the small nicks and pieces of steel, drops them into the crucible they’ve prepared as per the instructions in the tome.

The first step is to see whether they can recreate the re-forging of Valyrian Steel. Between the tome from Qohor, some more knowledge she has form somewhere, she won’t say where, and a solid understanding of smithery, he thinks they might manage that, at least. Won’t be a blade—just a test.

“How?” she says, looks to him expectantly.

No patience, like always. He grins a little. “Now we wait.”
The metal will take a watch to melt fully.

“Jaqen said he ran into you a couple of days ago,” she says. “Said you recognized him—very unambiguously.”

He nods. His eyes slide away from hers.

“He’s not my lover,” she says abruptly.

His gaze snaps back to her.

“Jaqen and I were wed, almost three years ago,” she says.

All he can do is stare.

“My family approves of the match,” she adds.

The King’s words start to make sense. *Jaqen is a brother to me… A lot of things start to make sense.*

“It’s a secret—I know you can keep secrets—because the Northern alliance with Braavos needs a face on it. So an Arya Stark will wed Tormo Fregar. Sealord’s in on it. Make sense?”

He nods, then shakes his head, mutely.

“The metal’s melting,” she observes.

He feels like his face is melting.

“It’s nowhere close,” he replies.

*Only then* he feels like the anvil sitting over on the bench has flown through the air and hit him on the head.

*Wedded. To the assassin. To Jaqen H’ghar.*

To be falsely-wedded to the Sealord of Braavos.

“Highborn,” he mutters.


*Of course you did. Man slaughtered an entire Lannister garrison for you, how could you not marry him?*

“I want us to be friends, you and I,” she says.

“You’re my princess,” he says, “not just m’lady anymore, I—”

“Cut the shit, Gendry,” she says. “It’s all shit, and you know it. I’m Arry and you’re Gendry. Or I’m the daughter of Eddard Stark, and you’re the son of Robert Baratheon, and our fathers were the best of friends, like brothers.”

He closes his eyes. *I wanted more.* Something in him tells him she knows that.

“What’s *wrong* with me, Gendry?”
He opens his eyes in shock. “Nothing!”

“You order my brother about like he’s your fucking errand boy, but you can’t even be friends with me when we came through war and blood and death together?”

“I’ve been setting the Crown Prince to making barrel-staves,” he says.

I sound so stupid.

“He asked for it, didn’t he?” she asks.

“Why?”

“Daorys,” she says, rolls her eyes. “He was pissed Brandon Stark was being carried about by servants everywhere, took Bran’s training in hand. But in the process Daorys infected Bran with the desire to be useful.”

Prince Daorys of Essos giving lessons to Prince Brandon of the North. That makes sense. Dragging Smith Waters into it feels unfair, somehow.

Made me make a fool of myself.

All kinds of fool he, Gendry Waters.

I opened my mouth about Jaqen H’ghar when the King told me not to.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Bran’s enjoying himself,” she says. “And if making barrel-staves keeps him happy and conditioned, I’m all for it. Keeps him out of trouble, too.” She raises an eyebrow. “Why, hasn’t he been doing good work?”

“He’s meticulous,” Gendry says. Not a lie—he’d never lie about a man’s work.

She smiles, looks inordinately proud. “That’s Bran,” she says. And the tone of her voice is exactly what Mistress Charlene’s had been, when he’d told her her son had an eye for metal.

“Prince Daorys doesn’t mind?” he asks, hesitant, “that I’m teaching his protege?”

She purses her lips, shakes her head. “Don’t see why he would,” she says. “Either way, you want to be friends with me, or not?”

The question is a sharp stab in his mid-section. He feels sorrow, and a little shock, and regret, and a hundred other things he can’t quite name. But a part of him is relieved. No hope, no possibility at all.

Arya Stark is completely and entirely out of his reach.

“Friends,” he says.

Got nothing else.

She spits on her hand, hold it out to him.

He spits on his own hand, shakes hers.
“Friends,” she says, with great satisfaction. “Good.” Then she grins. “There’s so much to tell you.”

He snorts. “Like how you married Jaqen H’ghar, I mean come on! You weren’t supposed to get married to him, you were supposed to become an assassin so you could kill all the people on your list!” He smirks. “Or is your husband going to kill them for poor, girly little Princess Arry?”

She glares at him. “I am an assassin,” she says. “How do you think I met up with Jaqen again, huh? I was trained by his guild, stupid!”

“Yeah, and how many men have you killed?” he asks.

“More than you,” she retorts.

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The steel melts. It is poured into small molds—he’s chosen ring-molds, rings are easy to work into something else if needed, a pretty ornament—the Starks can use them as diplomatic gifts of great value, if nothing else.

The steel remains molten.

“Two tries,” she mutters, considering the molds. Only enough metal for two rings. “If we get it wrong…”

The metal will fall to dross, the Valyrian shine of it destroyed forever.

This part needs blood. The blood that has made the remnants of her father’s sword, Ice, ripple with red and black, blood and smoke.

Uneasily, he wonders whose blood Mastersmith Mott used.

She shakes her head. “Better get it right right.”

He raises an eyebrow.

She rises to her feet in a smooth, cat-like motion. “I’ll be back.”

In her absence he realizes the tight band around his chest has eased. Not gone.

Never gone, he thinks. You don’t ever forget your first love.

But eased.

Sometimes an unambiguous “no” is a thousand times more liberating than the complications of a dream of “what-if”.

ARYA

She slips into the darkness outside the smithy, sidles up to a particular shadow in the recess of one the stone walls, where the lantern-light never reaches.

She knows He’s been there the entire time, listening. Almost helpless, in the thrall of his possessiveness of her.
“Did you like that?” she murmurs.

Jaqen’s arms close around her. “Mmm. I find myself feeling sorry for him.”

“Good,” she says, her hands sliding over Jaqen’s shoulders, His chest. “So you won’t mind giving him some of your blood, then.”

“All yours,” He says, “but your blood is as powerful as mine, beloved.”

She exhales. “I don’t want to take a chance. We need the rings if an Obsidian Mage is around. If it was pieces of Ice—my father’s blade knew his children. But Dark Sister has always been a Targareyn’s blade till it came to me.”

Blood of the Dragon.

He nods. And then she can feel Him grinning. “Should I come in, bleed all over the smithy as a show of my devotion to you?”

“Bend me over the anvil and fuck me while you’re at it,” she says. “Just so your claim is really staked.”

He sighs. “Point taken.”

“Here.” She offers Him an empty vial from her belt-pouch.

Duly, He nicks a finger, bleeds into the vial.

Black blood.

“Can you make it red?” she asks, peering at the vial against the light on the other side of the courtyard.

Slowly, the darkness drains from the blood; the vial gains a crimson hue. She feels her chin being seized in His hand, her face turned up to him.

Her lips part; Jaqen’s tongue flicks against hers.

Mmm. Yes, please. Dissuading infatuation in a kind way is irritating. Make me un-irritated.

Darkness—the darkness he has taken from the vial, it enters her mouth, her throat.

She groans.

The hair on the back of her hands has risen, the tops of her thighs flushing with warmth; she feels herself growing moist with need. “Jaqen,” she whispers.

“Go,” He says. “Before I convince myself there’s only one kind of Valyrian steel you need.”

GENDRY

She re-enters the smithy giggling, her hand over her mouth.

“You went to get drunk, didn’t you?” he asks.

She shakes a small vial of blood at him. “I had to endure a very bad pun to get this,” she says.
“Show some gratitude, man.”

“What is it?” he asks.

King Jon’s, most likely.

“Someone with some Valyrian blood in them,” she says.

His eye grow round.

“Oh, come on,” she says. “It’s not all that rare. A third of the people of Volantis have the heritage, most of Lys does, you can’t throw a fucking stone in Essos without running into someone with some Valyrian ancestry.

“Oh.” Essos. She made the Prince from Essos bleed for her, seems like.

“So,” he says, as he watches her carefully portion out the vial’s contents into two separate apothecary’s droppers, “what is Prince Daorys doing out here?”

“Same thing we all are,” she says, gives him an impish grin. “Raising a blade for Jon Stark.”

He concentrates on brushing the eagle-feather around the rim of the cup. “That’s the pap you feed the soldiers,” he murmurs, tongue caught between teeth. “Won’t work on me. Why did he really come here?”

She shrugs. “I called.”

Something must have shown on his face, because she looks away.

“Like I said,” she says, eyes now focused on the dropper’s tip as it hovers over the mold, “Jaqen’s not my lover. Daorys is.”

It’s a very good thing he’s holding his breath—he’d have choked on it otherwise.

**TORMO**

A whisper worms its way into his dreams. Like the hiss of cold wind seeping in under the door, the whisper draws him towards the waking world.

Tormo Fregar opens his eyes; the lantern is out, but candlelight from the antechamber illuminates the room, dimly.

*The candles are lit; it must be late.*

He has been sleeping longer and longer these days, well into the “day”, to rise for the noonmeal.

*Neither day nor noon to be seen, so what does it matter how late I sleep?*

The candlelight picks up the silhouette of a man standing next to the bed. A tall man, smelling of the vents under the Palace.

“How may I be of service, Faceless One,” mumbles Tormo. He rubs a hand over his face, trying to massage his expression into some semblance of alertness.

“Arya Stark sends you a message,” says the Faceless Man from the vents.
“From the King in the North?” asks Tormo, “or the House of Black and White?” He is too tired to dance around the nuances of this strange alliance.

The Faceless Man says nothing.

Tormo’s head starts working again, albeit reluctantly. “Just Arya Stark sends me word?” he asks, for verisimilitude.

“Arya Stark,” agrees the Faceless Man.

Tormo snorts.

*How sweet--my betrothed is thinking of me.*

“What would she convey?” he asks.

“Wake up, Tormo Fregar,” the Faceless Man whispers. “Your city is falling apart.”

**PETYR**

The blows rain down upon him from all sides; all Petyr can do is shield his head and wait for it to be over.

Pain.

When he comes to, he is in an alley somewhere by the smell of it; he cannot open his eyes fully.

*Sansa had me crippe*d.

No, no, that is not right.

*I’ve had Sansa murdered.*

But he hasn’t received word yet that it’s been done.

*Assassins are far too expensive*, he thinks muzzily, *should have run assassins instead of whores.*

He realizes his thoughts are not quite straight; he is passing in and out of consciousness.

Pain.

Someone is standing over him, and even with eyes swollen half-shut, Petyr sees the fury written on the boy’s face.

*The cartel boy.*

“Slaver,” the boy hisses. “You cost me *everything*, Petyr Baelish.”

The boy aims a kick at Petyr’s midsection.

Darkness.

Pain.

Light.
Warmth.

No pain.

Petyr opens his eyes. He can open his eyes.

It appears as if he is in a temple, of all places.

“Welcome back to the world of the living, Petyr Baelish,” says someone. Male. Deep voice. Petyr cranes his head for a look. A large man, skin black as ebony, stands at the head of the— for want of a better word—the bed Petyr is lying on. The man is dressed in orange and red robes.

Petyr looks down at himself. He is naked; there are wound, so many wounds upon his body.

“I should be dead,” Petyr whispers.

“You were,” says the man. “Courtesy of the Iron Bank and the Vash cartel, I’d say. But the Lord of Light is merciful.”

“Who...who are you?” Petyr asks.

“My name is Moqorro. The Lord of Light has chosen me to be your salvation.”

**DAARIO**

Drip...drip...drip.

Water is dripping somewhere. It won’t let him sleep.

A sharp sudden shock of cold.

*Wet.*

“What the fuck?"

Daario opens his eyes; piercing light hits his too-sensitive eyes, making him swear again.

“Who the fuck just poured water over me?”

A man walks around the head of the bed, into Daario’s field of view.

“I,” says the man, a halo of silver hair around his too-handsome face, “am Aegon Targaryen. You were my aunt’s lover, I heard.”

*What the fuck?*

It’s far too early to be confused.

*Or far too late.*

Belatedly, Daario’s head starts working again.

*Whoever he is, he could have slit your throat as easily as wake you up.*

The man smiles.
Something about that smile…it pierces Daario’s breast, makes him long for the bottle again. Well, it makes him long to hear Daenerys’s voice, but the bottle substitutes well enough, once it’s a bit more than two-thirds empty.

*Ah, Jorah the Andal, if you could see me now--you’d laugh and laugh and laugh.*

“What do you want?” Daario realizes his voice his hoarse.

“I want to wake you up,” says the man claiming to be the Dragon Queen’s *nephew*, of all things. “Your city is falling apart.”

**ZURAL**

Sensation returns, one screaming limb at a time.

For a moment he thinks he is hallucinating again--there is a woman with red hair sitting before a fire. Almost, Zural lunges forward, but in the last instance he realizes the hair is the wrong shade of red, and the woman…

*The howling stopped. The undead are here.*

The ruin of her face, scabbed over, turns to consider him. One of her eyes is missing from its socket.

*Wights know how to light a fire?*

“The Lord of Light is merciful,” she says. Her lips, untouched by whatever violence ravaged the rest of her, are beautiful; her voice, though unused, is melodious.

“Who…” it comes out as an ice-choked whisper. “Who are you?”

“My name is Melisandre,” she says. “I am the Champion of the Lord of Light.”

**SANSA**

“You danced a very pretty jig with my names,” she says. “Used the letter of the law to violate its spirit.”

*All while under the influence of magic powerful enough to make you tremble and vomit.*

“Bolton gold was as good as gone the moment we walked in those doors,” says Daorys. “Couldn’t twist the truth with the mage around. Had to twist the world instead.”

Sansa shakes her head. “We could have fallen back on asking for a loan.”

“Arya--”

“I want the real answer,” she interrupts. “The Bolton nonsense was *your* invention on the road, and I…” *Allowed myself to be convinced it would work, for the sheer poetic justice of it.* “Arya thought we *were* going for a loan, with you around to ensure they granted it.”

She waits.
“There is a man—a soldier,” says Daorys finally. “He comes out every so often to pray at the godsdow. He says, ‘Keep my little ones safe. All my comrades down, dead, if they get killed, so as not to come back.’ Sometimes he adds, ‘Make it so that Princess Sansa gets all her things back, the dresses and the jewels as the like she sold to feed us.’” Daorys shrugs. “You wouldn’t have bought dresses and jewels with borrowed coin.”

“A real god would grant his own miracles,” she says.

“A real real god,” says Daorys, “delegates.”

Chapter End Notes

Not being abandoned, or, given the feedback, opened for collaboration. Just slow.
Next up: sex, and septals, and storms.
Septal

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

Almost called this chapter "Jon's cajones..."

A Happy New Year to everybody :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON

The letters could be false. She could have played him. And yet, and yet…

He writes to her one last time, more and longer than he has ever written before.

JAIME

The column wends it way around the swells of the landscape, a dark ribbon against moon-bright snow. Stark soldiers at the front, followed by a train of horses drawing carts. Then a cluster of army recruits, huddled together for warmth and safety.

Jaime is amongst their number.

The army recruiter had turned a shrewd gaze on Jaime, when he’d asked about the Wall. Jaime knew what the recruiter saw--a cripple.

“Undead on our doorstep, swordsman,” he’d said, “you’ll do what you came to do north or south of the Wall. No need to be putting the men beside you at risk by seeking a posting beyond your abilities.”

It seems Eddard Stark’s unloved bastard has upended the order of the world. These days, only the “best”--whatever that means--get to go to the Wall. Less deserving souls get sent to Winterfell, to be assessed and assigned to one of the six legions.

And so Jaime finds himself battening on the Starks’ war-chest, going to Winterfell as part of a convoy headed by Sansa, of all people.

*If the gods exist, they have a very cruel sense of humor.*

The vanguard of the train is made up of Manderly men, the last of White Harbor’s levies to join up with the body of the King’s army.

The soldiers are taut with tension, the travellers with fear--the column was attacked two sleeps ago.

Jaime can still taste his own terror, metallic, at the back of this throat. Seasoned warrior, soldier, knight, he’d frozen, mouth slack, as the first of the slavering corpses had swarmed over an
embankment.

It was the Stark soldiers, in their silver-grey hauberks, that had saved the day. But not without losing two of their number.

Now, the occasional howl from a wolf is a comfort, the closer the better--wolves don’t attack such a large group of armed men. The undead don’t have enough of a mind left to care.

A ripple down the train--the head of the convoy is pausing.

*Time for the “noon” meal, I suppose.*

**SANSＡ**

She passes through the gates of Winterfell and a snake-like train of wagons and people follows in her wake. Barrels of saltpetre, and salted pork, and recruits for the army.

*And the gold. Let’s not forget the gold.*

Sansa cannot keep a smile from blooming on her face.

Her smile is echoed at the top of the steps to the Lord’s Keep, where the King himself waits with brimming horns of mead, Arya to the left of him, Bran, on crutches, to the right.

Sansa dismounts, as Jon rushes down the steps, and then she finds herself enveloped in her brother’s embrace.

*Son of Rhaegar Targaryen?* In this moment she is ready to scoff at all proofs, for if she closes her eyes she can believe it is Eddard Stark’s arms that hold her.

“A long journey,” Jon murmurs into her hair. He doesn’t mean the trip to and from White Harbor, he means the journey they started together at Castle Black, with nothing but a handful of wildlings and a desperate bid to retake their home.

*It’s done, Jon, it’s done.*

She blinks back the moisture from her eyes and disengages herself from Jon’s arms.

“Quite a haul,” says Arya, taking in the retinue filtering into the yard, the chests upon chests of Iron Bank gold.

“Because of you,” Sansa says, turning to her sister, voice choked. “Because you came home.”

“Wouldn’t have had a home to come to if Jon hadn’t won it back for us,” says Arya, “and you hadn’t held everything together.”

The steady *thunk-thunk* of wood on stone tells her Bran has made his way down to the courtyard. She turns to the last of her brothers, the brother she will never fully understand again.

Their embrace is awkward, because of the crutches, though Bran is grinning like the mischievous boy he used to be. But his eyes are dark, too knowing, out of place in that still-childlike face.

She looks around her, and her gaze catches the remnants of the Bell-Tower bridge. Icicles, some the height of a full-grown man, hang from the ruined stonework.
A reminder, that no journey can ever return you to the place you started from--for all the gold in the world, the bridge cannot be rebuilt this season.

“Winter has come,” she murmurs. A twist of the Stark words.

“Winter is an ally to the Starks,” says Daorys.

*Him. Almost forgot about him.*

Arya’s smile transforms into something enigmatic as the focus of her gaze shifts off Sansa. Sansa cannot very well be ungracious towards the architect of this triumph, and so she plasters a grateful look upon her face, even as Jon extends his forearm towards Daorys. The assassin mirrors the motion, but to Sansa’s stunned surprise, Jon draws the Faceless Man into a rough embrace, emotional for all its brevity.

“Thank you,” says Jon, pulling back. “A debt is owed, I...”

As Jon trails off, Daorys reaches into the satchel at his side, pulls out a small box. Lacquered in white and gold, it looks like one of the dainty pastry-boxes the Tyrells used to import from Essos.

“The first installment,” says Daorys, flipping open the lid, and holding the box out to a bemused Jon.

Curious, Sansa leans forward. “Is that *sugar-cake*?”

“Lyseni,” says Daorys.

“You had time to go shopping?” asks Arya.

“Sadly, no,” says Daorys. “Bank manager has a sweet tooth, filched it from her private stash.”

*Oh dear gods, on top of swindling them for a kingdom’s ransom in gold?*

Jon is still looking down at the box. “Debt wasn’t that big,” he murmurs. Looks up. “Was it?”

*What is he talking about?*

“Bigger,” says Daorys.

Jon pales.

*More secrets,* thinks Sansa, suddenly bitter.

Very slowly, Jon reaches out, picks up a small piece of the sugary confection, puts it in his mouth. Chews. Swallows. Finally, the King speaks. “A *first* installment, you said?”

Daorys snorts.

Arya gives Sansa a sidelong glance. “I feel left out,” she complains.

*So you don’t know what this ‘debt’ is either?*

“Share, Jon,” says Arya, reaching for the sugar-cake.


Arya glares daggers at the Faceless Man, even as Bran rolls his eyes.
Flirting. They’re flirting, right in front of Jon! And Bran knows, dear gods, of course he does, how couldn’t he, sees everything...he shouldn’t have had to know...

“Where is Jaqen?” she asks.

Daorys drops Arya’s hand.

“Behind the Keep, training recruits,” Bran replies.

VARRO

He cannot quite recall what excuses they made to the family, but he finds himself being led to their bedchamber, awash with the orange hues of the fire in the hearth.

Arya.

The refrain had been growing louder with each passing hour, ever since he left White Harbour.

Arya.

Now it is a chant echoing in his mind, compulsion and need and breath all entwined.

“Jaqen,” he breathes, his face buried in the hollow of her throat.

The heat in the room is stifling, the only surcease to be found in her skin, cold under his tongue, he licks, tastes her pulse.

Jaqen.

“Off,” he hears. She tugs, impatient, at his shirt. “Off!”

“Mmm.” He finds the wherewithal to comply, and then it is just skin against skin.

He gathers her up in his arms, walks forward, the half-formed intent is to lay her down upon the bed but she is wrapped around him, small kisses upon his shoulder, and he is falling with her, the bed is soft, she is softer still as her hips open to cradle him between her thighs.

His mouth finds hers, her teeth nip at his lips.

He groans.

Her hand, lithe fingers, all wrapped around his cock, guiding him and oh she has led him into her, wet, a vice, and it is her turn to groan as he sinks into her.

SANSA

They leave Bran at the edge of the inner courtyard, and walk towards the King’s tower.

“Jon,” she demands, “What is this ‘debt’ between you and Daorys?”

Jon’s gaze flicks up. “Jaqen was...I thought he was bleak, the night his brothers went renegade.” Jon hesitates. When he finally does continue, his voice is low. “Turns out he was walking the
“Walking?” she asks. “Jaqen?”

Jon’s eyes are troubled. “Hid it from Arya, from Daorys. Asked me, as if I have any answers worth giving.”

She looks down at the ground, watching where she steps, avoiding the cracks in the flagstones.

*Step on a crack, you’ll break your brother’s back.*

“You and Jaqen on the parapet,” she says lightly, “Daorys on the tower—Jaqen told me—Bran wanting to turn into a tree. I hope, truly, that Sandor never joins this death-cult of yours.”

Jon smiles, mirthless.

“Jaqen is better now?” she asks carefully.

“Daorys...seems to think so.”

*Daorys, Daorys, Daorys.*

Jon looks at her out of the corner of his eye. “Cerwyn attacked, while you were gone,” he says. “We’re keeping it quiet, to—”

“I know that,” she says. She mirrors Jon’s mirthless smile from earlier. “Four of my agents sent a raven to the Manderly Maester via the High Septon at the Sept of Snows—I’ll be asking two others why they didn’t. Even Brienne of Tarth sent a raven, which got lost and ended up in Stoneshead.”

“Lady Cerwyn is in the cells,” says Jon. “She is unwell.”

“Good for her,” says Sansa. “I couldn’t care less, Jon, how is Jaqen?”

“Less bleak,” says Jon. A small smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. “I think he’s being kept a bit too busy to have time to look at parapets.”

**JAQEN**

He stands, impassive, before the column of pikemen going through their exercises. If his breath is warmer than those of the men before him, if his pulse throbs with deliberate, cruel arousal, it does not show.

He knows his Chosen are fucking—she murmurs to him description of every touch, every penetration.

A particularly lurid moment of their lovemaking has him reaching for respite.

*Arya,* he thinks. *Behave.*

The Wind pretends to take heed—the tendril of air wrapped around his throat changes timbre, this time to murmur obscene *requests* into Jaqen’s flesh.

*We want to fuck you Jaqen, both of us all at once, make you feel us rubbing against each other, make us come, come Jaqen in us, I’m making him ready for you, just the way you like us pliant and*
The exercise winds to a close, the men destined for the fifth legion wait for further command. Out of the corner of his eye, Jaqen sees a score or so being led out of the side gate of the keep. From the uncertain clustering of the cloaked forms, the occasional fighter’s stance amongst them, Jaqen extrapolates: recruits from White Harbor, as Wyman promised. Verification comes in the form of a handful of better-organized men, wearing Manderly colors, that follow behind the recruits.

An excellent excuse to end the exercises early.

“At ease,” he says. The wind carries his words to the ends of the line. “Sergeant,” he addresses the corp’s sub-officer, “it seems some new souls have come to us seeking punishment for their sins.”

Grins, amongst the soldiers. Recruits are a source of great amusement to the Fifth Legion.

The Sergeant gets the hint. “The men and I, sir, we’ll see to the greenies’ education. Religious like.”

Some of the grins turn anticipatory. Jaqen takes note of those. Schadenfreude can turn quickly to harassment; the Fifth, filled with men that would have gone to the Wall in a different time, is more prone to such problems than the other legions.

Jaqen waves a lazy salute to the Sergeant, and as the men snap to attention, he untethers his mount from the hitching post and mounts.

...use me, Jaqen, while his tongue...

Jaqen sighs, and wraps his attention around the errant tendril of air, squeezes.

You will not make me ride back with my manhood at full mast, beloved.

The Wind makes a pretense of abashment, it quietens, rubs soothing circles into Jaqen’s back. A touch that grows bolder, becomes exploratory, as Jaqen nears the keep.

Something pricks at his senses as he passes the huddle of recruits.

A figure in a tattered cloak, oilcloth underneath.

The blood in Jaqen’s veins burns, just a little, like tendrils of spice threaded through a meal.

He’s carrying Valyrian Steel.

Jaqen observes the man’s gait, interpolates its had-been.

Well, he thinks, as the man’s name rises to the surface of Jaqen’s memories, this should be interesting.

SANSA

From the balcony of the heralds’ quarters, she sees a dark figure on horseback detach itself from the soldiers at training, ride towards the keep.

Jaqen.
On the other side of the courtyard, in the Eastern Wing claimed by Arya for her own, there is a single window where orange firelight spills out from the small gap between curtains.

Cold certainty: Arya pays our debt to Daorys.

And Jaqen is on his way back. Jaqen, who was walking the parapet the night his brothers in the House of Black and White betrayed him.

Cold fear.

Sansa whirls, skirts swirling around her ankles, and races for the door. “Beron!” she calls for her page. But, stationed outside the door, is not Beron but the Iron Bank boy, sitting on the ground.

“Micah,” she says, as the boy springs up, “run down to the courtyard, Commander Jaqen will be coming in from the training fields. Tell him I need to speak with him on an urgent matter.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” says the boy, and dashes off.

Quick, and obedient, she observes. Protocol and manners can be taught later. And in the meantime, she needs to find an urgent enough topic of conversation to keep Jaqen occupied until Arya is done with Daorys.

JAQEN

An unfamiliar child wearing a page’s uniform accosts him as he passes through the arch into the inner bailey.

“Are you Commander Jaqen, sir?” asks the boy.

“It seems so,” says Jaqen.

The boy peers up at him. “My mistress wants to talk to you urgently, sir.”

Sansa, I presume.

His awareness flickers over the keep; he counts heartbeats. His sister’s is steady, neither panic nor exertion in it.

The matter is nothing that won’t keep.

“Tell her I will be by in a watch,” says Jaqen.

“Yessir.” The boy turns on his heel, runs off in the direction of the heralds’ quarters. Jaqen himself turns in the opposite direction, slips through a side-door, through a narrow passage, into the courtyard before the East wing.

Arya’s whispers have been chipping away at the restraint he wears like a well-used set of armor; Jaqen’s steps are swift. Faceless-swift, far too swift, should he be seen by unfriendly eyes.

He flings open the door to their bedchamber.

On the bed, outlined in firelight and shadow, the focus and the fuel for the burning in his veins: Arya, unclothed and unfettered, Varro, his body deliberately posed to best advantage, resting against her bent knee.
Twin, mirrored gazes trained on him, expressionless.

The lack of intent in those gazes, it makes Jaqen hesitate. The Wind and her renegade, they play at being no one.

He shrugs off his cloak, the boots.

“I am dead,” he says.

“Truth,” says Arya.

“I am death,” he says.


“I am no one.”

“Lie.”

Jaqen chokes on his frustration; he closes his eyes, turns his face to the sky in lieu of a scream.

A shift in the air; hands, on him, gentle, unbuttoning his shirt, drawing away the layers of clothing he is wrapped in.

A kiss, upon his shoulder. “Try again, my lord.”

A gentle love-bite, upon his knuckles. “Try again, beloved.”

Jaqen’s eyes open, and he considers his bride. “For you,” he says to no one. “All the world and all the broken things in it, for you.”

No one bites her lip; her eyes well. “Truth.”

“Missed you,” he says to no one. He puts his arm around his renegade’s waist, draws him in closer. “I never stop missing you.”

A shudder, a sigh. “Truth.”

Jaqen exhales. “I am no one.”

Lie.

SANSA

“What do you mean he didn’t listen?” Sansa snarls.

The boy backs up a step, reminding her to watch her tone. Not the boy’s fault Jaqen decided “urgent” was not “urgent enough”.

Breath by breath, she controls herself--the anger, the soul-robbed helplessness.

I have to warn them.

She turns on her heel and heads to the small staircase at the back of her suite.
JAQEN

“You anticipate me,” he murmurs darkly into his chosen’s ear. His renegade’s passage is slick, stretched, and Jaqen pushes in with minimal resistance.

He raises his face to meet his bride’s gaze. She lies on the edge of the bed, one leg hooked about Jaqen’s waist, directing the depth of his penetration.

“What else of what you promised is true?” he asks her.

Her smile is edged.

“All of it,” gasps Varro, suspended, taut, between them. “All of it. Please,” he begs, despite himself, despite being no one.

“Mmm.” A kiss, against Varro’s temple, and Jaqen pushes forward, deeper, harder, and this time he pushes more than just his cock in.

Darkness, coiling through his veins, snakes out through him.

“More.”


“My gods mock me,” the renegade whispers, leans back till his back his pressed against Jaqen’s chest, his head rests against Jaqen’s shoulder.

The darkness bleeding into Varro thickens, to the point of pain, if Jaqen is any judge. And he leans down, captures the renegade’s lips.

SANSA

She can hear the creaking; she doesn’t care about intrusion--Jaqen is probably mere moments behind her.

“Stop!” she calls as she bursts through the doors to Arya and Jaqen’s bedchamber. “Jaqen is com-

Her mind stutters to a halt.

Three gazes flicker up to meet hers.

Jaqen was kissing Daorys.

Is that what they call it over in Braavos? asks the mockingbird voice in her.

It is very clear what else Jaqen is doing, one arm around Daorys’s middle, the other upon Arya’s breast.

Arya’s legs are wrapped around Jaqen’s thighs, trapping Daorys between them.

“Sansa!” Arya’s hiss startles Sansa out of her daze. “What the fuck?”
Mute, Sansa shakes her head.

Jaqen’s eyes are wide, he’s backing away from the others.

Jaqen is naked, dear gods, Jaqen is naked, the clothes on the ground are Jaqen’s. Jaqen is naked, I can see his...his...

Sansa whirls, too late, too late, and rushes out, away.

JAQEN

He finds Sansa on the balcony overlooking the old training yard.

“Um.” He clears his throat. “I...should have locked the door. I apologize.”

“The fault is mine,” she says, her voice disant, formal. “I should not have intruded upon your bedchamber.”

“I extrapolate--you were trying to protect me.”

“I thought you were betrayed,” she says bitterly. “And I had to let it happen.”

“Not the case,” he says.

“Clearly.”

Jaqen sighs, looks out across the dark stonework. “Do you...” he pauses. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He sees her shudder. “No!”

Relief. “Oh. Good.”

She nods vaguely in his direction. “I will go rest now, get ready to handle the logistics of Jon’s departure tomorrow.”

“No,” he murmurs, “please not yet. They’re watching. They want me to talk to you. Just...stay here for a bit, pretend we’re discussing things. Or I will never have peace.”

Horror fleets across her face, as if she’s just realized something. “Arya’s going to accost me tomorrow, asking about...it.”

“Be vague,” he says. “Tell her we talked.”

Sansa snorts. “Jaqen, we’re sisters. It doesn’t stay ‘vague’.”

Oh. “Um.”

“I’m going to have to move up the timetable on the deployment,” she says. “And leave for Karhold with the Sappers before Arya wakes up.”

Jaqen nods. “I’ll keep her from looking for you too early.” He pauses. “Relocating yourself to the war front--do you think it could be considered an overreaction?”

“I saw you naked,” she says.
He raises a hand to cover his face.

Varro was right; mortification is almost worse than despair.

The great Jaqen H’ghar, Him of the Many Faces, forgot to lock the damned door.

SANSA

I want wine.

The silence between them stretches to its breaking point.

“Did Arya drag you into this?”

“Yes,” he says, “entirely against my will, kicking and screaming in protest, as you must have surmised.”

The words, dripping with sarcasm, cut through her circling thoughts.

“Help me understand,” she whispers, not looking at him.

“It beggars understanding,” says Jaqen softly. “I...I still cannot credit it sometimes. I keep thinking something bad is going to happen, something worse than has happened already, to compensate for what I have been granted. There is no balance to this, not for me.”

Every conversation she’s had with Daorys comes back to her, shifts.

Not Arya. Not just Arya.

“He told me,” she says, her tone wondrous. “He told me.”

“We were not trying to keep any more secrets from family,” says Jaqen, gently. “But, sister of my heart, you see what you expect to see.”

“There are two crenellations on the Ravensloft that are wider than the others,” she observes.

“Yes, they’re watching. We need to keep pretending to talk about...um. What you witnessed. Arya has commanded me to make sure you are....”

At peace with my sister and her husband sharing a lover?

“Not upset,” Jaqen finishes.

“I want wine.”

“Makes two of us.”

“Your hair is white.”

“Jaqen H’ghar was born in Valyria four hundred years ago. He woke something, deep in the slave pits.”

Sansa exhales, looks down. Realizes her hands are shaking.

“You are immortal,” she says. “Like Jon.”
I knew. I knew. I have known all along.

“I can kill Jon,” says Jaqen. “If he asks.”

*Jon gave himself ten years.*

“What is *your* time limit?” she asks.

“Arya,” Jaqen replies.

Sansa closes her eyes, and tries, with all the shards of her soul that are left, to *listen* to the voice of Jaqen H’ghar.

To the Many-Faced God.

There is nothing but silence in her heart.

“Four hundred years of silence,” she whispers.

“I was on a ship that sank, once,” says Jaqen. “A plank of wood, holding me up upon the waves under the setting sun, nothing but water to the edges of the world. And I wondered, what if there was no world to return to, what if it has ended, in some war, some plague of its own making, all the people dead, their temples abandoned?”

*The last of all mankind, alone, in the echoing silence of the ruins of the world.*

A truth. It is not *her* truth, but it is tangible enough for her to taste.

*Gods are men.*

“Why can I touch some men and not others?” she asks. “Why can I touch Daorys, but not Samwell Tarly?”

She feels Jaqen considering her. “Who else?” he asks.


“Bran is a child to you, still,” says Jaqen. “It will change. In a year or two, you won’t be able to touch Bran, either.”

“Why?”

A sharp laugh, dark at its edges. “The only good man is a dead one.”

At that, she *has* to look at him. A bitter smile plays about his mouth. “Your warg senses, tortured into use, put to twisted service in a twisted world.”

*You are dead. You, and Daorys, and Zural.*

Arya.

“You know what we are, Sansa Stark,” agrees Jaqen, “without having to be told. Dead men, though we walk, and talk.”

*And fuck.*

*Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.*
“Sandor is alive,” she says.

“I knew the name of Sandor Clegane before Arya ever came to Braavos. She left him for dead, and so he was, for many a breath. Doesn’t take miracles to bring a man back--happens often enough in the Iron Islands with their drowning rituals.”

*The only good man is a dead one.*

Dark, and satisfying--it can only be *her* truth.

*A gift from a god.*

She should have asked for something else.

“Forgive me,” says Jaqen. “I knew not what I was, nor what you would be to me. Else I would have reached out, turned stone and shackle to dust--they kept him in the cells just above mine, did you know?”

*Father.*

“I knew not what *I* was,” she says slowly, “or I’d have stabbed Joffrey through the heart the first time he mocked Jon. They were standing in the courtyard right here, just below me.”

*For all the gold of the Seven Kingdoms, for all the bitter truths to my taste, I will not forgive the gods until I can forgive myself.*

The Many-Faced God smiles sadly at her. “And so at last,” He says, “we come to an understanding of each other, you and I.”

The wind wails upon the battlements, sweeping snow into the shadowed corners of the keep.

**BRAN**

The forge is hot, the arrow-molds are sanded, and Mastersmith Waters is *flirting*. The count of serving maids in the smithy has grown to *seven*.

Bran exchanges a glance with Dacey. She rolls her eyes.

The door to the smithy creaks open.

*Another one?*

No, it’s Ghost. He pokes his head inside, then he bares his teeth, growls, low. One of the serving maids gasps, skirts the anvil to put the heavy stone block between herself and the direwolf.

“Here, boy,” says Bran, snapping his fingers, “don’t frighten people like that, Ghost, come to me!”

The direwolf steps into the smithy. His hackles are rising.

“What’s wrong, boy?” asks Bran, now fully alert. “Ghost?”

Everything happens all at once.

“I am so sorry,” whispers the woman that has darted around the anvil--she is drawing a knife,
lunging towards him.

Ghost pounces, slams into the woman.

“I am so, so sorry,” whispers another of the women, a pretty blonde with bright summer-sky eyes. She, too, has drawn a dagger.

Gendry’s eyes widen, he moves, slowly, too slowly, towards the warhammer resting in the corner.

Dacey reaches for the tongs.

Jaqen!

“Arya!” Bran shouts, even as he throws himself into trance.

ARYA

The last of the wildfire grenades for the Sappers are ready, wrapped in wool and packed carefully into a straw-lined crate.

Maester Samwell grins. “That ought to give the Night’s King pause,” he says.

She nods, though her attention is divided between the three porters cleaning up the packing debris off the ground, the two others that have brought in the empty crates.

There is a pattern to the men’s movements.

They’re not leaving. They’re milling about, pretending curiosity.

Arya grabs a firing pin, jams it into the throat of the porter nearest her.

The others rise, in unison, they draw knives.

“Sam, get behind me,” Arya growls, drawing her own blade.

Samwell is not slow. “Caught ’em by surprise, you did,” he says, vaulting over a low bench, fireplace poker in hand.

“Get behind me.”

“I was a brother of the Night’s Watch,” he pants. “Fought White Walkers. I’ll be fine.”

They square off against the men—two others have been added to their number, apparently waiting just outside the workshop.

“I am so sorry,” says the long-faced man in the lead.

Not yet, you’re not, the Wind whispers.

SANSA

She surveys the Sappers’ preparations from the balcony overlooking the stables—the sacks of charcoal, the metal augers. Everything moves at the pace it should. The walkway behind her is
busy, serving maids walking to and fro.

Walking to and fro?

She looks over her shoulder--the maid with the southern-style hair, she peeks around a corner.

Isn’t that one involved with one of the guards, Janson? Is she looking for him?

Speaking of guards, where are they?

“One am so sorry,” whispers one of the maids, to Sansa’s right.

A searing pain in her mid-section.

Sansa stares down at herself in bemusement--a dark stain is spreading on her grandmother’s white winter dress.

The world has slowed; the torchlight is getting shadowed. Women, drawing close around her. Serving women, cutting off the light.

JON

He knows inspecting the repairs does nothing but delay his departure from Winterfell. But the undone task will nag at him, and so it must be completed.

Winterfell has to be whole, has to be safe.

The last portion of the inspection is the top of the broken tower. It has been rebuilt, an additional storey now usable below them. The roof itself is canted, newly hewn stones set as crenelations, to be finished as time permits.

Four stonecutters, three masons--the workmen wait, just to his left, for the King’s approval. Jon himself is looking towards Jaqen, a few paces ahead of him.

The Master Stonemason steps up behind Jon.

“'Am so, so sorry,” the Master Stonemason whispers.

Jon half-turns towards the man. “Sorry for--”

A hard shove; Jon is overbalanced, falling backwards, off the top of the tower.

NO ONE

She assesses the porters: trained fighters, all of them, used to close-quarters work. More dangerously, used to working with each other--they act and react as one. And from the way they circle her, it is clear their target is Arya Stark.

There are seven of them.

A strange association triggers itself.
A Septal? Someone has hired out an entire Septal of Sorrowful Men?

The room is full of fragile glass bottles, designed to break upon impact. Each bottle contains enough wildfire to obliterate the workshop, setting off a chain reaction that will take out the entire Northern Wing of Winterfell.

The porter to her left advances, blade ready to catch and twist Arya’s thrust, the only option she has for an offensive strike in the confined space.

Arya Stark is not yet good enough to take on a Septal by herself.

The Wind surges to the fore, shreds the persona of “no one” like confetti.

THE WIND

She strips breath from the lungs of all living things in the room. In the sudden panic--trained or not, even assassins must breathe --she has hurled her blade across the room like a javelin.

Two down.

She slides under the table, slitting a throat in the process. From her low vantage, she targets the achilles’ tendon of another.

A knife, a hair’s breadth from her face.

The Sorrowful Men have mastered their panic, they’re moving quickly to regroup, to take her out within the next few heartbeats.

She twists out of the way of a blade, catches a kick to the ribs.

They don’t have much time left before the lack of air overcomes them.

But neither does Samwell Tarly.

Jaqen will be sad if we kill his friend.

The Wind doesn’t really care about sad.

She rolls out from under the table, slinging herself between the legs of the man braced to overturn the closest crate.

Fool.

Her legs scissor upwards, powerful, driving his testicles into his abdominal cavity.

Six down.

The seventh porter makes a last, desperate attempt to rush her.

The faster you move, the quicker you suffocate.

Out of reach of his target, the last Sorrowful Man, hamstrung, dies all by himself, mouth opening and closing like a fish outside water.

Not a single bottle or jar or crate has been disturbed, she notices with pride.
Suddenly, there is sound in the room again—Samwell Tarly, gasping. Clearly, the Maester is stronger than he seems.

**JAQEN**

He moves.

His hand closes around Jon’s wrist.

A blade pierces his side.

Jaqen pulls, hard.

**JON**

The momentum from Jaqen’s pull is enough to vault Jon back over the side of the stone wall, onto the tower again. Midair he draws his sword, lands on his feet, slashes wide.

The Master Stonemason can only blink in surprise as a dark ribbon of blood opens up on his chest. Then, suddenly, he falls to dust. Jon looks up—Jaqen’s eyes are dark in the torchlight, power rising from Him—Jon can feel it, seeping into the ground.

The other masons—assassins—have drawn blades now, moving, shifting in unison to surround their quarry.

Jon shifts, and then he is standing back-to-back with Jaqen, blade held out.

Dust—stone dust, assassin dust—swirls around their feet.

Jaqen lunges forward, pulls back.

The body falls to the ground.

*Five.*

Jaqen’s head snaps to a side.

“Jaqen?”

“Bran is in danger.”

Jon’s teeth clench.

*Let’s finish it quickly then.*

**GENDRY**

He’s never hit a woman in his life before. And now one lies in front of him. Blood bubbles over the ruin of her face, where her nose used to be.

He has just enough time for a single glance over his shoulder—Dacey is pinned to the ground by the
bellows. King Jon’s direwolf has blood on its jaws, it stands, snarling, in front of the curled-up body of Bran Stark.

Gendry raises his hammer again.

The door of the smithy flies off its hinges; every light save the glow of the forge is suddenly doused.

Movement. Screams.

Gendry lashes out blindly, to the left and right of him.

Finds his wrist seized in a strong hand.

Gendry yells.

“Calm, smith, calm,” says a voice out of Gendry’s nightmares.

Jaqen H’ghar.


A flare of light--someone has lit a taper.

King Jon.

The King crouches in front of the body of his brother; the King’s direwolf whines and paws at the ground.

“Bran,” says the King gently, “Bran, wake up.”

Just unconscious?

The lanterns around the room are coming alight, all by themselves. They illuminate the corpses of seven women, bleeding into the dirt floor of the smithy. More than just one wears the marks of Gendry’s handiwork, parts of their anatomy crushed to pulp by a warhammer.

He swallows back the bile.

Focus on the living.

He moves to Dacey Glover’s side, hauls the bellows off her.

She groans.

Relieved beyond measure, Gendry looks up to see Brandon Stark being helped to a seated position.

The boy’s eyes are white, like a blind man’s.

“I couldn’t get him to Sansa in time,” says Bran. “And Smith Waters is going to die if the Wind doesn’t let Arya help him.”

Smith Waters. That’s me.

His gaze follows the King’s, he looks down to his own hand. A large slash on the back of it, from a dagger. Angry red lines are radiating outwards crawling up Gendry’s arm even as he watches.
“One thing at a time,” says Jaqen H’ghar. “Sansa.”

“I cannot do it, Jaqen,” Bran says quietly. “I’ve never been able to change what has already come to pass.”

“Daorys is near.”

“I know,” Bran snaps. “I cannot breach his mind. The only way he can get to her is to use the passage I keep trying to show him. He doesn’t listen.”

Jaqen H’ghar kneels beside the boy. “He will, Champion,” he says gently. “He already has.”

Bran looks as bewildered as Gendry feels.

“Someone else breached his mind, once,” says the assassin. “Use it. Go back.”

“To when?”

“To the night you and I keep trying to change. The night the house broke with me. But this time, focus on Daorys. He is lost, his mind is a sieve. Lead him, Brandon Stark, lead him into the walls of Winterfell.”

“How?” Bran whispers.

“Cheese,” says Jaqen H’ghar.

Gendry realizes there is blood oozing out from Jaqen H’ghar’s side. In the dim lantern-light, the blood looks black.

NO ONE

He bursts through the hastily-repaired section of the wall in the northern wing, and slashes at the woman closest to him. Her head, crowned with pretty braids, goes bouncing down the corridor.

The others whip around at the sound.

Attrition and distraction all in one. Very efficient.

And in the moment it takes the enemy to understand what has happened, the Faceless Man Winterfell knows as “Daorys” has lunged towards Sansa, caught her up in his arms, and thrown the both of them off the balcony.

SANSA

“I’m fine,” she snarls. “It was barely a scratch. Put me down.”

Why do I sound like I’m drunk?

Daorys dumps her on the ground.
That was rude.

Shapes--people--landing from some height all around them.

Assassins. But not our assassins.

Daorys dances --that’s the only word for it, dancing--towards one of the shapes. It falls. Daorys flings out his hand.

Something clatters to the ground next to Sansa.

A dagger.

She reaches for it, draws it towards herself, cradles it to her breast.

Some time has passed, she thinks muzzily, for when she looks up, there are but two of the serving women left. Daorys’s dance has changed--it looks strained, as he clashes blades with the second-to-last assassin.

She’s good , Sansa thinks. Better than Brienne, perhaps.

The last of the assassins is standing right in front of Sansa.

“I am so, so, sorry, Princess,” the woman whispers. Her hands close about Sansa’s throat.

Sansa knows, to the last heartbeat, how long she can be choked for before she loses consciousness.

Sansa waits.

The woman presses closer.

Calmly, Sansa raises the dagger and buries it between the woman’s ribs.

She finds she is giggling.

Ramsay had flayed a man once, made Sansa watch. Made a great show of teaching her a man’s vital anatomy.

“Thank you, dear husband,” she murmurs, then raises a hand to her mouth to stop the fit of laughter that threatens to overwhelm her.

Her hand is covered in blood; it leaves copper-smelling smears around her mouth.

I’m dying .

The thought is crystal clear.

GENDRY

The world has blurred into incomprehensibility--he is in Arya’s sitting room.

“...serving staff have never been allowed in here,” Jaqen H’ghar said, before dumping Gendry onto the settee like a sack of potatoes, and rushing out again, King Jon a step ahead of him.

Gendry’s arm throbs with pain.
A few breaths later, Prince Daorys came in, carrying Princess Sansa in his arms. She was placed on the couch with a great deal more care than what Jaqen H’ghar showed Gendry.

“Where is Jaqen?” the Princess whispers.

“Arguing with Arya,” says Prince Daorys. “He’ll be here soon.”

“I’m scared.”

Her voice is calm, at odds with her words.

“They’re waiting for me,” she says. “Ramsay, and Joffrey.”

A chill creeps up Gendry’s back.

BRAN

It’s not enough.

Sansa is still going to die.

*It has not yet come to pass.*

Time is not a river. Time is a raft, a boat, and you sit in it and row yourself past the world.

He has never been able to undo something that has already happened.

“Help me,” he pleads.

*It has not yet come to pass.*

Time lists lazily under him, rudderless, it drifts through visions of the was, the might-have-been.

In the world, he knows he is lying on a bed in the eastern wing of the keep, and Jon is sitting beside him.

*Arya’s bed.*

And Jaqen’s, and Varro’s. That much is clear, from the wisps of lust wrapped around the bedposts.

He’s never been here before. Too embarrassing. But now, eyes wide open, he cannot help but be assailed by the bed’s silent witness. Faces, changing one into the other. Blood, and limbs, and voices, writhing.

Jaqen, wearing a woman’s face, wearing a dress. Arya, swearing, as she saws at the ribbons with a knife.

Varro, kneeling. “If you think it’s about the sex,” he is saying, “it’s never about the sex.”

*It’s never about the sex.*

The boat jumps, from one stream to the next.

*The dress.*
And Bran finds Sansa on the morning of the day she is going to die, rising out of her bath.

**GENDRY**

“Gendry Waters!”

Fingers, snapping before his face.

Gendry blinks, looks up.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispers.

“Arrgh!”

Gendry comes to his senses. Panic floods him, he sits up straight.

“I think he’s going to be just fine,” says Jaqen H’ghar, sounding amused.

Arya snorts.


“Saved by fashion,” says Arya. “Knife just grazed her--the stiffeners sewn onto the dress were too layered to allow for much more. Just enough poison to make her loopy.”

“Oh. Good.”

And then he has to sit through Arya stripping Jaqen H’ghar of everything but his britches, and binding up the wound at the assassin’s side.

**JON**

Bran sleeps, so does Sansa, laid down beside him on Arya’s bed. Sam, Gendry, they keep watch.

Jon tries to step back from the precipice that yawns before him: could have lost them all today.

There are twenty-eight bodies laid out on the ground in the Great Hall. Jaqen replaces the cloth that covers one of them.

“All new faces,” says Jaqen.

“There’ll be four more,” murmurs Varro. To Jon, “they call a squad of Sorrowful Men a ‘septal’. A misdirection--there is always an eighth man. A failsafe.”

*Four more chances for Sansa to die.*

Jon’s skin feels paper-thin, entirely inadequate to hold in the rage that burns under his breast.

Someone has to answer for this, and that someone, it seems, is the Commander of the Guard.

She stands at parade rest, face ashen, at the foot of the dias.

“All hired within the last moon,” says Jaqen, to Brienne, “after you were put in charge of clearing the new arrivals. Did you ask them questions I instructed you to?”
She looks straight ahead. “I do not answer to an assassin--”

“Answer him!” the shout is ripped out of Jon.

Everyone is looking at him.

“Answer. Him,” Jon repeats, more quietly.

“I asked my own questions,” says Brienne of Tarth. “If they’d served other lords, if--”

“Which means,” says Jaqen, tone deceptively mild, “any of the new people could be spies of Petyr Baelish, spies for the Citadel, Lannisters, men of the Night’s Watch bearing a grudge, followers of R’hllor...”

“Ask her,” says Arya, voice just a shade short of gloating, “whether she asked any questions of the women.”

Brienne of Tarth looks up to Arya, startled. Then, almost helpless in the thrall of the conclusion to her inattention, Brienne’s gaze drifts to the neat rows of sheet-covered forms on the stone ground.

“Cordial test?” Varro asks in an undertone.

“And you did not offer the cordial,” says Jaqen quietly.

“I...I did not see the need,” says Brienne of Tarth. “I thought you were mocking me.” Her voice is a whisper.

“Sorrowful men of Qarth,” says Jaqen, “do not respond well to the taste of anise. A cultivated allergy against the Shade of the Evening. I did not feel it had to be explained, since Sandor served King Joffrey as you did King Renly. Faceless Men, Sorrowful Men, The Eyes--members of the Westerosi Kingsguard are made aware of precautions to take, are they not?”

Brienne of Tarth flushes.

“When Sansa walks about the keep,” says Arya, “she takes one of many predetermined paths. Not always the most direct route, but she accepts the delay because it keeps her within the line-of-sight of at least two guardsmen at all times.”

A compromise with Sandor, who wanted Sansa followed everywhere by a well-armed score.

“Why were there no eyes on her?” Jon asks. “How could she have been surrounded without alerting any guards?”

Brienne looks down at the ground. “I changed the guard schedules after the attack on Prince Bran. When Cerwyn came with such numbers, our guards were too scattered, we--”

“She’s got most of the men doing group patrols,” says Arya. “In shiny boots.”

Jon gestures to Arya: desist.

His sister’s eyes widen--this is the first time since she came to Winterfell that Jon has given Arya a command.

The room is silent.

The knight drops to one knee before him, blinking back furious tears. “My Liege.”

“You are relieved of your duties.”

Brienne nods tightly, remains kneeling.

Jon turns to Varro. “Ser Daorys--you said there are four more of these,” Jon gestures to the corpses.

Varro nods.

“Find them.” Kill them.

Varro bows shortly, then makes towards the doors at the rear of the hall.

“Arya.”

She draws herself upright. “Yes, Jon?”

“Since Bran is resting, I need you to warg a warning to Lyanna, to the houndsmaster that is warg for Sandor, to Sigorn’s cousin--assassins may have been sent for more than just the Starks.”

She nods, seats herself on the ground right then and there. Her irises roll back in her head, leaving her eyes the white-on-white of a warg.

“Commander Jaqen,” says Jon. “Sansa is not staying at Winterfell while we are absent.”

Jaqen’s mouth twists. “No.”

“She will ride with you, serve as warg to the Fifth Legion.” Safest with you. “Arya will take Lady Brienne’s place in the First, with me.”

Brienne’s head snaps up. “Your Majesty, I have failed here, but--”

Jon’s gesture cuts her off mid-word. His eyes are focused on Jaqen.

Jaqen, who shows no emotion at all.

The Night’s King will have isolated two targets to concentrate his attacks upon: the Greenseer, and the King in the North. Varro to Bran, and now Arya to Jon--both of the god’s consorts to form the first line of sacrifice, at Jon’s behest.

The outcome of this moment is fraught with uncertainty.

Am I your king, Jaqen, as you are my god?

Slowly, Him of the Many Faces bows. “As you command, my Liege.”

YARA

She gags on the smell of shit and piss and rot. The water is ankle deep, swimming with excrement.

The hold of Euron Greyjoy’s flagship.

Mutes work to secure her in a cage, dangling a handspan above the fetid water.

A part of her still thinks this is a dream--a nightmare.
there is another cage beside hers. A figure, huddled in the corner, hair grown long and lanky. the other prisoner has no arms, just stumps ending a fingerbreadth below the shoulder.

“You don’t mind if I take your flagship, do you?” asks a voice.

Yara snarls; there is nothing else she can do, the chains are too tight, she cannot even turn her head to look at her captor.

“Daenerys Targaryen will welcome me with open arms,” says Euron Greyjoy. He pauses. “Speaking of arms...maybe you can help Asha. She doesn’t seem to be able to eat.” A chuckle. “Then maybe she’ll be able to help you piss.”

ARAYA

Four more bodies have been added to the pile burning outside the Great Hall. Sansa and Bran have been relocated to their respective beds. But Jaqen still has such a look about him…

Arya Stark wants to argue away Jaqen’s pacing: *I am a good fighter--as good as Brienne, better since I’ve faced wights before .*

No one, she knows Arya Stark’s insecurity makes her project motive onto Jaqen that does not belong to him.

The Wind, *she* can face the truth neither Arya Stark, nor no one will acknowledge.

*Jaqen H’ghar is afraid.*

Varro has seen it, he perches at the edge of the bed, torn between caution and wide-eyed incredulity.

Varro is no use.

“What made you let go of fear, Jaqen?” she asks gently. There is only one person the Wind is capable of being *gentle* with. “The night Arya Stark became nameless.”


The Wind cocks her head to a side. “I would understand.”

Jaqen nods towards Varro. “He would too, if he saw the giant orrery the Citadel maintains. Corrections upon corrections, miniscule bits of copper and spheres of gilded lead, to explain the ever-changing motion of the world. But the best they can do is predict that ‘winter is coming’. Neither the Long Night nor its durations figure into any of their equations.” Jaqen snorts. “The ‘heliocentric model’.”

“Jaqen?” Varro’s voice is a whisper.

“There is no sun,” says Him of the Many Faces. “Our planet is untethered, cast off from whatever star that gave it birth, it drifts through the great void between galaxies, cold and dark, and utterly alone. **There is no sun .** There was a man who sacrificed himself--the ‘Lord of Light’, some nine thousand years in the past. He burned himself to cinders, circling our world, growing more unstable
with every pass; by the end of it a few moons ago, he had neither speech nor understanding, he bled gibberish at me as I ate him.”

Even gods die.

“A million cycles of winter,” she says, “interrupted by self-sacrifice.”

I have been awake before.

How long has this been going on?

A “million cycles of winter”, the Wind said.

Our world has been dark and cold and adrift for a very, very long time.

“Is this what R’hllor is supposed to do?” asks Varro. “Give the world a sun again?”

“R’hllor doesn’t seem to want to play by the rules of his own prophecy,” says Jaqen. “Given the end of his predecessor, why would he?”

“Even gods die,” murmurs Varro, gaze sliding off Arya.

So you fear for me as well?

She had expected better of Varro Massag.

So what made Jaqen let go of fear, the day He ate the sun?

And then she knows.

“You chose me,” the Wind trills. The death of Arya Stark means nothing to the god--she dwells forevermore within Him.

The god turns to face her. His heartbeat, thud, thud, thud, it slows already, His breath tastes less of acid and more of lust.

“I chose you,” says Him of the Many Faces.

She leans back, arches her back: an invitation, now that Jaqen H’ghar is cured of the illusion of fear.

“I would understand,” whispers Varro.

The god advances upon the bed, He reaches out, cups Varro’s face. Gently.

“Some say the world will end in fire,” He quotes. “Some say in ice.”

The poem is part of their shared memories.

“I have chosen,” says the Eater of Worlds. “And so the universe will freeze, and fragment into ever smaller pieces, and the wind will drive apart fragment from fragment till all of existence is indistinguishable from nothing.” A savage smile; His touch becomes cruel. “I will be there, watching. And the last face I shall ever wear will be cut off of her.”
MISSANDEI

They read the letter together, her and the Queen, and the Queen’s Hand.

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Bran says he saw what he thinks was a dragon, far overhead, the day Winterfell burned. Did Drogon disappear around that time?

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The keep comes alive, day by day. Word’s gotten out, we have food and fuel. Farmers, craftsmen, even two vinterers for some reason. And we have a competent smith.

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There was a kidnapping attempt against Bran two days ago.

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I will be marching against the Karstarks by the time you receive this. No man can truly predict a battle, but Sansa is heartless, she used her own wounds to extract promises out of me, so I’m not allowed to lead the charge.

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You are on a ship, surrounded by the sea, watched over by dragons and the Unsullied. Still. Be careful?
We are looking forward to greeting your fleets in White Harbor.

—

“Her own wounds,” murmurs Tyrion.

“So you do care,” says Daenerys, eyeing her Hand.

“Of course I care,” snaps Tyrion. “That child has been gravely misused.” He looks sidelong at Daenerys. “All children have been gravely misused.”

“There was a time I would hear no ill-words spoken of Drogo,” says Daenerys quietly. “He loved me. I loved him; love him still. He asked, you know. I said yes.”

“What would have happened had you said no?” asks Tyrion.

Daenerys considers her words. “He would have stopped,” she says sadly. “But he was Khal of Khals, and his Khalasar stretched out over the horizon, and he had taken a strange, milk-skinned woman as a bride. He had something to prove.” Dany’s mouth twists. “Drogo would have stopped, that night. And then it would have been a race to see what came to an end first: my fear, or his patience.”

Tyrion clears his throat. “It won’t be like that again. Obviously.”

“No,” says Daenerys. “Jon Stark has no fear in him. And I already have children.”

A sharp rap on the doors. “My Queen, Lord Tyrion,” calls Varys the Spider. “Masts have been spotted. The Queen of the Iron Islands returns with her fleet!”

BRIENNE

“Why are you here?” asks Lady Cerwyn, her voice grown brittle with confinement.

“I came to see to you,” mutters Brienne. She places an earthen jug of water, a loaf of good bread, within reach of the cell’s bars.

Lady Cerwyn snorts. “What is there to see to? I had a chance. I took it. I failed. The bastard will have my head for it.”

“Why did you do it?” asks Brienne.

“I have a son,” says Lady Cerwyn simply. “Word’s out now, and Sansa Stark will not let him live.” Brienne blinks in confusion.

“The Dreadfort belongs to my son,” adds Lady Cerwyn.

Oh .

“But she would not have dared harm him,” says Lady Cerwyn, “not as long as I held Brandon
There is a great upwelling of pity in Brienne’s breast for the woman before her. “Princess Sansa would not have exacted vengeance upon an innocent babe.”

“You would think that, wouldn’t you?” asks Lady Cerwyn. “Ah, Brienne of Tarth. What a naive view of the world you must have.”

“I have seen much of the world,” snaps Brienne.

“Oh yes. Kingsguard, twice over.” There is gentle mockery in the words--she cannot know of Brienne’s dismissal just a half-watch ago. “The Rainbow Guard. Renly Baratheon. Everyone mocked you when he died, called you delusional for claiming he was cut down by magic. His lover, Loras Tyrell, was out for your head.”

Brienne says nothing.

“Laugh, Lady Brienne,” says Lady Cerwyn. “Lo, you are vindicated! Magic is real.”

Brienne’s jaw hurts from clenching her teeth.

“You don’t get it?” asks Lady Cerwyn. “Stannis Baratheon burnt his own daughter alive, so says the Onion Knight to all that will hear. Burnt her alive to his fire-god and begged for magic and it availed him naught. Killed by some random soldier’s sword-thrust, head lying on one side, body on the other. Stannis Baratheon didn’t have magic. He could not have killed Renly. But now we know who did have magic, don’t we? The Starks, Lady Brienne, the Starks! War of the Five kings. Unholy risings, only in the North, from the Wall whence Jon Snow came. Wargs, come alive again, in the bloodstream of the cripple, who will be the next king should the bastard fall. A warg king. His brother, Rob Stark, who could turn into a wolf at will and slaughter his enemies. No proof of magic in the world, save the proof that is the Stark witchery.”

Brienne finds that she is backed up against the far wall, as far away from the cell bars as she can get.

Lady Cerwyn chuckles. “Laugh, Lady Brienne, Laugh.”

BRAN

He knows he has a fever. Chills, alternate hot and cold, the body is wracked with them.

A wave, cresting, and under it lies the shadow of a kraken.

He perches on the inside of a cage, and watches a bowl of sand flow upwards.

“Who are you?” he asks the sand. “Whose time are you?”

My time has run out, the sand hisses. Why has the god not come for me? Tell him Damphair calls.


A mouth with a blue eye, weeping frozen tears beside a black lake.

“Who are you?” asks the Three-Eyed Raven. “Whose mouth are you?”

Jon Stark, answers the mouth. I am Jon Stark.
VARRO

He watches Jaqen sleep.

And, for the first time that he can remember, he sorrows for the thing that might have been had he had anything left, to sacrifice in Asshai.

And the last face that I ever wear shall be cut off of her.

“Envy?” she asks, from Jaqen’s other side.

Varro rises up on an elbow, reaches out to touch her face. “Sorrow,” he answers truthfully. Always truthful, with her. “Joy, that there will be no end to you.”

Long after the world under their feet has turned to dust, long after the very last star gives up its light, winter will abide in the heavens.

The timespan of it staggers him anew.

A touch of ice in her eyes--the Wind turns her head, kisses his fingertips. “You are obtuse.”

“Sharp--acute--surely,” he teases.

A sound--a slamming door. A thump.

He is out of bed, and halfway down the hall when the Wind rushes past him.

A slight form lies at the foot of the stairs to their suite, twitching.

Bran.

----

Varro settles another blanket about Bran’s shoulders. The boy is propped up on a loveseat, furs and blankets piled around him. He fevers; a cold sweat dots his forehead.

“Am I hallucinating again?” asks Bran in a small voice.

Arya holds up a glass of water for Bran to drink from. Small chips of ice float in the glass, to cool the boy’s hoarse throat. “Yes, you are,” she says. “Because the Wind is actually being nice to you.”

Bran smiles, weakly. “Jaqen,” he says, “Jaqen, Damphair is going to die tonight.”

A slight flaring of Jaqen’s nostrils. He doesn’t look at Bran. “Valar morghulis.”

“He doesn’t have to,” says Bran, stubborn. “He’s inside Euron Greyjoy’s flagship, but Euron is somewhere else!”

Jaqen says nothing.

Bran is drifting in and out of sleep.

“The Dragon Queen’s fleet is past the fingers,” says Bran. “And Euron is at her heels.”

Arya dosed Bran with something.
But he’s not twitching anymore.

“Is it looking to be very bad for Daenerys?” asks Arya.

“Euron thinks he has trapped her,” Bran answers, drowsy. “Euron doesn’t understand dragons. His fleet is going to burn, and Aeron with it.”

Varro and Arya exchange a glance.

…and the sea is crowned with storm…

“I am not constrained,” says the Wind. “My lord?” she asks Jaqen.

“You do not understand restraint,” says Jaqen. “You will destroy Daenerys’s fleet in the process.”

“Scatter it, no more,” she says, dismissive.

“Dampair calls for you, Jaqen,” pleads Bran. “You wouldn’t leave me to suffer as he does!”

Varro’s jaw is tight; he maintains his silence.

*Your word must be true to all of us, or none at all, Jaqen.*

Jaqen is staring into the fire.

“Jon is King,” He says finally, voice distant. “Let him choose who reaches his kingdom--his wife-to-be, or my priest.”

Chapter End Notes

For the sake of moving the plot along, I’ve cut out a number of extraneous scenes. Maybe I’ll do a ”deleted scenes” thing after the fic is complete. I don't think I'm missing any critical plot points, but some of them will be contextual and not explicit.

Please feel free to ask questions if something is not clear!

And again, my best wishes for a wonderful 2018 to everyone!
MISSANDEI

Viserion lands on the foredeck, and the Queen slides off the dragon’s back.

“Missandei was right,” says Daenerys, walking up to them, her skirts sodden with spray. The Queen hands the farseer back to the ship’s captain. “The flagship is still flying Yara’s banner, but there are more Iron Islands ships than there should be.”

The Spider gives Missandei a suspicious look. “You have keen eyes, translator,” he says.

“Young eyes,” she retorts.

A snort and a chuckle from Tyrion Lannister.

Theon Greyjoy is shifting from foot to foot, a trembling in his fingers, he rakes them through his hair. “He has her. My uncle has Yara. I know it.”

“Storm’s brewing,” mutters the captain. He looks uncertainty between the Queen and the Hand. “Storm’s brewing.”

Missandei looks up--clouds have covered the moon.

THE DROWNED MAN


The shadows have wings.

The drowned man smiles.

*I am going to die tonight.*

By fire, not sea.

DAENERYS

The lash of freezing rain bites into her exposed skin. Drogon’s wings strain against the gusts of wind, he is driven down towards the surface of the sea again and again.

The Dornish barges are in disarray, some overturned, some scattered. The Tyrell ships should have engaged the Ironborn forerunners now, the boarding parties deployed. There are masts, far below. Enemy or friend, she cannot tell.
But even in the roar of the storm she hears the impact—an echoing boom, a high-pitched groan, the snap of timber.

One of ours? Theirs?

Daenerys snarls in frustration. The only way they can prevail against an Ironborn armada is if the dragons are brought into play.

I cannot see anything!

“Rudan!” she screams. “Rudan!”

The wind steals her voice. But her children still hear her. In unison, the dragons pinion their wings. They dive.

THE DROWNED MAN

A battle. The smell of green timber cracked and spilling into the black sea.

The Grey King will sit on the Seastone Chair.

He comes awake with a gasp as cold water hits him in the face. A biting cold wind is whipping up the waves to a frenzy. Waterspouts, where there is no turmoil to birthe them. The water is cold, the wind blowing above it is colder still.

Why has the sea taken me now?

His hands are still bound to the masthead.

Broken.

Some small memory rises.

Euron’s enemies rammed his ship. He was not there.

DAENERYS

She sits between Drogon’s shoulder blades, flanked on either side by Viserion and Rhaegon.

The underside of their wings gleam orange from the burning.

Some of the ships on fire may be her own.

She puts aside the pounding fear, searching, searching.

Yara, where are you?

Eventually, she finds the silhouette of the ship she knows well.

A man stands on the deck of Yara’s ship, a sword in his hand. The air around him swirls with activity.
Tyrion has taught her how to read the body language of power.

This is the man in command.

A twang --a Ballista on the deck of the ship snaps forward. Something is hurled into the air, she cannot tell what.

Droplets of heat spray her legs, stick.

Burning pitch.

“Dracarys!” she commands.

As one, her three dragons open their maws.

MISSANDEI

The storm is ebbing; it has doused the flames of friendly and enemy fire alike. They are missing many ships. What remains of the flotilla has been blown so off course that the captain refuses to make a guess as to their location until he can see the stars clearly.

There is only one ship left that is large enough to hold Drogon’s bulk--the Orchid, previously a grain-shipping barge.

The dragon slumbers.

We lost so many to his fire. But the enemy lost more.

“Well?” she asks.

Silently, Grey Worm leads her to a quadroned-off area. A body lies under a piece of sailcloth. She gestures; Grey Worm removes the cloth.

A man, swarthy, with an eyepatch over an eye. A giant whaling hook is stuck through his belly--seems that was used to pull him out of the water.

“How has Theon Greyjoy seen the body?” she asks.

Grey Worm nods. “He has said it is his father’s brother. Then he kicked the corpse. Again and again. Lord Tyrion had to take him away.”

We haven’t found Yara yet.

She looks at the corpse again, more carefully. Some parts of his clothing are singed, his hair is gone--burnt off. The top of his skull is split open from the heat, the skin around his hairline bubbled and red. The rest of him is curiously untouched.

“He jumped into the water,” she says. Not fast enough. A moment sooner, and the top of his head would have been submerged as well.

Grey Worm cocks his head to a side. “Only Unsullied would hold their ground before dragonfire. We do not expect it of kings.”

“I suppose not,” she murmurs.
And so ends Euron Greyjoy, King of the Iron Islands? After all the agonizing and scheming, it come down to a single lick of dragonsbreath?

She has played Missandei so very long, that despite herself, she cannot but rise with the surge of adrenaline a victory brings.

The Valyrian slave shivers in fear.

THE DROWNED MAN

Voices. Human voices.

“Hey, hey, hey, there’s one of the slaves in the water!”

Shouts. Something tugging cruelly at him.

“Pull him up! Pull him up!”

He does not feel his limbs. Until he does. Pain, sweet pain, rushing into his extremities. His bonds have been cut.

He feels a dribble of water over his lips. Fresh water.

TYRION

"The Bay of Crabs?” he demands. “We’re in the thrice-damned, pox-ridden, utterly useless Bay of Crabs?”

The captain clears his throat. “We are in the middle of the ocean, My Lord. We will be in the Bay of Crabs. If we make good time.”

Tyrion rubs his head. Like a reflex, his hand rises towards where a filled goblet should be sitting. He snatches his hand back.

The entire sea north of the Fingers is going to be frozen by the time we get there.

“Alright,” says Tyrion, hopping off his stool. “Missandei, go wake the Queen. It’s time for a change of plans.”

THE DROWNED MAN

He has been rescued by a Dornish vessel. It makes no sense. The crew speaks a babble of languages, languages he does not know. They have pulled up two others, lying beside him. Fighters. Not Ironborn.

There was a battle. There should be more ships.

The one keen-eyed man on the ship is sent climbing the mast over and over again looking for the flotilla.
There is nothing but black water all around them.

He slowly crawls forward. The crew has fished something else out of the water. He has to see it for himself.

He is suddenly filled to the brim with fear, it dribbles out of him, smelling like piss.

*I have not moved beyond fear*, he thinks sorrowfully.

His questing fingers find a rough surface.

A suit of Valyrian Steel Armor, choked with seaweed. The sea spat it out.

The men babble. Bare chested, a few of them. Dornishmen. Dark men, from across the sea. Some have long hair, sharp scimitars. There are *horses*, whinnying.

The crew voted in a Dornish captain. He is pawing through water-impregnated charts by lantern-light.

“Where do you go?” he croaks. His voice is not used to speaking above the sea, and he is too far away. Nobody hears him.

“Anybody know these waters?” The Dornishman calls out in Westerosi, then another language. “Anybody know how to read half a nautical chart?”

He can do nothing but try to raise his hands, wave.

“You!” The captain has him hauled--gently, for all the speed of it--to the foredeck. “You look like an Ironborn.”

He grimaces. “A thrall,” he whispers, harsh. “I am a thrall.”

“Do you know these waters?” the captain asks.

“I know water,” he whispers. Licks his cracked lips. “Where do you go?”

The captain shakes his head. “There was supposed to be a rendezvous…” he seems to come to some decision. “White Harbor. We go to White Harbor.”

*The North.*

Euron has forced enough Warlock Wine down his throat, asked enough questions that he cannot answer, that now he knows well that the King in the North is Euron’s enemy.

“I will show you the way,” he says.

**EURON**

“The Lord of Light,” whispers a woman’s voice, “wants you to live.”

With a strangled screech, Euron Greyjoy opens his eyes.

“Welcome back to the world of the living, Your Majesty,” says a shadowed figure. By the stink of it, they are on a fishing boat, a dreg-trawler.
“I will cut off your tits,” says Euron, “and feed them to you, sliver by sliver, if you don’t take me back to my ships.”

The woman has the temerity to laugh. “You were dead, Euron,” she says. “We stole your corpse from the Dragon Queen herself. And now the Lord of Light has brought you back.”

“Then I will cut off his tits if you--” he struggles against his bonds, “don’t untie me.”

The woman is silent.

Euron looks down at his arms.

There is no rope, no bond. Only a whisper of shadow.

“A shadowbinder,” he muses. Looks up with a grin. “I cut off the legs of the last one I met.”

The woman’s mouth twists. “You will find,” she says, “that there are things you can and cannot do now. Attacking Priests of the Firelord is one of them.”

Euron struggles against the bindings, struggles and swears and spits, and all the woman does is calmly wipe the foam-specked spittle off her face.

“I have a destiny!”

“Ah, yes, the dreams of your drugged ‘prophets’, “ she says. Shrugs. “Hallucination is a strong binder, but it is not stronger than true prophecy. Whatever you thought your destiny was, whatever you wanted it to be--it is no more. Best to let the past go.” A gentle hand strokes his hair. “Spit at me again and I will sew your lips together.”

**THE DROWNED MAN**

“Ship!” shouts out the man on watch.

He blinks the salt spray from his eyes, looks in the direction the lookout’s pointing. A dark silhouette against the night.

A ship.

Sailors pick up weapons, half the Dothraki are lofting sabres.

Truth of it is, they are in no condition to fight. Food is running out, fresh water is running out.

It is the most luxurious voyage he can remember ever being on. He is dry, he is given warm blankets, food to eat. He loses control of himself at times. The tremors and visions take him. The sailors leave him alone during his fits, though someone still sits beside him.

He’s the pilot.

The black sea churns under them, and the stars are his guide overhead.

The dark ship ahead suddenly blazes with light--ship’s lanterns, they are almost too bright in the darkness.

A large emblem spans the breadth of the sail.
“Dog,” growls one of the Dothraki, his newly-acquired Westerosi limited to simple words: “dog”, “cat”, “rat”, “hat”, “mat”.

He closes his eyes. “A direwolf,” he says. “The ship belongs to the King in the North.”

The captain has stepped up beside him. “How did they find us in the dark?”

“Ho the ship!” calls a voice, clear as a bell across the still water. “Are you of the fleet of Daenerys Targaryen?”

The Dothraki know that name. They raise their sabers. “Daenerys! Daenerys!”

The ship maneuvers broadside. Timbers creak, sails are shifted.

A plank.

He does not expect a woman--a girl--she is one that crosses first. Dressed in grey britches and a grey fur cloak that trails behind her.

Asha, Asha.

The girl speaks to the Dothraki in their own harsh language. Commanding. A few of them exchange looks.

_This must be the translator girl the Captain spoke of._ Another slave, freed. _So the Dragon Queen’s fleet made it to White Harbour._

The girl comes forward, picks out the two Dornish sailors.

“I am looking for a man,” she says. “A priest.”

“No priests here,” says the man. “Who are you?”

The girl speaks to the Dothraki again. They lower their sabers, look very uncertain.

One of them points at him, the pilot, lying on the ground.

_Please, no more._

The woman moves, fast, faster than he can follow, and the Dothraki startle, they move as if to block her path but she kneels in front of him, and her eyes are brimming with tears.

“Dear god, I didn’t feel you.”

He looks up into her eyes. _Who are you?_

“Help him up,” she says, “we’re going to cross over to the Raker.”

He cannot breathe, he cannot see.

She gives a few more commands, to someone behind her, two men dressed in furs.

One of them comes forward, helps him stand. He staggers, but finds his footing somewhat, the roll of the ship helps him.

He finds warm furs draped over his shoulders, his feet are being lifted, encased in warm wraps of leather and linen.
He lies in a warm cabin, upon a bunk, he has to raise his hands to shield his eyes from the light.

*Too much light.*

Two, three of the lanterns are shuttered. “Sorry,” she says.

He’s spoken aloud, then.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Which answer would you like first?” she asks. “The hard, or the easy?”

He shrugs.

“I am the Princess Arya Stark,” she says.

He is lying on his back, eyes closed.

“I was foster-sister to your nephew, Theon. Kin, if you will. You are safe here.”

“Kin is the one no Greyjoy is safe from.”

“Euron Bloodeye is going to get a lot more eyes soon,” she says, “open blood-red eyes all over him with a dagger.”

He has to open his eyes, look at her in startlement, *so much venom in a voice.*

Quicksilver, her face changes, rueful, sympathetic.

“You will give me the hard answer now,” he says, weary beyond measure.

“I am the Storm,” she says; her voice echoes in the hollow places inside his skull, in the center of his forehead, and her eyes flash white, white in white, and he trembles.

*A sorceress, a witch-queen of the North.*

“Euron Greyjoy also called himself the Storm,” he says quietly. *More pain, more tests, Lord of the Abyss, till I reach your halls?* “He could not break me from my faith.”

She gives him a look. “Wind and Wave, Storm and Sea.”

*Sorceress is mad.*

“God wanted to come for you himself,” she says, “but fucking undead armies were spilling out of Karhold, like maggots from a wound.”

His vision wavers a bit, rainbow-hued haloes pulsing in and out around the candles in the room.

There is a little smile about her mouth.

“This is all a bit abrupt. Shall we pretend you never asked for the hard answer?”

“Whatever you wish,” he says. It’s best to be passive with the mad, it hurts less in the end.

She swivels around, sits backwards on the cabin-chair, like a boy, her forearms crossed around the
back, chin resting on the rail.

Asha, Asha.

“I am Princess Arya Stark,” she says. “My brother, foster-kin to Theon Greyjoy, invites you to the North, to discuss what may be done about the madman that calls himself King of the Iron Islands and the North.”

His breath wheezes in his lungs. “I am a priest,” he whispers.

Preached once, tried to pray Euron away, and see what that earned me.

“King Jon follows the same faith as you,” she says.

“Then King Jon wants to be King of the Iron Islands and the North. Sit on the Seastone Chair.”

She’s looking at him, and her eyes are disconcertingly intent; humor dances in them. He holds her gaze.

“Seastone Chair’s meant for another,” she says softly. “Both of us know the name.”

His jaws clench.

“Do you believe in your god?” she asks him.

He splutters; he hadn’t realized he had it in him to be offended. Terrified, despairing, furious. Mad. All of these things, but not offended.

She grins. “Not a force, out there,” she says, waves out the small, barred cabin window. “The sea, the salt. But real. A real voice. One you can touch.”

He closes his eyes, nods, and he feels such sorrow. “Most don’t,” he whispers.

“He likes it better that way,” she says.

“Do not play with me,” he says. “Do not play with one of God’s servants.”

She sighs. “Small things,” she says. “What can I do to convince you I am not mad?”

“Leave me alone,” he says.

“As you wish.” She rises, and he watches her shutter a lantern, then another.

Blessed darkness is creeping up on him.

He realizes she watches him again. “Your lips are blue,” she says. “And it’s not the cold.”

He remains silent.

“Poisoned?” she guesses.

He shrugs.

“I’m going to smell your breath,” she says, “take your pulse. Would this be acceptable?”

“You are the Storm,” he says, “how can I stop you?”
“By saying no.”

He sighs. “No.”

“There’s water beside the bunk, bread and fish and winter-apples in the covered basket over by the door,” she says. “Rest well, Drowned Man.”

“No rest for those that dream,” he whispers.

She pauses on her way out the door, glances back at him over her shoulder. “Dead men should not dream, unless the god wants them to. There will be no dreams for you tonight.”

She steps onto the deck outside; the wind has slackened.

The door closes behind her.

---

The bread has gone hard, the fish is cold and sour, preserved in lye, then washed. The winter-apples are shrivelled and tasteless.

It is the best breakfast he has ever had.

He staggers; the ship lurches to a side. He wraps the leather and fur around his feet, his legs, uses the thongs sewn to the pieces to pull them tight. He dons the fur cloak sitting at the foot of his bed.

He emerges into night.

There is a scattering of lights, blue moonglow off of ice and snow. Land. White Harbour.

The sorceress stands at the rail, next to the drawn gangplank, her cloak heavy around her shoulders.

“Have I convinced you?” she asks.

“The mad have no restraint,” he says, “no control over the madness they vomit wherever they go, and so they must cut out tongues in their wake.”

He sees her jaw clench. “Euron Crowshite muted one of my brothers,” she says.

“Crow’s Eye,” he corrects.

She looks at him, raises an eyebrow. “What, he drugged the sense of humor out of you as well?”

He is taken aback. Men and women have mocked him, tortured him, they have respected him and listened to him. None have teased him, not since he rose again from the waves.

“Humor is folly,” he says, “God has washed all follies out of me.”

She snorts. “You and Him are going to get along great, I see.” She turns then, leans backwards, her elbows resting on the rail. “A word of advice?”

“Speak, sorceress,” he says.

She looks incredulous for a moment. Her lips silently form the word “sorceress”. Then it looks like she is about to giggle. Young, six-and-ten at the most. Arya Stark. He’s heard the name, wasn’t
she imprisoned by the Bolton dogs? He cannot recall the specifics of it.

“The Drowned God is harsh,” she says. “Soft as the Sea, deep as the Sea.”

He bows his head for a moment, looks up. Confusing, but not ungodly. She has fed me, clothed me. May her womb be fruitful, Lord of the Depths.

“He is dark,” she continues, and the prospect does not seem to frighten her at all. “And in the coming days there are many things you will learn--things I think you know already, though you turn your back on them.”

He Who Dwells Beneath the Waves, Lord God who drowned for us, give your servant strength.

“He cares for you,” she says softly.

“Then why did He leave me bound to the prow when I begged for death? The sea was right there, the sea could have reached out, taken me.”

Bitterness. Accusation. Aeron hears it in his own voice, backs away from them.

“But it is not my place to question,” he says. “It was a test.”

“If you will not question,” she says, “who will? A test, yes,” and there is bitterness to her mouth. “Not of you. Of the god.”

“Blasphemy,” he says.

“Really?” she asks. “The Deep One gave you edicts that could be blasphemed against?”

He is brought up short. He cannot lie. “You are right.”

“A test, as I said. What is dead may never die. Sea took Euron, Euron dragged himself back. No lack of will or cunning or strength in Fuckeye Greyjoy, I’ll grant him that. A madman’s strength. But now, looking at your lips, I think there may be more to Euron’s defiance that we thought.”

He steps up to the rail.

She speaks and the sea speaks with her. I can see the waves, reaching, reaching for her with watery hands to drag her into a wet grave, sea-wolf’s bones stripped clean by the fish, the white bones in the black water; the bones frolic amidst the crabs.

He blinks and the vision passes.

“God raised Euron up,” he says. “Ratified his kingship.”

She nods. “My lord balanced, between the mercy you begged for and the harsh necessity of undoing a mistake.”

“Euron Greyjoy was a mistake,” he whispers. And in his heart he knows, and it quiets the sorrow, that twisted wondering, how did I fail you?

I did not fail. God did not fail. Mistakes were made by both of us.

“The Drowned God has more than one name, does he not?” he asks quietly. The vision, vivid against his flesh like a brand, the gods impaled upon the Iron Throne.
She nods.

“By what name do you serve him, sorceress?”

She grins out over the water. “Sweetie-pie.”

When he chokes on air, she slaps him on the back, hard, like a man he used to drink with in his youth. “A sense of humor, Ironborn--you’d better find yours.”

---

The ride east to Winterfell is cold, though the sorceress does not feel it as much as he does, as much as the soldiers that make up their escort. Two beardless boys and a man who says he was born north of the Wall.

He has never been a curious man, his faith keeps such things from him. But some questions must be asked.

“Why do we go away from the sea to see He Who Dwells Beneath the Waves?”

“He is acting in another office,” she says.

They sleep twice before he believes he has digested that.

“He cannot act in two offices?”

“Most of it is autonomous, sea doesn’t need direction, a man stabbed through the heart usually dies by himself without needing His intervention,” she says. “But conscious acts, yes, He is constrained. His mind could encompass it all, should He choose.” A pause. “He chose, a few moons ago.”


When the greatest storm in all memory swept across the world, and dead things did not die, nor tides change, and the sea was as a pane of frozen, black glass.

“A breath of air,” she murmurs. “Gossamer bindings--he allows himself to be constrained.”

He looks sidelong at her. “You were there.”

A smile plays about her mouth. “Our wedding night.”

He does not ask any more questions for three sleeps.

The towers of Winterfell rise before them before he asks his last. “A sense of humor is required?”

She smiles at him then, and some strange kindness wraps around him; the wind feels warmer than it did before. “No, Damphair,” she says. “You are perfect as you are.”

DAMPHAIR

They dismount from their horses, and a groom steps forward to take the reins. A dark haired man--boy, truly, though he wears a large sword, is waiting for them. He holds two horns in his hands.
“Have we mounts, remounts?” asks the Storm as she takes the offered horn, returns words of ritual he does not understand.

“You just got in,” says the boy, but then rounds on Damphair with a smile plastered on his face. “Welcome to Winterfell, Prince Aeron,” he says. The smile slips into something more genuine, more sad, as if he sees in Damphair a ghost. “Welcome.”

He carefully takes the horn the boy holds out to him, sips the mead.

*No room left in me for Balon’s hatred.*

There is not much of Aeron Greyjoy left, that he should have in him some room. Even the name “Aeron” falls strangely about his ears, as if it does not fit, and he cannot tell if he has shrunk, or the name has.

Damphair--shorn and denuded and yet Damphair still works.

He gives a short bow; he has been unaccustomed to such for a long time. “Blessings of the Drowned God upon you, child.” The words are rote.

The groom choke a little.

“I am Jon,” says the boy. “Come, come in.”

---

The Storm leads the way deep into the bowels of the stone keep. He expects wind to whistle through its corridors as it does in Pyke, but instead here is warmth, and candles drip wax onto the ground at regular intervals.

“...halfway to the Long Lake,” Jon--the King in the North--is saying.

“...not a nursemaid ,” says the Storm. “Did Sansa, did Varro, did Bran, dosed this one all the way back from White Harbor. My blade needs to drink deep before I can balance the lives saved.”

Damphair nods to himself. That is how it should be.

Asha and the Storm, they would have liked each other. Or not, as sometimes happens with women cursed with a man’s heart. But then the Storm is not properly a woman, is she? The wind is as womanly as the sea is manly.

They end in a long, narrow room with a blazing hearth.

“God is not here,” says Damphair.

“He is almost at Karhold,” says Jon. “Arya and I are the last two left in Winterfell.”

*Waiting for me .*

Damphair does not know how he knows that, but he does.

---

That night he dreams.

A boy sits in a chair beside the hearth, and Damphair can see that his legs are useless, wasted. But
his arms are strong, like that of a boy with the potential to make a good oarsman when he is grown.

The boy looks up.

_The raven perches on the wood Euron binds him to each night, and the raven has three eyes and a tree grows out of its wings, a tree that covers the world and its branches are made of shells and the ribs of whales beached on an island, picked clean by gulls. “Just a little longer,” croaks the raven. “Hold a little longer.”_

And then the Storm is beside him, her eyes white like a newborn ship’s cat.


“We’ve met,” says the Drowned Man.

“It’s good to see you at last,” says the boy and smiles at Damphair, radiant.

“Excellent,” says the Storm, and Damphair looks to see her dusting her hands. “My work here is done.”

The boy raises an eyebrow. “You’re riding out?”

She nods.

“Tell Jon the hoarde is still not moving,” says the boy.

And then, like the sudden summer squall that rises out of nowhere and slips away just as quickly, the Storm is gone.

“What would God have of me?” he asks.

“You already know,” says the boy.

“I am no Lodos,” Damphair whispers, despairing. “I am a _priest._”

“I am no Knight, no Champion in burnished mail,” says the Three-Eyed Raven. “I am a _cripple._”

---

After he wakes, and takes counsel with the King in the North, Damphair rides west, over the sea of frozen water, white, featureless before him. He rides west, and sometimes he sees out of the corner of his eye a raven keeping pace with him, and sometime the wind sweeps clean his path.

His hair is growing again. It comes out grey, as the foam upon the waves that break on dark rock. His body is still strong, Ironborn, sinew and muscle and bone, his face bears lines of pain, not age. But his hair grows, and it grows grey like an old man’s.

The blue has all but faded from his lips.

When he sleeps he dreams, and he dreams of the bones of a race long passed into memory, and black eyes that watch him as he swims through God’s drowned halls, and bit by bit Aeron Greyjoy reconciles himself to earning the names God wishes him to bear: Dead King. Lich King.

Grey King.
I debated a long, long time before editing and posting this. The muse is well and truly
dead, I haven't slept a full night's sleep in a very long time...but it is what it is. Next up:
Winterfell wrap-up, Dany and Dragons realize they can just fly around burning shit.
Who's going to stop them?
Every breath is laced with the musty smell of wheat husks.

This is what I get for dreaming of flying...

“This is humiliating!” he yells out of the basket.

“What?”

Tyrion raises his voice. “This is humiliating!”

Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the Queen, sits folded up inside a grain basket. The commander of the Unsullied occupies a similar basket dangling just a few handspans away.

“You are a dwarf!” Grey Worm yells back. “You are not eating your knees!”

Granted, the Unsullied is a bit more ‘folded’ than Tyrion…

“You got a horse!” Tyrion yells back.

My weight is counterbalanced by a damn goat.

Meat, in case Drogon gets hungry.

“...your idea, Tyrion,” his queen shouts down.

“The next time a fool dwarf gives you an idea,” Tyrion mutters, “take him out back and feed him to Drogon.”

“...of...bright side!” yells the Unsullied, half his words eaten by the rush of wind. “You cannot see the ground!”

That’s true. It’s pitch dark all around them, no moon, no stars, black clouds in a black sky, if it wasn’t for the wind licking at Tyrion through the gaps of the basket’s weave, and the rush of Drogon’s mighty wings, all the creaking and swaying could just have been attributed to a flimsy boat and a rough sea.

Tyrion snorts and takes another swig from his flask. The fire-brandy is running low.

Should have worn some of that wool-and-horsehide underwear Missandei kept offering.
“...dragons!” the Unsullied Commander is still trying to cheer Tyrion up. “We will...be warm!”

_Unless the dragon drops us, _thinks Tyrion. _And then we will be cold._

The baskets are slung like panniers down Drogon’s flanks. A mess of ropes and sailcloth—the product of the structural engineering efforts of a Dornish sailor and a Dothraki leatherworker—is supposed to keep everything balanced.

_Don’t jinx it now, it’s working._

But it’s been hours, surely they should have sighted the lights of White Harbour by now.

“Well, I suppose if we hit a wall we’ll know we’ve gone too far.”

**GENDRY**

The King’s army is divided into six legions, spread out across the snowbound North. Enough men for a seventh legion—reserves, and a tenscore recruits—are encamped at the Command Center, on a large plateau deep in the Lonely Hills.

Gendry has become an ‘officer’, of a sorts. He must turn his attention from shaping metal to shaping wainwrights and barrel-makers into field smiths, good enough to patch a breastplate or stamp out arrow-heads. Darcy’s helping with the command part of it—the Glover name carries weight amongst these men.

One of the iron-banded wagons that Princess Sansa brought back from White Harbour serves as Gendry’s travelling forge.

He leaves a handful of smith-hopefuls sharpening swords under Darcy’s watchful eye, and heads to the large tent in the center of the encampment.

He hesitates for a moment, then brushes the tent-flap aside and goes in.

Bran Stark is alone, sitting on some skins near a brazier. But his eyes are dark, not _warg_ white, and he looks up as Gendry approaches.

“Mastersmith,” says Bran. “I’m sorry, I would help with the sharpening, Darcy told me to come, but I have to fly the night-patrol.”

“They day I need to rely on a runaway apprentice to get work done,” says Gendry, “I’ll know it’s time to retire.”

Bran grins.

Gendry hesitates again, then forges ahead. “I saw something yesterday.”

Bran raises an eyebrow.

“I saw...I _thought_ I saw Prince Daorys weeping.”

_An assassin like H’ghar, that much is clear, but Daorys is a good sort, helping and teaching Bran_
the way he did. Arya teases too much, he likes her, she keeps taunting him with ‘sweethearts’ and ‘darlings’, jesting about him being her lover. She shouldn’t do that to a man, it’s cruel.

Bran’s face is expressionless. “Someone died,” he says.

Poor fucker had to kill someone he cared about?

“Who?”

“Daorys does not know,” Bran replies.

“So why’s he weeping then?”

“Who does the sky weep for, when it rains?” Bran’s smiles, sadly. “If we knew, the sky would not weep.”

“Witchy business…,” mutters Gendry.

Didn’t know Daorys was caught up in magic and the like… but then, isn’t everyone these days?

“Assassin business,” says Bran. “So you must never mention this again. Not to Daorys, nor Arya. Or Jaqen.”

Witchy, assassin business. Which is a thousand times worse than just “normal” witchy business,

“Consider the matter forgotten,” says Gendry.

Bran’s mouth twists. “It will be. In a decade, I will be the only person that remembers that Daorys once had another student.”

**JON**

The First Legion marches up the frozen Kingsroad in high spirits.

Jon understands the men’s enthusiasm--the time for waiting is over. But his officers ride with their hands on their hilt, and Arya, mounted on a white palfrey beside Jon, Arya’s eyes are grim as she scans the rise on both sides of the road.

“I feel them too,” says Jon, his voice low.

She nods.

Eyes, watching the column as it advances.

That night, the undead creep up on the encampment and steal away men from the fringes of the army.

“How many?” Jon demands harshly.

The lieutenant’s mouth is a thin line. “Almost a score. Including half the scouts, and one of the squads on east patrol.”

“We’re two score down then,” says Arya, her voice devoid of all expression. “The score that we lost and the score that the Night’s King gained.”
“Word hasn’t spread amongst the men yet,” says the lieutenant.

And we’d better keep it that way.

“No more patrols, no more scouts,” says Jon. “Ring the entire camp with a wildfire barricade when we stop.” He looks to Arya. “Pass the word to the other legions, that the wights have started staching outliers. Us wargs will have to work harder, do the scouting and the messaging, but we’ll not risk any more men.”

Arya gives him a short bow, and wordlessly heads into the command tent--the men are still wary of wargs, seeing the princess with filmed-over white eyes will not help.

Seeing the King in that state will help even less--Jon will bear his fair share of the increased burden on the wargs, but the time will be subtracted from his sleep.

Somewhere close by, two men raise their voices.

“Oh I don’t know but I’ve been told,
The Night King’s balls are really cold…”

“Shut up, you lot!” a voice calls in the dark. “There may be wights about!”

Jon shakes his head. “Sing!” he calls out over the camp. “Sing louder! Let the enemy know what we really think of him!”

Scattered laughter. The song starts up again.

“...oh, I don’t know but it’s been said,
The Night King’s cock is frozen dead…”

“It’s not like he doesn’t know we’re coming,” mutters Jon. “Might as well see if we can piss him off.”

WYLIS MANDERLY

He knows how ridiculous a man of his girth looks astride a horse. But he’s no mean rider for all his bulk, a veteran of three wars, and he’ll be damned if he’s going to walk just for the sake of his dignity.

The Second Legion has packed up camp, abandoned the staging area in the Wolfswood; the only sound that accompanies their advance to the north and west is the rustle of leaves, and the crunch of brittle, ice-veined branches under the horses’ hooves.

How does a legion of heavy cavalry pass through dense forest undetected by the undead?
Quietly, quietly and slowly, and with a Warg at the head of the column, following the secret paths the wolves take.

Lyanna Mormont has not risen from her warg-trance more than twice in the last few sleeps, the last time only to pass on information from the King: the wights feed on scouts.

Not on the scouts of the Second Legion, they don’t--the wolves take down any wight that dares to stray too far into the trees.

TORMUND GIANTSBANE

Rattleshirt spins a silver coin over his knuckles; the bones dangling from his sleeve dance, clickety-clack, with each twirl of the coin. “We’re just sitting around,” he says thoughtfully. “Getting paid a silver coin a day just to sit around.”

Tormund’s men, the Third Legion, with Rattleshirt as sub-commander, covered the distance from Winterfell to the Long Lake in a tenday. Now they hide in caves far above the treeline, and wait.

“Big war,” says Tormund, taking a bite out of one of the strange white apples the Winterfell greenhouses have produced. The apple is mushy and tart at the same time, with a strange aftertaste of metal. “Have to wait for the Southerners to catch up.”

“Southerners move slow,” says one of the Ice River men, his teeth the filed-down points of a man-eater.

“Ranger Crows used to move fast enough,” says Rattleshirt.

The Ice River man grins. “Not once we stuck an arrow in ‘em.”

Rattleshirt considers the coin on his palm, turning it this way and that to catch the firelight and make it glint. “Should have given us a coin a day before not to stick ‘em with arrows,” he says finally.

“Ranger Crows were mighty stupid, till Jon showed up,” says Tormund.

“Ah,” the Ice River man sighs, “the good old days.”

ALYS KARSTARK

The floor inside the tent is soft, built up from layer upon layer of fur and hide, laid over tamped-down snow. The sectioned, domed roof of the round hide tent rises over their heads, and a large wrought-iron lantern hangs from a hook set into the apex.

Her son needs the soft floor--he has just learned how to walk, and he falls often. His nurse, a middle-aged retainer from Cerwyn, is not much help at the moment--the woman exists in a permanent state of fear.

The flap over the tent’s entrance is drawn aide, and Sigorn Thenn, Magnar of Thenn, King’s Rider, and commander of the Fourth Legion, knocks the snow from his boots and steps inside.

The baby shrieks in delight and toddles towards his father. In his haste he falls before he has taken
more than two steps, but, unfazed, crawls the rest of the way at a remarkable speed.

Sigorn swoops up the child, throwing him into the air and catching him again, and again, amidst giggles.

Alys looks upon her husband and child fondly. “He’ll be unmanageable for the rest of the day, you know,” she says. “You should not indulge him so.”

Sigorn grins, unrepentant, then hands the child off to his nurse.

“Warg Greshon says the firestarters are all in position,” Sigorn tells her. He shakes his head. “Mad, all of them.”

The firestarters will spend the next few days atop trees, deep in the forest that surrounds Karhold, while undead lurch about on the ground below. Nobody knows if wights can climb trees--hopefully they won’t find out.

“Courageous,” she corrects.

Courage will secure the firestarters’ future, and the future of their descendants--lands, and revenue, and titles for each one of them.

If they succeed.

*There will be no future for anyone if they fail.*

“They’ll have to run fast,” says Sigorn, “some are almost a mile away from the treeline.”

A wolf howls, somewhere in the distance.

The nurse wails. “Oh, oh, me and the little lord, we should have been allowed to stay in Winterfell.”

Alys sighs--it’s a tune the nurse sings often. If only the child wasn’t so attached to his minder…

“My son is a Karstark,” she says to the nurse.

‘Twas Karstarks that led the undead into the North. Even a babe will ride to war, *must* ride to war, to atone for that.

“That’s his mother’s keep up there,” says Sigorn. He’s always one to look to the future, Sigorn is, no atonement for the Thenn, only hope. “It’s his mother’s keep, and he will see it taken back from the dead.”

**BRAN**

He is an owl tonight--ravens do not see nearly well enough on moonless nights. His flight follows the curve of the Weeping Water, towards the Dreadfort, days of hard riding away from where his physical body sits, inside a tent on a plateau overlooking the Long Lake.

*Ground. Something moves. Food? Mouses?*

He ignores the owl’s hunger for the moment and spreads his wings, swooping lower, the tufts of his ears lying flat as wind rushes over and under his downy form.
Dark, ant-like specks on the snow far below, heading towards a small valley.

*A splinter force.*

They don’t have a *warg* with them, but the smoke rising in the fifty-man column’s wake tells him all he needs to know: Jaqen’s men are on the move.

Daorys calls Jaqen’s Fifth Legion “the rubbish men”. As they are quite possibly the best trained of the soldiers in Jon’s army, Bran assumes the epithet refers to their function: the cleansing of the North.

Jaqen has split his forces into twenty half-centuries--splinters--to range freely over the expanse behind the front lines. Every hamlet and village and charcoal burner’s hut the Fifth’s men leave in their wake is either a place of the living, or it is ash.

But the heaviest infestation of undead, apart from the army of fifty thousand near the Long Lake, is in the pinewoods surrounding Karhold. A battle yet to be fought; the fire from *that* burning will illuminate even the eternal night, for a time.

Satisfied, Bran leaves the lands south of Karhold, and climbs, climbs to the next thermal that will take him west.

**SANDOR**

“The lot of you have gone soft!” he growls at his sub-officers. “What were you doing, playing house?”

A few sheepish looks here and there--a few of the officers of the Sixth Legion have married into the local gentry in the months they’ve been stationed at the Last Hearth.

*War weddings--it’s going around.*

“Get your centuries moving,” he commands. “In three watches I want five hundred horse bearing down on the Night’s King’s army with the next five hundred to ride out once the snow is deep enough again.”

Soft snow is good for the horses’ hooves, but ride five centuries on it, and it gets packed into ice. Treacherous footing, especially under a light dusting of flurries. A good snowfall is needed to march the other half of the legion out.

“Commander?” asks Captain Galbash, hesitant, “the Night’s King’s army is west of us, sir, massing on an open field at the Long Lake, so I’ve been told. But you’ve had us training sortie maneuvers out of the Last Hearth.” A few nods. “Um. With all due respect, sir, what have we been training for?”

*A thing for history books, if we pull it off.*

The plan has been closely held amongst those commanding the legions. Now’s not the time to share it and clutter up the men’s thinking.

“Half our forces will ride west, towards the Long Lake” says Sandor. “The other half will ride towards Karhold. We will stop *just* short of engaging the enemy.”
“With all due respect, sir,” says Colonel Batan, “you have some of the finest heavy cavalry in Westeros under your command. You’re relegating us to a diversion?”

A grin stretches Sandor’s scarred lips into a grotesque parody of happiness. “Yes.”

That’s the cue for the officers to unleash a torrent of noise--questions, theories, opinions.

Sandor sighs. Leading Northmen has its advantages--they are courageous to a fault, and can think for themselves. But all the damn talking they do...Five men will have eight different opinions between them on any given topic.

At least Lannister men had the decency to be intimidated into silence by my face.

DAVOS

In summer, four small, underground rivers carry freshwater from higher ground--Karhold and its environs--into the sea, through the grey cliffs. There are certain wells within Karhold’s walls where, if you dropped in a bit of painted wood, it will be found floating halfway to Widow’s Watch by the next noon.

The rivers freeze solid every winter--no man in his right mind would expect them to be a route of assault.

Davos squeezes into the ‘cabin’ of an ice-breaker, his knees protesting the movement. The vessel is barely the size of a canoe, with room for two people lying down side-by-side.

The hull closes over his head--not a good ship for anyone scared of closed spaces.

But it is fast!

If I had one of these when I was younger...

Why, Davos Seaworth would never have had to pay a single tariff his whole life.

“It’s going to take us about two watches to get to the breach”, his co-pilot says. The girl commands the Breakers, the squadrons of foolhardy (and small) young men and women that have been trained to operate the ice-breaker ships. They are identified by a brown-and-white armband sewn onto their close-fitting fleece uniforms. “The ice re-forms sometimes,” she adds, “so we may have to drill a bit. But as of this morning every river is bored clean through.”

The underground rivers of ice are hollow channels now. Pipes, to carry soldiers from the sea right into the heart of Karhold.

Davos grins.

One last caper for an old smuggler.

TYRION

“Down there!”

The shout wakes Tyrion from a fitful doze. “What? Where?”
He rubs blearily at his eyelids, fingers clumsy with numbing cold.

“We see people, Tyrion!” shouts down Daenerys.

His body thinks moving is a really bad idea.

*You’re napping snug inside a basket, wrapped up in quilts,* he tells himself harshly. *Meanwhile your queen is up there, facing the full brunt of the wind and the cold.*

By sheer force of will he twists himself around, using the confines of the basket to push and pull himself into a standing position. If he gathers the quilts into a heap at his feet...like so...he can stand on the impromptu step-stool and just barely look out over the rim.

The air is clear. Somehow, they’ve flown past the clouds. The ground is very clear, brilliant white in the moonlight.

He feels a huge grin stretching his chapped lips, pulling at his cheeks, ear to ear. That first rush of dizziness when you look out over a high parapet—it is missing entirely.

*I’m flying. On a dragon.*

The specifics of basket versus saddle can be debated later.

*I’m flying.*

It takes a few shouts from both Daenerys and Grey Worm for Tyrion to pull his attention back to their words. And then he looks down and to the left.

Ant-like specks of mottled black clustered on the snow. People. Two-score of them, at least.

“We must make sure they are alive!” shouts back Grey Worm. “Missandei said there were armies of dead men!”

*Have Daenerys and Missandei been getting letters from Jon the rest of us don’t know about?*

Something catches Tyrion’s eye, and he grins again.

“They’re alive!” he shouts back. “Look! Cookfires!”

**DAENERYS**

The fur-clad soldiers in front of her are already recovering from their initial terror. A handful of them ran, in the first moments—those men are returning, shame-faced.

*Cersei’s men at Dragonstone didn’t stop running till they were over the horizon.*

But then, her dragons had come in flaming at Dragonstone, intent upon conquest. Here they landed softly, without even a screech to communicate aggression. Granted, they landed without warning, right in the middle of the band of fifty or so soldiers. But if any of them wet their trousers, well, that is between them and whoever does their laundry.

The soldiers are moving swiftly into some formation in front of her, a movement that has Grey Worm draw his spear, extend his shield-arm in front of Daenerys in protection. Not that she needs it—Drogon is sitting on his haunches behind her, Rhaegon and Viseryon are perched on the crest of
a ridge just behind them.

The formation of soldiers now bristles with pikes and halberds, tips pointed at the dragons.

The doubts that have been gnawing at her the entire flight... *what queen abandons her army after a costly victory to chase after a voice in a letter across a frozen wasteland?...* the doubts are feeding on the soldiers’ stances.

“Well trained,” Tyrion murmurs.

_Calm. Calm. You are a Targaryen, the rightful queen of this land._

“Well trained is good,” she says. “I will use them to take the Reach. Announce me.”

Tyrion nods, clears his throat. “You stand before Daenerys Targaryen,” he calls out, “Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and the betrothed of King Jon of the North.”

A hooded man steps forward. “We know who you are,” he says, his hands held out before him, open, in the universal gesture calling for calm. “The dragons sort of gave it away. Um. We did not expect—” he breaks off, swallows the rest of his words. Then he bows to her, clumsily, but deeply. “Your Majesty.”

The bristling pikes are lowered, and the soldiers pull back a little.

“We’re a splinter force,” the man says, “I would carry word of you back to the legion proper, if…” he gestures at the dragons again.

Daenerys smiles, amused despite herself. “He will not eat you. Go.”

The man nods, he looks back over his shoulder, gives some signal she cannot interpret. Then he turns around, and without fanfare, lopes off into the snow, towards the northwest.

**TYRION**

“So,” says Tyrion, rubbing his hands together, “I see we interrupted dinner.” He gestures to the four small cookfires clustered together against the rise, out of the wind.

“Breakfast,” says the man who seems to be the leader of this band. The man’s entire demeanour screams ‘sergeant’.

“Too early for a drink, I suppose,” says Tyrion regretfully.

“Sun never rises,” says the man. “North don’t understand ‘too early’ no more. Drink if you got it, don’t make a fuss though--Fifth Legion stays dry on patrol.”

*Neither ale nor spirits in this bitter cold?*

They have a formidable commander--or these men are many cuts above the norm--that such a rule is actually followed.

Then something else registers.

“Fifth legion?” asks Tyrion. “How many legions are there?”
The man shrugs. “At least five, I’d say.”

Tyrion grinds his teeth in frustration.

_Damn Varys with his dribbles of information, and damn Missandei for wasting ravens on poetry, we don’t know anything about what is really going on here._

“I didn’t know there were that many men left in the North,” he says aloud, “let alone men in fighting form.”

“It’s amazing what kind of fight a man is capable of with the undead on his doorstep,” the sergeant answers, grim. Then he turns to his men. “Alright you lot! Enough gawking at the dragons! Barricade, half-camp, on the double!”

_Sergeant, as I thought._

There is a flurry of purposeful movement from the soldiers. As Tyrion and the sergeant look on, four soldiers unpack a small chest from a nest of furs. Inside, there seems to be a series of small vials, each nestled in a bed of snow.

The men unpacking the chest have a blue-and-green armband around their left bicep, sewn into the outermost layer of fur.

The rest of the soldiers have dug a small trench--about a hand deep--around the encampment. Then the men with the armbands each take up a small vial, and quarter off the trench, pouring drops of liquid onto the snow.

_A fascinating_ suspicion blooms in Tyrion’s mind.

A suspicion that is confirmed with the last man picks up a smouldering stick from the cookfire, and tosses it into the trench.

Fire blooms, blue, and white, and green, and it races across the snow, jumping from drop to drop, until a short wall of iridescent flame encircles the camp.

“Wildfire,” whispers Tyrion. He raises his voice. “That is wildfire!”

_Now_ the sergeant smiles. “Why, so it is.”

“Now how on earth did the North get its hands on Wildfire?”

The sergeant scratches at his head. “You know, I don’t rightly know?”

“No, of course not,” says Tyrion, dry. Then, at a deliberately unhurried pace, he walks to Daenerys’s side. Grey Worm has settled her on a small heap of furs next to Drogon from where she watches the soldiers, a frown of deep unease on her face.

“Wildfire,” says Tyrion shortly. Daenerys’s jaw clenches. “And enough of it,” adds Tyrion, “that it’s just...handed out to a ‘splinter force’ to use as a barricade every time they set up camp.”

“This is bad?” asks Grey Worm.

“It is what it is,” says Tyrion, with a sharp glance at Daenerys. “A tool. Bad or good, it depends on the use it is put to--for the moment, it keeps us safe from whatever is out there.” He gives Daenerys a small smile. “But I’m getting the feeling we’ll be glad, by the time this is over, that we don’t have to fight the North for your crown.”
“They’re coming,” says Grey Worm, raising his chin towards the west. “A score of horses. Soon.”

By the time the riders file into the valley, she has managed to control her shivering and adjusted her cloak around her. Tyrion and Grey Worm have risen to stand at her side, protective.

The riders draw closer and pause beyond the ring of fire. The northmen are ready with shovels—quickly, they heap ice on a small portion of the wildfire barrier. It doesn’t help much—the wildfire is not doused, only subdued, and that too for just long enough for one rider to pass through. Then the ice is shoveled on again for the next rider, then the next.

“You let armed men pass through unchallenged?” asks Tyrion.

The sergeant snorts. “Being alive is a good enough challenge out here, I reckon.”

That seems to trouble Tyrion—his forehead is furrowed, the lines around his eyes deeper.

The four riders in the lead dismount amidst the jingling of bit and harness. There is a woman with them. Cloaked and in shadow, but her form is unmistakably feminine.

*They send an attendant for me?*

But the woman’s horse is good, not by Dothraki standards for course, but for the North...a bay, thoroughbred, with high withers, near to sixteen hands. No mere attendant would be given a horse such as this.

The woman draws back her hood. Red hair, glinting copper-gold in the firelight. A sharp indrawn breath from Tyrion confirms Daenerys’s sudden suspicion.

*Sansa Stark!*

But the red-haired woman seems oblivious to everything around her, including Daenerys—her head is craned upwards, eyes wide and fixated on the dragons.

*If this is Sansa, then that means...*

Daenerys’s gaze snaps to the tall man beside Sansa Stark, and fixates there. He is cloaked in heavy grey furs, far finer than the garb of the soldiers she has seen until now. The hilt of a greatsword rises over his left shoulder.

Daenerys's heart is hammering in her throat.

He draws back his hood.

A sudden rush of warmth; she can feel her cheeks flush.

Every feature on the man’s face screams “Targaryen”—but for his dark hair, he could have been a more handsome kinsman of Viserys.

*Is everyone in Westeros blind?*

Drogon is *purring*, the thrumm in his chest deeper than she’s ever heard it.
How could anyone think this man is a Stark?

She raises a hand towards him.

A strident cough beside her abruptly stops her motion. A warning. She turns to Tyrion, almost irritated.

He shakes his head.

What?

Tyrion shakes his head again.

Not Jon?

Tyrion clears his throat, rescuing Daenerys from her confusion. “We thought King Jon would have come in person to greet his betrothed.”

“He would have,” says the tall man. His voice is deep, too smooth for the harsh landscape that surrounds them. “Were he here. Allow me to--”

“The king does not lead his legion?” snaps Daenerys, embarrassment transmuting to irritation.

“Rulers must absent themselves from their armies, from time to time,” the man replies, and the dry amusement in his voice absolutely infuriates Daenerys. Then the man has the temerity to bow, deeply, seemingly sincere, as if he wasn’t mocking Daenerys just a moment ago. “I am Legion Commander Jaqen H’ghar. Welcome to the North, Your--”

Rhaegon screams.

The sound cuts through her jawbone like a diamond-tipped saw, she whirls, all thoughts of mockery and men banished from her awareness. Her dragon’s neck is arched in distress, his wings unfurled, a terrible confusion swirling in his eyes, she doesn’t know whether he will take wing or run.

Drogon and Viserion are as startled at their brother’s behaviour as Daenerys is--they have turned to face Rhageon, their wings half-furled, questioning, questioning.

“Rhaegon!” she calls, scrambling for the rise. “What is going on?”

Rhaegon rears back, and sweeps down his wings, creating a downdraft that blows snow and scree over the camp. She has to close her eyes, shield her face. When she can look up again, his maw is open, and deep orange flame is boiling up from inside his stomach.

It is aimed, it is aimed at something behind Daenerys…

She turns again, just in time to see the tall man shout, “Sansa! Stop!” and tackle Sansa Stark to the ground.

Behind her, Rhaegon gives a great whuff and settles onto his forelegs, wings tucked back in, calm and unconcerned as rapidly as he had become agitated earlier.

Everyone is watching, the soldiers caught between startlement and fear.

The man has risen and drawn Sansa Stark to her feet. Jon’s sister looks dazed, but even as Daenerys watches, her face is coloring with chagrin.

Sansa Stark. It was Sansa Stark.
It is a certainty born of a mother’s intuition, the one that *knows* that someone has done something to her child.

“What did you do?” snarls Daenerys.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Sansa Stark is saying as she turns to face the Mother of Dragons. “I could *hear* him calling out, so loud! I just...I touched him, that’s all. I didn’t mean to distress him.”

“What…” Daenerys’s nostrils flare, she turns to Tyrion, “what does she mean?”

Tyrion’s eyes are wide, he shakes his head, he doesn’t know.

“Well,” says the tall man, this *Jaqen H’ghar*, and the infuriating amusement is back in his voice. “It seems dragons don’t like *wargs*.” A smile that is almost a smirk. “This is going to be interesting.”
The Battle Plan

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Sansa Stark is saying as she turns to face the Mother of Dragons. “I could hear him calling out, so loud! I just...I touched him, that’s all. I didn’t mean to distress him.”

“What...” the Queen turns to Tyrion, fearful confusion splayed across her face, “what does she mean?”

Tyrion shakes his head. I don’t know.

“Well,” says Commander H’Ghar, “this is going to be interesting.”

Tyrion winces.

“Interesting?” Daenerys hisses.

Violence hovers over the moment like a vast overhang of rock; one stray pebble, disturbed, will trigger a landslide.

Tyrion should be smoothing things over, but his attention has snagged on one word.

“Warg,” he murmurs. “Skinchanger?”

It can’t be true, it’s just a legend.

“I...” Sansa’s gaze flickers back and forth between him and Rhaegal; the child has that stunned look that men often wear when they’ve woken up after a night of being blackout drunk. “I’ve only ever talked to rabbits before,” she whispers.

Tyrion catches the concerned look Commander H’ghar gives Sansa. Then the man steps half in front of her, as if to shield her from Daenerys’s rage.

H’ghar bows, again. “It is an old Northern magic, your majesty,” he says. “Princess Stark meant no harm, she has but recently--”

“Sorcery,” says Daenerys.

Oh oh.

Tyrion gives the Commander a warning glance, then clears his throat. “Um. No, my Queen. I’ve read about wargs--in a very old book, about the legends of the North. Wargs were men born with the ability to talk to beasts.”

Amongst other interesting habits, he peers at Sansa--she doesn’t look the type to go running around naked in the woods, howling at the moon, but you never know... best not to mention that now.
The queen’s expression is unreadable. “A sorceress, regardless of what you call her--godswife or witch, or warg --is still a sorceress.” Sansa looks like she’s about to speak, but Daenerys’s lip curls. “A sorceress that tried to talk to my beast.”

Sansa’s posture shifts--defiant now. She steps out of Commander H’ghar’s shadow. “Your dragon-Rhaegal--he is not a beast. You would be a fool would underestimate his intelligence.”

Daenerys seems taken aback. He, himself, is astonished at Sansa--the child has grown dangerously outspoken. But she is still marked by that damned naivety that seems to be a Stark bloodline trait. Luckily for Sansa, Daenerys is a queen that respects honesty; it is a tricky business, throwing defiance in a Targaryen's face.

But the queen’s rage seems to have lost its razor-sharp edge.

Tyrion raises his chin. “So what do dragons speak of?” he asks Sansa.

Daenerys gives him a look out of the corner of her eye.

“What, don’t you want to know?” he asks her. “I do.”

Daenerys’s lips are pressed tightly together. She is thinking. Finally, she unbends enough to give a small nod.

Sansa looks up, beyond their heads, to the dragons on the rise. Tyrion cannot be sure--perhaps it is a trick of the light--but her eyes flash white for a moment, white-in-white.

He finds himself straining forward.

“The big one is,” says Sansa, and swallows, “he is telling the others ‘these man-things do not smell like the man-things we know, maybe we will be allowed to eat these ones.’”

Well.

Daenerys’s right eyebrow has arched. “And the others?” she asks.

A frown marks Sansa’s brow. “Rhaegal says he would prefer to eat our horses as they are bigger than men. And…” she pauses, “the white-and-gold one, he says ‘let’s find a nice herd of cows, brother, I don’t want these man-things, their hides look too thick and hairy.’”

That startles a snort out of Daenerys.

Then, the Mother of Dragons takes a deep breath. “It seems the dragons have spoken,” she pronounces. “We will not eat you. Today.”

“Well, now that that’s settled,” says Tyrion, “there is obviously quite a bit we need to know about the North before we proceed. Wargs, and…” he gestures to the knee-high wall of flame encircling the camp.

Sansa curtseys deeply towards the Queen, then gives Tyrion a shorter, but no less proper, half-curtsey. “The Dreadfort is but a few miles from here. Would your Majesty and your companions accept the hospitality of the keep in order to refresh yourselves? Commander H’Ghar and I would be pleased to answer any and all questions you have.”

You would, would you?

Tyrion looks up to meet Grey Worm’s eye. The Unsullied gives subtle head-nod towards
Daenerys.

The queen is drooping; her iron will is no longer strong enough to overcome the cold, she shivers. She needs rest. But the set of Daenerys’s shoulders speaks of wariness. Not afraid, not Daenerys, but...uncertain, and drawing stubborn pride around herself like a cloak, layer by layer, that will solidify into inaction.

*Get her moving, get her inside, and fed, and get her some answers.*

“The dragons are hungry, apparently,” Tyrion says to Commander H’ghar.

The man gives a small smile--almost a smirk. “Would the dragons object to goat?” he asks. “There is a sizable herd fattening at the Dreadfort.”

Tyrion looks to Daenerys for a decision.

She acquiesces with a nod; the goats have won her over. But her agreement is a foregone conclusion to Tyrion--a mother will not let her children go hungry.

**SANSA**

She stands at a large window of frosted glass, and looks out over the Dreadfort’s main courtyard. For all that she has avoided the place for months, she realizes its forbidding stone walls harbor no nightmares for her.

“The rooms are a disgrace,” she murmurs, “half the keep’s servants don’t seem to know which end of a broom is put to the floor.”

Nevertheless, Roose Bolton’s old rooms had been tidy, if a bit dusty, clean enough to pass muster by torchlight.

“She was so tired,” says Sansa, who had taken on the role of the queen’s attendant herself, and helped the wary Daenerys wash and change into a warm woolen nightgown. The gown had been clean, and smelled fresh, stored as it was in a cedarwood chest, with boughs of pine.

No need to tell the queen who the garment had belonged to.

Tyrion, Tyrion Sansa had ignored like she had ignored the Dreadfort all these long months and the task of seeing to Daenerys Targaryen's male companions had fallen to one of Jaqen’s captains.

A squeal, cut abruptly short.

The dragons are feeding near the abattoir at the rear of the keep.

Dragons are too large a topic to avoid.

She turns around.

Jaqen sits at the large table dominating the tower-room, his sharp features lit by flickering candlelight. The tower used to be a lookout, the keep’s seneschal informed them, before being it was into a barracks; it has stood empty since the battle the smallfolk call ‘the battle of the bastards’. Jaqen’s officers have already transformed the floors below this one into war-rooms.

“Jaqen,” she says, “Jaqen, dragons *talk.*”
“Apparently,” he murmurs, looking up, “there were none to listen, before now.”

“They are so loud,” she says.

“And the poor, delicate princess,” he replies, dry, “who has only talked to rabbits before, was the one to hear them first.”

Yes, alright, I may have laid on the ‘sweet innocent Sansa’ a bit too thickly.

“Daenerys was ready to breathe fire, nevermind the dragons,” says Sansa, “I had to do something.” She shakes her head. “I cannot believe I did that. Try to warg a dragon, I mean. Of all the stupid, idiotic…”

I lost my mind, for a moment.

Lost her breath, lost even the bitter edges of herself in wonder, in that first sight of them.

For a moment.

Dragons are overwhelming creatures,” says Jaqen quietly. “I had forgotten.”

There is a world of sorrow in the last.

“Did you…” she hesitates. “Did you have a dragon?”

A small smile. “Better to say, Bantis had me. Wrapped around his littlest talon the moment I laid eyes on him. He was so small, compared to the other hatchlings, he would curl into a little ball on the palm of my hand and go to sleep.”

Oh.

“What happened to him after Valyria fell?”

“He was killed long before that,” says Jaqen. “Bantis was a runt—nothing at all like that behemoth out there—that one is going to rival Balerion for size when he reaches his full growth.”

She swallows. “They’re going to get bigger?”

Jaqen grins at her. “Double, maybe triple the size they are now. And the girl…queen…” his gaze grows thoughtful, “she doesn’t really know how to control them. They are entirely wilful. As near enough to wild as makes no difference, when they are grown they will fly away to make lairs in the high places of the world. In a hundred years they will not know men other than as food. And yet,” he says, “and yet they listen to her now. They obey. They carry baskets full of dwarves at her request.”

“One dwarf,” Sansa says. “You like her.” The last is almost an accusation.

“She ignores her own fears,” murmurs Jaqen, “for a handful of goats, just because the dragons complained they were hungry. Dragons are always hungry, these ones look quite well-fed to me, they don’t need to eat more than once every fortnight.”

But why wouldn’t she accept the provender that is offered? Even the most ornery of riders will accept food for his horse, will he not?

Jaqen shakes his head. “She forewent pride, and all the stubbornness that is the birthright of queens, she let go rage—a Valyrian is not wont to do these things just to indulge their dragon’s
whim. It is the dragon that must be taught to bend to the Valyrian.”

He has noticed Sansa’s incomprehension.

He half-turns on the chair, and hikes his shirt up around his shoulders. There are faint shadows--
lines, criss-crossing his back, picked out in relief by the candlelight.

*Whip marks.*

“Because Bantis refused to flame a living target, and I refused to force him to it.”

Jaqen lowers his shirt, turns around again. “These dragons listen to Daenerys because she is not
their owner, she is not their rider. She is their *mother.*”

Sansa is only half-listening. The scars on Jaqen’s back seem to have unmoored her from the here-
and-now. Almost like a vision superimposed upon the man that sits before her, she sees a boy,
gentle, his hand curled protectively around a small creature.

He reads poetry.

Not an Arya, or a Jon.

Jaqen had once been something a little bit like *Sansa* Stark.

“I killed Jeyne,” she says aloud. “After Ramsay made me rape her. I wrapped my hands around her
throat and held on, with all my strength, until she stopped breathing.”

There is no surprise on Jaqen’s face.

*He knew already.*

Abruptly, she is tired of herself.

“Jaqen, what do we do with Daenerys? I need to tell Jon about her, and soon.”

but a dwarf and an eunuch for escort.”

“Eunuch?” asks Sansa.

“The Essos man is Grey Worm, the commander of her Unsullied forces.”

“A bodyguard,” says Sansa.

“A token,” counters Jaqen. “Brave to the point of foolhardiness, all three of them, to fly into snow
and storm on nothing more than the surety contained in a few brief love-letters.” He grins at Sansa.

“In this, at least, she fits in.”

Sansa tilts her head to a side, enquiring.

“Alys Karstark,” says Jaqen, “clinging to a dying horse, heading to Castle Black alone, to warn Jon
and Stannis Baratheon. Arya Stark, crossing the Narrow Sea on a fishing boat. Lyanna Mormont,
leading sixty men into war against a force ten times that number. Sansa Stark,” his gaze flickers to
the window, “taking charge of the Dreadfort.” He smiles again. “Jon is surrounded by brave
women.”
“Perhaps women become brave in Jon’s orbit,” says Sansa.

_I thought it was for Jeyne that I first defied my fear. But just that morning I had learned that Jon was the Commander of the Night’s Watch, that I had a brother left alive and he held Castle Black. That was what had enraged Ramsay into trying to break me anew._

“Daenerys flew North for Jon,” she says, and she is not entirely sure she likes the taste of the words.

“For Jon,” says Jaqen, “we must tell her of wargs. She must know, all of it, so it is not a surprise—especially an unpleasant surprise—when she meets him for the first time.”

“And some part of the battle-plan,” murmurs Sansa, “so she doesn’t insist on flying out to the First Legion after breakfast.”

“Would she really?” asks Jaqen, and he sounds intrigued. “You must admit it would be a very good morale boost for our moody king.”

Sansa mock-glares at Jaqen. “I blame Jon’s mood on that death-cult he’s joined.”

Jaqen grins.

“But a morale boost is not sufficient justification to throw away the surprise of dragons,” she adds. “_Dragons_, Jaqen. Nothing will hurt the Night’s King like dragons.”

“Maybe,” says Jaqen, and his tone is gentle now, “we should let Jon and Daenerys decide how and when they want to meet.”

“I’ll think about it,” says Sansa.

“You will not be able to protect him forever,” says Jaqen.

“She is very beautiful,” says Sansa, a little bit of irritation creeping into her voice. _Flawless._

“If you like Valyrians,” replies Jaqen, neutral.

“She is supposed to be the most beautiful woman in the world,” Sansa insists.


“Three quarters what?” Sansa demands.

“Mad assassins,” explains Jaqen patiently, “the Mother of Dragons rates three quarters of a mad assassin, at most. The Stark sisters number three, between the two of them.”

_One and a half mad assassin each, if we average it…I suppose it is acceptable._

“As long as Daenerys’s three-quarters doesn’t come out of our portion,” she mutters.

Jaqen places his hand over his heart. “Perish the thought.”

“She hates me,” sighs Sansa, dropping into an upholstered armchair in an entirely unladylike manner. “She cringed away my touch every time I tried to help her dress tonight.” She looks at him. “How do I repair this, Jaqen?”

“Ask permission,” he says.
GENDRY

A shadow falls across his forge.

“Almost ready,” says Gendry, concentrating on aligning the last fixture pin on the prosthesis before he clamps the end. It’s no substitute for a hand, just a fixture you can bind a sword-hilt to, but it’s more than most of the crippled soldiers expect.

“Mm..mmm,” mumbles the man who has come to be fitted.

Gendry looks up, and the breath freezes in his lungs.

No. No, I will not be afraid, not here, not anymore.

The man’s eyes are wide as he stares at Gendry.

Gendry stands, draws himself up to his full height, and realizes he has a good hand and four stone on the man before him.

“I am not a child any longer,” says Gendry. “You should not have come here, Lannister, the Starks will have your head for it.”

“Lassss..?” the man hisses. Then he shakes his head. “Unnn Lassshh.”

There is a sword strapped to the man’s back.

Gendry glances at the entrance to the tent out of the corner of his eye, but the flap is closed.

He was supposed to be the best fighter in King’s Landing. He’ll attack if I call for a guard...

The man has raised the stump of his hand before him, almost in...supplication.

Gendry looks the man up and down. “You won’t get within weapons’ reach of a Stark” he says, “so you’d best abandon whatever plan you have, and head back south.”

The man narrows his eyes, points disbelievingly at the tent-flap as if to say: “You’d let me go, just like that?”

Gendry flushes, caught out in the lie.

And then, to Gendry’s surprise, the man chuckles. The chuckle turns into a wheezing laugh, the man is shaking with laughter, he collapses on the ground, his thin frame shuddering with mirth.

Now’s my chance, thinks Gendry.

But something feels wrong...the man has gone mad. Mastersmith Gendry Waters needs to summon guards to help him handle a crippled madman?

Awkward, Gendry shifts from foot to foot, though his grip on his small tap-hammer does not slacken.

“Here now,” he says, “get up, Lannister.”

With effort, the man pulls himself around to sit upright on the ground. Then he reaches for the
foolscrap Dacey has meticulously filled with small, neat numbers—the measurements for all the protheses the crippled soldiers need.

Jaime Lannister flips the foolscrap over onto Gendry’s anvil, and begins to write upon it.

The letters are large and clumsy, much like Gendry’s own half-tutored scratchings.

“I know who you are, boy.”

“Your family tried to kill me,” says Gendry aloud. “For all that I was a bastard.”

The man shakes his head, and writes, “my sister”. Then, he writes, “Smith? Rule the Seven Kingdoms.”

Gendry snorts. “There’s another one of my father’s bastards that lived, so Princess Sansa tells me,” he says, “some halfwit down near Highgarden. Go put him on the throne.”

Jaime Lannister looks at Gendry again. Just...looks. And there is a kind of wonder in his eyes.

Gendry’s eyes narrow. “I am Mastersmith Gendry Waters,” he says, “the keep smith of Winterfell, nothing more.”

“I saved you,” writes Jaime Lannister.


“Never could,” Jaime Lannister giggles, and the charcoal stick goes skittering over the page, “never could harm one of hers. No matter the father.”

“You are confusing me for another of Robert Baratheon’s bastards,” Gendry says. “I was--”

“Apprentice to Mott,” writes Jaime Lannister. “Mastersmith you are. Waters? No. Rightful heir of Seven Kingdoms cannot be a Waters.”

*I am the Mastersmith of Winterfell.*

“I am not the rightful anything of the Seven Kingdoms,” says Gendry.


The wheezing laughter starts up again.

**JON**

In eight watches, Sandor will be within hearing distance of the swarm of undead beside the Long Lake.

*Eight watches, and the waiting will be done.*

Now there is naught left to do but sharpen blades, perhaps for the last time, and sing songs. The soldiers—even the First Legion, undisciplined though it is—knows better than to drink themselves insensible before a battle.
But from the occasional grunt and moan and jeering shouts, dimly audible even within the King’s tent, the men have found other diversions.

“How the fuck,” asks Arya conversationally, “did some of these men convince their women to follow them out here just so they can fuck?”

Jon looks up from the near-obsessive oiling and polishing of his breastplate. “Not all the camp followers are…um.” He looks to Sam, who is rolling and unrolling a roll of bandages over and over again.

Sam comes to Jon’s rescue. “Most of the women are not married, are they?” he says. “There was a lot of back-pay that needed spending, once Sansa returned from White Harbor.”

“That’s all right then,” says Arya, still concentrated on brushing out imaginary dust from the grooved hilt of her sword with a wire-brush. “I expect the whores will set good rates--hardship bonus, the like.”

Jon raises an eyebrow. “And that’s better than having wives trail along?”

“Married people are not allowed to charge a fair price,” mutters Arya.

Sam cocks his head to the side. “I think we charge for the exclusivity.”

“One,” says Jon, a bit irritated, “many of the men out there are married, and they’re not being exclusive. Two, you’re not married.”

Sam leans back, entirely unperturbed. “Interesting theological question,” he says, “if a god forges a religious document, and attests that two people are married... are they?”

“Jon,” says Arya, and there is something... off... about her tone. “Hypothetically. If Jaqen and I had a child, if history serves as precedent, the Stark look,” she gestures at him, “would breed true. The child would look like you. And have the blood of Valyria.”

Jon blinks.

“Would you claim it as your bastard?” she asks.

“But he wouldn’t be a...” Jon’s brow furrows. “But the child would be yours, and Jaqen’s.”

Or yours and Jaqen’s and Varro’s?

A question he feels far more comfortable asking Jaqen than he does Arya. But it is only a precursor to another question he is not sure who could answer for him: does some part of me belong to Dorne? To my mother’s lover, my father’s wife? Is some part of me a gift from Elia Martell, in spirit if not body?

“What would assassins do with a baby, Jon?” Arya asks, almost...almost sadly. “I would be made to give it up any which way. But if you claimed it, you wouldn’t have to violate the sanctity of your marriage bed, you could offer Daenerys an heir that could control her dragons.”

Jon narrows his eyes at her. “I’ll fuck who I have to fuck, don’t you worry about me,” he says roughly. “Nobody is going to be allowed to take your child away from you.”

THE CHARWOMAN
She watches anxiously as the priests of the Lord of Light haul the struggling, thrashing body of her husband over the side of the boat.

“He’ll come to his senses once he’s under a roof,” she calls to them.

One of them waves a hand at her, as if to say, ‘don’t worry’, then grunts as they lower her husband to the deck.

The journey to White Harbor has been long, with her husband having to be drugged into insensibility for large parts of it, but it seems the King’s legions have swept the land clean of the undead. And she was not alone--almost fifty others have made the journey along with her. They bring supplies, food, furs, fire.

They will go east by boat, then land, until they reach the temples of the Lord of Light.

May he take our sorrows from us, and banish the terrors of the night.

The expedition was joined halfway by a man she recognizes, but has the grace not to name. He is called “convert”, and “disciple”, and the priests of the Lord of Light seem to defer to him.

It explains why he was thrown out--the Starks do not hold with fire worship.

She has nothing against the Old Gods, nor the Seven Gods of her old faith. But neither the old gods nor the new can help her husband.

Only R’hllor’s fire can give them refuge from the terrors of neverending night.

ARYA

Jaqen is keeping something from her.

Balance, she thinks sadly.

GREY WORM

Daenerys still sleeps, and he is torn between standing guard over her and finding Jaqen H’ghar. There are guards outside, patrolling the corridors, the wolf-motif of the Starks sewn upon the breasts of their heavy garb.

They are our allies.

That, in itself, means nothing.

Finally, he compromises--he locks and bars the door to the sleeping chamber, then locks the doors to the suite, before making his way to the hall outside.

“I must speak to your commander,” he says in this best Westerosi, to one of the guards stationed at the end of the hall. “Put four of your best men beside the queen’s door, and do not let anyone enter.”

Grey Worm has no right to give commands here. But the guard simply nods, and raises a small wooden stick to his mouth.
The stick is a whistle, Grey Worm realizes, as the guard blows into it, producing a series of short, sharp notes, interspersed with pauses of varying lengths. Then he puts the whistle back into a pouch at his belt.

“Better than yelling,” the guard explains, “or having to leave your post to alert others.”

Grey Worm sees the benefit of the idea immediately.

“Rest easy, Sirrah,” the guard adds. “Any man bearing the Direwolf,” he raises a hand to the wolf’s head sewn on his breast, “will give his life before harm is allowed to befall King Jon’s betrothed.”

The percussion of booted feet on stone—six more ‘Direwolf’ guards round the bend, and after a brief discussion with the guard Grey Worm has been speaking to, they take up stations outside the door to the queen’s suite.

Grey Worm is still uneasy, but his task is urgent.

“Do you know where your commander is?” he asks.

“Morning inspection’s just finished,” says one of the new guards. “Try the stables.”

Grey Worm nods, and heads off in the direction of the stables they’d seen when they arrived yesterday.

He finds ‘Commander’ Jaqen H’ghar inspecting the tack of his horse.

Missandei’s guildmaster looks up as Grey Worm enters.

“Shouldn’t you be protecting your queen?” Jaqen H’ghar asks.

“That is what this one is here to do,” Grey Worm replies.

There is a treaty between the assassin guild and the Starks, and Missandei has sworn there is no contract to kill Daenerys. She is loyal to the queen.

But this Jaqen H’ghar that leads their guild, he is not Missandei.

Grey Worm unsheathes his daggers.

Jaqen H’ghar snorts. “Sacrificing yourself to save your mistress? Not very original.” He bends down to check the horse’s forehooves. “Loyal-to-death guards come a sovereign a dozen, can’t throw a pebble in the North without hitting one these days.”

Grey Worm takes a deep breath. Then he kneels, heedless of the filth underfoot, and lays his daggers on the ground before the guildmaster.

“Missandei has said you know this one’s name,” he says. “This one would trade his name for his queen’s.”

When there is no response, he risks raising his head up for a look, only to see the assassins’ guildmaster looking at him in consternation, brow furrowed.

“You convinced Missandei to give you a coin?” Jaqen H’ghar asks, finally.

*Coin? Why would she give me a coin?*
Grey Worm rises a bit, shakes his head. “Her and I are not speaking. But before, she said the Death God accepts trades...” he trails off.

Jaqen H’ghar is rubbing at his forehead, the assassin mutters something that sounds suspiciously like “why me?”.

One thinks one has interpreted wrong.

Jaqen H’ghar sighs. “Do you love her?” he asks.

“She is my queen.”

Jaqen H’ghar narrows his eyes at Grey Worm.

The Unsullied wants to bite his lip. “This one would say Missandei is his life, but his life means nothing.”

“So why should I trade anything for so worthless a thing?” asks Jaqen H’ghar.

Grey Worm’s eyes widen a bit.

“Tell you what,” says Jaqen H’ghar, “since it’s worth more than yours, I will take Missandei’s life, and spare Daenerys.”

“No!”

Jaqen H’ghar raises a brow at Grey Worm.

“Missandei is your student!” he protests.

Jaqen H’ghar is watching Grey Worm without comment. Frantically, the Unsullied thinks back to what Missandei told him, before they stopped speaking to each other.

“It is not a fair bargain!” he says, “if Missandei dies, I will die with her. That means your god will get two lives for sparing only one.”

“But that one is a queen.”

Grey Worm swallows. “All men are equal in death,” he says. Though he is not sure he can be brought to believe it.

It doesn’t matter of I believe it, just that the assassins do.

“I suppose it would not be fair,” Jaqen H’ghar murmurs. “Two for one.”

“No,” says Grey Worm. “It would not be fair.”

Jaqen H’ghar sighs again. “Could you stop kneeling? It’s bound to give people entirely the wrong idea.”

Immediately, Grey Worm rises to his feet, in the process he picks up his daggers and re-sheathes them. “What can I offer you for Daenerys Targaryen's life?” he asks.

The guildmaster’s aggrieved expression is back. “One,” he says, “nobody has bought her death, so we have no reason to assassinate her. Two, if Daenerys marries Jon, she is joined to the House of Stark, and the price for buying the death of a member of that house cannot be met.”
“My queen has to marry the man she wants to marry?” Grey Worm asks. “And then she is safe?”

“Three,” Jaqen H’ghar says, entirely ignoring Grey Worm’s question, “it doesn’t work like that! You cannot just ask to be killed so someone else can be saved. We are the guild of assassins, Unsullied, the safekeeping is in your hands.”

Grey Worm bows. “This one apologizes.” The backs up a step, then another. “This one will go. Safekeep.” When the assassin makes no move to stop him, Grey Worm turns around and exits the stables as quickly as he can.

_I must make the queen fly to wherever this Jon Stark is right now._

He wonders what, exactly, the rituals of of marriage are in the North, and how long the whole process takes. A tree is involved, this much he knows, but he is not sure what the purpose of it is. Regardless, he will keep an eye out for marriage-suitable trees on the flight.

**TYRION**

There is a small army of guards guarding the doors to Daenerys’s chambers. Upon enquiry, it seems the queen is still sleeping, and Grey Worm has gone off to the stables to speak to Commander H’ghar, so that is where Tyrion must go.

The courtyard is deserted—the men have already mustered out, it seems. Tyrion walks up to the half-open doors of the stables, and pokes his head inside.

Two voices, speaking in a tongue whose cadences are familiar to Tyrion by now, though he does not entirely understand the words.

One of the voices belongs to Grey Worm.

The other belongs to Commander H’ghar.

Tyrion does not understand most of what is said, but the words “Daenerys Targaryen”, and “Stark”, are unmistakable. Also, “guild of assassins”, and “Unsullied”.

Quickly, Tyrion ducks out of the stables, and takes up position in the deep shadow of a large watering-trough beside the doors.

Grey Worm emerges, a few moments later, with what looks like horseshit caking his knees, and hurries off towards the main keep.

Tyrion’s eyes narrow.

There are some things in the world one does not question; they as immovable as mountains, relentless like the sea.

Grey Worm’s loyalty is one such thing.

_So what, exactly, is going on here?

A handful of heartbeats later, Commander Jaqen H’ghar steps out.

“Ah, Commander,” calls Tyrion. “Just the man I was looking for.”
The Commander pauses, then waits for Tyrion to catch up.

Most people would be at least a little startled if a dwarf popped out at them from a shadow, but Commander H’ghar seems entirely at ease. Unlike yesterday, when H’ghar was tensed to throw himself in the line of dragonfire to save Sansa.

H’ghar is not a Northern name. Nor is it Westerosi.

Things fall into place with a nice, satisfying thunk.

Well, Varys, it seems I’ve discovered the identity of the ‘mystery guild’ backing the Starks.


H’ghar’s mouth twitches, as if he is fighting not to smile. “Perhaps that is because you are a Lannister. Familiarity breeds contempt, or so I’ve been told.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say I was contemptuous of gold,” says Tyrion. “But it does lose some of its luster when one gets to be on a first-name basis with a dragon.”

“I know the problem,” says H’ghar, his tone sympathetic, “dragons--even in wolf’s clothing--are far too large. Once they settle in a man’s heart there is no room left for gold.”

A guard in Stark livery salutes H’ghar as they near the inner keep, then pulls open the heavy oaken doors for them. A blast of warmth and the smell of soot hits Tyrion as he steps in out of the night. Heavy iron braziers line the walls of the corridor inside; torches burn at regular intervals, giving off light and smoke in equal measure.

“And how long have you known Grey Worm?” asks Tyrion conversationally, as H’ghar leads the way to a winding stone staircase.

“We have never spoken before,” H’ghar replies, then snorts. “The boy fancies himself a politician.”

Tyrion sighs. “Gods save us from amateurs.” He looks sideways at H’ghar. “What did he want?”

“To offer himself as a substitute victim,” says H’ghar, dry, “you know, in case my blade happens to wake in the middle of the night, hungry for blood, and goes rummaging in the royal pantry.”

Tyrion pauses mid-stride. Then he raises his right index finger in the universal gesture of ‘one moment, please’, and turns towards the nearest wall.

Once, twice, thrice, he bashes his head against the stone wall. Gently, of course, he’s looking to express his exasperation, not brain himself. All the while, he can feel H’ghar watching him with mild curiosity.

Tyrion straightens, then returns to the middle of the corridor. They resume their progress, to where exactly, Tyrion is not sure.

There is the arched opening to the upper floor of a tower up ahead. The room beyond the opening is bustling with activity--military men, clearly, officers by their bearing and tabards, walking to and fro with rolled up parchments, maps, arguing, leaning down to move markers on a table…

Tyrion’s fingers start to itch with the desire to get his hands on those maps and dispatches.

Activity does not cease when Tyrion and H’ghar pass through the arch. Only two of the officers
salute--others offer lazy waves or a quick head-bob, some do not acknowledge their commander’s presence at all.

*Now how does one reconcile this indiscipline with what we saw out on the rise?*

One of officers--a lieutenant, and one of the ones that had saluted--comes up to them.

“Status?” asks H’ghar.

“Jayloc’s on the high low, sir, all the critters except the cat are striped. Sir.”

Tyrion blinks.

“But Jayloc is still on W eight,” H’ghar observes, looking at a chalkboard propped up on a chair in the corner of the room. A confusion of numbers and letters fills the board.

The sound of hurried steps, off to the left.

Tyrion turns to see a young soldier ascending the narrow stone stairs that lead to other levels of the tower. The soldier salutes vaguely in H’ghar’s direction, then rushes up to the chalkboard.

There, he carefully erases some letters and numbers, and writes in their stead: W3 JALOC 1 1.

“Jayloc High High,” calls out one of the officers.

“Why the delay in updates?” asks H’ghar.

“Uneventful night patrols, sir,” the young soldier says. “Nothing to report. Jayloc alpha needed some shut-eye. And our cat got lost in the root cellar, unfamiliar territory for her, sir, she’s taken to wandering about looking for a nice, warm spot to have her kittens in. Jayloc beta had to step in and find her so she could reestablish LOS on the sitrep board.”

*Have I gone mad, or is it everyone else?*

“Would someone care to explain…” Tyrion lets the sentence dangle, hoping someone will jump in.

He doesn’t miss the subtle head-nod Commander H’ghar gives one of the officers standing over the table.

“This is the Fifth Legion Communications Corps, sir…” the soldier looks to H’ghar, then corrects himself. “My Lord. We coordinate and direct all military intelligence and communications for the Fifth Legion. My Lord. Welcome to the 5L Mobile Communications Cabin.”

Tyrion looks up, at the wooden beams of the ceiling above them, where an entire chandlery’s worth of candles hang from iron chains, dripping light and molten wax onto the large table below.

“This is a tower,” he observes. “And quite stationary, as far as I can tell.”

“The Fifth-legion Communications Corps works out of the Fifth-legion Mobile Communication Cabin,” says the soldier. Belatedly, he adds the “My Lord.”

“It would not do to change location designations every time the unit is bivouacked in a different edifice,” H’ghar murmurs.

“How very... military,” replies Tyrion. He peers at the board again. “So W...W3. W8. Watches of the day? You’re getting updates every watch. From units? JALOC, TRLOC, SILOC…” six groups of five letters, all ending with LOC. But the splinter force yesterday had contained fifty men, and
there’s only about fifty stationed around the Dreadfort, as far as Tyrion’s morning survey has shown. A legion is a thousand men. It splinters into twenty units. “Twenty, not six,” Tyrion murmurs. “What could you have six of? Fifth Legion. Five. JSLOC.” Tyrion turns to H’ghar, not quite believing in his own deduction. “You’re getting a status update from the other legions once per watch?”

_Hundreds of ravens exchanged every day, just to say “all is well”?_

A wide grin has split Commander H’ghar’s face in two.

Tyrion’s eyes narrow. There was an immediacy to the young soldier’s movements, an immediacy not merited by reports that inevitably go stale during the long raven-flight that brings them.

“Cats,” murmurs Tyrion, staring at chalkboard, willing sense out of the mystifying code. “Cats having kittens. Not a code.”

_Wargs._

“You’re using _warg_ magic, somehow, to keep track of each legion,” says Tyrion. “_Wargs_ can communicate with their familiars across long distances? Some sort of prearranged signals. Two _wargs_ for JALOC Legion, one of them has a cat as a familiar…” Tyrion realizes the chatter around him has died down, he snaps his mouth shut, forcibly halting the runaway train of deduction.

_Shit._

People like a witty dwarf; they don’t like an _intelligent_ one, especially not around military secrets. And the last time he’d been around soldiers, Bronn’s presence was the only thing keeping them from pummeling Tyrion right from the get-go.

A low whistle, somewhere in the back of the room, cuts through his dismay.

“He figured it out faster than Maester Wyllan,” says the young soldier, looking at Tyrion in consternation. “And Wyllan has enough links to circle his neck twice over.”

“Commander,” says one of the older officers, a gruff-looking man with a wicked eyepatch, “you’d better hire him.”

The statement is met with a chorus of good-natured encouragement.

Tyrion can only stare at the room in disbelief.

“He already has an employer, I’m afraid,” says H’ghar, then looks to the man with the eyepatch. “What’s the going rate for defection, Lord Vypren?”

The greying officer--Lord Vypren, of the Riverlands Vyprens, Tyrion assumes, it is a minor house, one he has not taken notice of before--scratches at his head. “A smile a month from one of the princesses sounds about right,” he says, “that’s about what I’m making.”

“Ah.” Tyrion finds himself at a bit of a loss.

“Come!” says H’ghar. “I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Grateful for the segue, Tyrion follows H’ghar down the narrow flight of stairs, to the base of the tower.

As the curve of the stairwell takes them out of earshot of the men, he asks, “did they not notice I
am a dwarf?”

H’ghar pauses, one foot on the next tread. “Two moons ago, they might have.” He moves aside, inviting Tyrion to step down beside him. “The other legions have not really encountered wights with any regularity. When they do, it will be on the field of battle. The men of the Fifth encounter wights almost every other day. In homes that look much like theirs, with faces that could have belonged to their kin. Children with skin sloughing off to frostbite, and eyes white with death. Old people with joints too gnarled to walk, pulling themselves through the snow, mouths agape, slavering. Sometimes a splinter loses a man, and if the corpse is not burned quickly enough it comes back.” H’ghar’s mouth twists. “They have to put them down, Lord Tyrion, women and children and comrades, day after day after day, and some of them still weep while they do it. You are alive. That is about all the men of the Fifth ‘notice’ now.”

Tyrion closes his eyes.

“Don’t tell,” he whispers, “don’t tell Daenerys. She could have been here sooner, with her armies intact, had she not given in to Yara. It will haunt her.”

“That’s the point of a chain of command,” says H’ghar, “shit flows downhill, not up.”

Tyrion opens his eyes. “You do not tell Jon?”

“He knows,” says H’ghar. “He knows. But...I do not give him the tallies.”

Tyrion forces himself to take the next step. “Alright,” he says, “let’s see how it’s done.”

**DAENERYS**

She wakes to Grey Worm standing impatiently over the bed, holding out a heavy, multi-layered velvet dress, the likes of which Daenerys has never worn before.

“It is very cold outside, my queen,” he says, shaking the garment at her.

“That looks like a wedding dress,” says Daenerys. “And it once belonged to some sort of elephant, given the size. I am not wearing that, no matter how cold--” she sees a different dress, of blue and gold brocade, just as warm as the velvet monstrosity, but considerably more dignified, laid out on the chair next to the bed.

With some minute reluctance, Daenerys pushes back the heavy eiderdown covers, and swings her legs over the side of the bed. There is a roaring fire in the hearth, and the floor is dark, polished wood, warm underfoot.

She considers the clothes someone--Sansa Stark, probably--laid out for her as she slept.

Folded neatly beside the dress are Daenerys’s underthings, apparently laundered overnight, and wraps for her feet. A pair of laced boots sits on the floor under the chair.

“A very solicitous sorceress,” she mutters.

“No,” says Grey Worm, his brow furrowed, “I do not think Sansa Stark is a sorcerer. Sorcerers use blood to make their foul magics, there are many such in Volantis. These wargs, they just think it and they talk to animals.”
Daenerys raises a brow. “Where did you learn this?” she asks.

“The soldiers, they talk,” says Grey Worm. He pauses. “It does not seem to be a secret, my queen.”

*It was a secret from me.*

Daenerys stands, and gestures for Grey Worm to put aside the wedding dress he keeps thrusting in her direction.

It is time to get some answers.

**TYRION**

The first thing he notices is the bear. Hard *not* to notice really, bears are very noticable indoors. There’s a collar around its neck, but no chain.

“That’s Sara,” says H’ghar. “She’s very drowsy at the moment.”

Sure enough, the bear, “Sara”, is sleeping, snout between paws.

A low growl, Tyrion whirls around, only to come face-to-face with a wolf, its piercing yellow eyes focused on him.

“Gida, gida, Terrance, gida,” H’ghar murmurs, reaching out to scratch the wolf’s throat.

Tyrion swallows. It’s an *extraordinarily* large wolf, larger than any Tyrion’s ever seen before.

“Tamed as a pup, was it?” he asks.

H’ghar smiles. “A direwolf--even half a direwolf, like Terrance here--cannot be tamed. But I knew his mother.”

*And was she the full direwolf or just your normal, run-of-the-mill wolf?*

Tyrion contains his hysterical chuckle, and dares to survey around the rest of the room.

There’s a shaggy mountain-pony at the far end of the tower, drowning, muzzle-first, in a grain-bucket. Next to it, a raven shares a perch with a tufted owl, and a hutch under the window houses a rabbit. There’s a medium-sized terrier tethered loosely to a ring set into the wall.

*And there’s the cat.*

“A veritable menagerie,” says Tyrion.

“The term ‘familiar’ arises out of a *warg*’s familiarity with an animal,” says H’ghar. “It seems *wargs* habituate to a particular species--the bear is Lady Mormont’s, the pony speaks to one of the Free-Folk *wargs*. In the chaos of battle, it is best to rely on the bonds forged by familiarity.”

Tyrion steps further into the tower room, and sees what the curve of the stairwell was hiding from him--one entire section of the tower’s inner wall is taken over by a large wooden board that reaches from the floor to the ceiling. The board has pegs on it, some small, some large. Each peg has a palm-sized wooden token hanging from it, with black and white stripes emblazoned on the face.

“Eight animal familiars,” says Tyrion, “but only seven pegs.”
H’ghar snorts. “Yon rabbit there is Ser Hops-A-Lot. Sansa doesn’t need to warg her own legion, but the critter travels with us because she was afraid he’d end up in a stew-pot if we left him behind at Winterfell.”

Ser Hops-A-Lot.

“I am glad,” says Tyrion quietly.

_That Sansa has managed to hold on to some portion of her childhood after its ruination...perhaps there is a measure of hope left for the salvage of some shard of Daenerys’s childhood as well._

“So,” says H’ghar, “every legion carries a copy of this ‘menagerie’, and each warg has trained to be able to link to the minds of ‘their’ animals, regardless of distance. Every watch, the wargs do a round--Lady Mormont, for example, links to the bears of each legion, one by one, and the animals move the marker--stripes, or spots, or solids--onto their designated peg. Stripes mean ‘all is well’, spots mean ‘need to convey information’, and solids mean ‘off-duty’. They ring the bell,” and H’ghar points to long cord disappearing into the ceiling, “to summon someone if there is need for urgent assistance. And if a warg needs to sit in on a conference, or find out something specific, the animal simply goes where it needs to go--the Commander’s office, most often. Hence the lack of chains or collars.”

“How…” Tyrion pauses to process this. “How far apart are the legions?”

“The farthest one is up near the Last Hearth,” says H’ghar.

_Dear gods._

“Near-instantaneous communications, across all far-flung branches of an army,” says Tyrion. “Coordination, logistics, commanders that can respond to the ground-truth as it evolves, not have to base decisions on days’ old information. No chance of messengers being killed, ravens lost...H’ghar, do you know what you’ve done here?”

_Every other army in the world just became obsolete._

“Not me ,” says H’ghar, “it’s Maester Samwell and the Stark princesses, a few others, that devised the system. But the implications are clear, and that’s even before you take their scouting abilities into account--the wargs can use the eyes of animals to survey terrain, see enemy movement, listen in on command conferences, intercept ravens--owls are particularly useful.”

_If Jon Stark turns his eyes south…_

“Well,” Tyrion says, “dragons would still give you a problem or two, I suppose, were we enemies.” He realizes he is trying to reassure himself.

H’ghar says nothing.

A thought strikes, and he looks around the room. “How does one know if a warg is watching?” he asks. “Do the other legions now know I am…”

H’ghar shakes his head. “We were not certain what the queen’s decision would be. It is between updates now, no warg will be visiting unless there is some crisis.”

Tyrion tries to poke holes in the formidable advantage the North has accrued. As an academic exercise, of course.

“What if an animal dies, or falls sick?”
“A problem,” agrees H’ghar. “Dogs and cats are common, but finding a bear at a moment’s notice would be a challenge. Luckily, a warg is not limited to a particular species. With a little training, they can bridge the gap.”

_It’s a bigger limitation than you’re letting on, Commander H’ghar, Sansa was stunned she could hear anything other than a rabbit, methinks ‘bridging the gap’ between species is not quite as easy as you make it sound._

“You must understand,” adds H’ghar, “we are working with novices. Most of our wargs, like Lady Mormont, did not know what they were until just a few moons ago. A deaf-mute suddenly realizes he can hear, and speak--it will take time and training for him to start taking lead roles in a mummer’s troupe.”

“Hmm. But that still makes a warg the weak link in the chain.”

“Weaker than a lone messenger riding cross-country with a dispatch inked on parchment?” asks H’ghar, dry.

“I suppose not,” says Tyrion.

“A hundred men,” says H’ghar quietly. “On the battlefield, a hundred men whose standing orders are to guard the warg, and should the tide turn against us and all hope be lost, to evacuate the warg to safety.” His mouth twists. “Unfortunately, a number of the wargs are in positions of power. And liable to countermand such an order as it suits them.”

Tyrion raises an eyebrow. “This Lady Mormont? Is she the do-or-die type?”

H’ghar snorts. “Legion Commander Lyanna Mormont, you mean?”

_A woman legion commander? And they’re not short of experienced men, not if the likes of Vypren are running things upstairs._

Tyrion glances at the board. “Who else is likely to cause trouble?” he asks.

“One of the Free-Folk wargs,” says H’ghar.

“A Wildling?” asks Tyrion. “You’ve got Wildlings fighting for you?”

“A couple of thousand of them, give or take,” says H’ghar. “The troublemaker is an Ice-River man. A cannibal, as it happens.”

Tyrion’s eye twitches a bit. “Not the sort to retreat to safety, I expect.”

“Alas, no,” says H’ghar. “And then there’s two of the Starks. Arya Stark--she’s with the first legion, uses cats.”

_JALOC beta. So who’s alpha?_

“The King,” says H’ghar, “who, if history is any precedent, will end up on the front lines, charging at the enemy on foot, regardless of what the battle plan actually says.”

**DAENERYS**

She does not know whether it is morning or not, but the meal laid out on the heavy dining table is
clearly breakfast. And so utterly Westerosi. Bread, pats of butter, a wheel of cheese. Fruit, in the middle of winter--some kind of apple or pear, she cannot tell.

Sansa Stark is waiting at the table, she rises and waits for Daenerys to be seated by a Stark-liveried footman before being re-seated herself.

The Princess of the North defers to whom? The Queen of Meereen? The Khaleesi? To the Queen of Westeros? Though the last title is nigh indefensible, with Cersei Lannister on the Iron Throne.

“You were betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon,” says Daenerys in lieu of ‘good morning’. “You thought you would be Queen of Westeros.”

“I was a child,” says Sansa, “I did not think much beyond the fact that I would get to be a princess.”

And here we are, princesses and queens, sitting down to breakfast together, as if we were actually civilized.

There’s even porridge.

Then, to Daenerys’s surprise, Sansa Stark smiles at Grey Worm, who is about to take up his customary position at Sansa’s back.

“Will you not break fast, Ser Worm?” she asks.

Grey Worm clears his throat. “I am not a ‘Ser’, Princess, I am Unsullied.”

Sansa Stark narrows her eyes at him. “Unsullied or not, the serving-women say neither you nor Lord Tyrion have eaten yet.”

“This one is not hungry,” he replies.

Right on cue, his stomach growls, giving the lie to his words.

Daenerys sighs. “Sit and eat, Grey Worm, she’s not going to take offense at a former slave eating at the table if she’s invited you herself.”

“Who would dare to take offense?” demands Sansa Stark.

Daenerys gives the princess a narrow-eyed look of her own. “Westerosi,” she says. “There were...incidents...with the Tyrells and the Dornish.”

The incidents left both Missandei and Grey Worm wary of meals taken with Westerosi.

Sansa Stark’s nostrils flare. “The Kingdom of the North does not recognize slavery as a thing in an of itself,” she says. “That gives it far too much power--for then you must make laws forbidding it, and even the most carefully worded of laws has loopholes we cannot anticipate.”

Jorah was exiled because he dealt in slaves...has Jon made some new laws for his kingdom?

“If you do not forbid it,” says Grey Worm, actually going so far as to pulling back a chair and sitting down, “you give the appearance of condoning it.”

“Wrongful imprisonment is already forbidden,” says Sansa. “So is abduction, and rape, and murder. We call slavery by its true name--not an ‘economic practice’, or a ‘cultural means’, but a crime, often multiple crimes bundled together under one simple-to-grasp label. The North is
inclined to tolerate the economies and cultures of our allies, no matter now alien to us they may be, but crimes? Those we will not abide."

Daenerys leans back in her chair. “That is an interesting way to look at it,” she says. “Have you ever applied this principle to practice?”

“Slavers were operating in the Narrow Sea,” says Sansa Stark. “Abducting our Free Folk and taking them to Essos by boat. One of the boats hulled itself on an ice floe, and a fishing vessel brought the survivors in to harbor. The slavers were handed over to the leaders of the Free Folk. Beyond the Wall the penalty for abduction and murder and rape, should the perpetrator be caught by certain tribes…” Sansa Stark smiles, grim. “The slavers were flayed, then roasted to taste, and eaten.”

Grey Worm has paused mid-reach, hand extended towards the bread.

“As a deterrent,” says Daenerys thoughtfully, “it may actually work even better than crucifixion. But surely Jon does not condone cannibalism?”

“Jon is not just King in the North,” says Sansa Stark quietly. “He is King Beyond the Wall. Jon ate the morsel of flesh that was his due.”

The thought does not bother Daenerys as much as it should. Or at all, really. But then her children are man-eaters as well. Grey Worm, however, does look mildly squeamish as he stares down at the bowl of porridge the footman has served him.

“This is gruel?” asks Grey Worm.

“Porridge,” says Sansa Stark.

Grey Worm looks dubious, but he bravely picks up a spoon, dips it in the bowl, and raises a spoonful of porridge to his mouth. Daenerys leaves her companion to his culinary exploration, and turns to Sansa Stark.

“You are not quite the innocent you portrayed yourself to be yesterday,” observes Daenerys.

“I…” Sansa Stark sighs. “I actually was, I think, for a moment,” she says.

*Perhaps even a queen is allowed to forget herself, for a moment.*

“I wanted to vomit,” murmurs Daenerys, buttering her toasted bread. “Till yesterday I did not know how fearful I was of sorcery.”

“Hot and cold and your stomach reels so much you don’t know if the ground has moved or you have,” murmurs Sansa.

Slowly, Daenerys nods.

Sansa does not meet Daenerys’s eyes, she is pouring cream from a small pitcher into her bowl of porridge. “I have the same reaction to men of a certain type.”

Daenerys exhales.

“I am not a sorceress, your Majesty,” says Sansa, finally looking up. “I have no power to curse or foretell.” Her mouth twists. “Or Rickon at least, I would have saved.”

The bald truth, all fat and flesh melted off of it by helpless rage…Daenerys recognizes the bones of
Sansa Stark slides a thick sheaf of parchment, bound with a leather cord, across the table to Daenerys.

“I had ravens bring these in overnight,” she explains. “Some notes our Maester made on wargs. I am not experienced, nor trained to research. But Master Samwell has studied every warg in the North, including me. You will find the answers you seek in there.”

The way Sansa Stark says ‘every warg’...a suspicion forms in the back of Daenerys’s mind.

*Each of the Stark children was given a Direwolf cub. The bastard got one too.*

“Her Majesty should know the family she is marrying into,” says Sansa. “Though I am sure she suspects the truth.”

*I was given a wolf-direwolf hybrid during the betrothal, as Jon was given a stone dragon’s egg.*

That she is reminded of it now and not yesterday on the rise, nor all the time Sansa Stark solicitously helped her dress for bed, but in fact steered the conversation to matters far removed from magic and wargs …

Sansa pours tea for the both of them out of a ceramic jug. “With your permission,” she says, “I would inform Jon you are here.”

“You have not sent messengers already?” asks Daenerys.

“You have flown so far,” says Sansa, “I thought the news, and the surprise, should be at a time of your choosing.”

*Tyrion was sure Jon would know by the time I awoke.*

She doesn’t know whether to be disappointed that he does not know, or pleased that Sansa waited for Daenerys’s say-so.

*Sansa Stark wants this to succeed. Jon and me. This alliance.*

“You would accept me as your queen,” says Daenerys.

“I would have accepted Cersei,” replies Sansa, dry, “had she but brought dragons with her as dowry. The battle for the North is just the beginning.” A glance, to the dark night outside the window. “There are such things coming…”

Daenerys feels a chill, as if fingers of ice are stroking the back of her neck.

**TYRION**

Their next stop is in the same tower, three stories above the menagerie. The menagerie, of course, is not called a menagerie, or a kennel, but the “Sitrep-Wagon”.

*The military mind is a peculiar thing.*

Left to its own device, it will create an entirely alternate version of reality, populated by “collateral damage” instead of “murdered civilian”, “foraging” instead of “rape, murder and pillage”. But as
far as Tyrion can tell, the Fifth Legion’s renaming has confined itself, for the moment, to relabeling innocuous things.

Like the third floor of the tower, which is now the Fifth Legion War Tent.

Not a single tent-pole in sight, mind, if Tyrion had been in charge, drapes of oilcloth or waxed canvas would have been hung over the stone walls as an homage to plausibility.

The room is empty of people at the moment, but there is a map-table in the center of the room, populated by small, carved figurines.

Tyrion rubs his palms together. “So, what is the battle plan?” He pauses. “Perhaps we should wait, request the Queen’s presence...”

“Princess Sansa should have led her here by now,” says H’ghar, looking at the doors in consternation.

_Coordinated this bear and pony show, did you?_

He schools himself to patience.

_Let this play out the way they want it to._

The way things are presented says much about the things that are _not_ presented.

“So,” he says, pulling a topic out of a hat full of topics he’d like to discuss, “what’s the pay like for a... **guildsman** ...turned Stark loyalist?”

_Now_ H’ghar grins. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you. You should _see_ the terms Sansa has negotiated with my guild.”

“You know, I would love to,” says Tyrion.

“Show us _your_ secret agreement,” H’ghar counters, “we’ll show you ours.”

Tyrion snorts. “And have every banker from Westeros to Southros calling for my head on a silver platter? I think not.”

H’ghar seems about to say something else, when the iron-bound door that leads directly from the keep to this floor of the tower squeaks open on rusty hinges. Two guards step through, then take up position on either side of the door. On the heels of the guards, Daenerys Targaryen and Sansa Stark stride into the tower.

Tyrion realizes his mouth has fallen open a bit, and closes it with a snap.

Both women are of a height, their dresses of a similar cut, though Daenerys is in blue-and-gold brocade and Sansa in copper-and-creme. Daenerys's hair, unbound, flows over her shoulders like molten moonlight. Sansa’s copper tresses, caught up in a single thick braid, are wound around her head like a crown.

The combined effect is like being hit on the head with a great big club of stupid, and that’s despite all the immunity to beautiful women Tyrion has accrued in his years of dedicated whoring.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees H’ghar execute a bow that is somehow both graceful and military-crisp.
“The sun has risen again,” says H’ghar.

 Damn assassin stealing the best lines.

“If there are two more beautiful women anywhere in the world,” says Tyrion, not to be outdone, “I will eat,” he casts around, settles on the leftmost guard, “ that man’s shoes.”

The guard looks faintly alarmed.

“Forgive the delay,” says Sansa, even as she exchanges a cryptic look with Daenerys, and says nothing further. But it might have something to do with Grey Worm, who wears a rather hangdog--and frankly nauseous--expression.

H’ghar gives the Unsullied a bemused look, then shakes his head before turning back to the table.

“First Legion has reported in?” Sansa asks H’ghar.

The Commander nods. “All is well. Arya’s familiar got lost in the cellars, and Jon fell asleep.”

 Now see, was that so hard? Was there really a need for all that “JALOC High-High Striped Cat Dancing 1-2-3 Cuckoo Clucks at Midnight, Sir”? 

“So, the battle plan, in brief,” says H’ghar, gesturing to the map table.

Tyrion walks up to a chair and climbs up onto it for a better vantage point.

“Seven legions,” he says.

“Six,” says Sansa, “and Bran in the center with the reserves.”

“The undead are massing at two points, at the Long Lake, here,” H’ghar leans forward, taps the map, “and in and around Karhold, here.”
“First Legion is light infantry, commanded by King Jon. Their staging area is to the south-west of
the Long Lake. Second legion is heavy infantry, commanded by Lady Mormont. They are massed in the forest to the west of the Long Lake.”

“A legion of heavy cavalry in a forest?” asks Grey Worm.

“The wolves keep the undead away,” says Sansa. “As far as we can tell, the Night’s King doesn’t know they’re there.”

“A secret legion of heavy cavalry in a forest,” murmurs Tyrion. “Fair enough. Please, continue.”


“Are there any other kind?” asks Tyrion.

H’ghar grins. “Well, we have the Fourth Legion, to the south of Karhold. Free Folk cavalry, commanded by Sigorn Thenn.”

“Thenn,” says Daenerys, eyes intent on the map. “I know that name. King’s Rider Sigorn Thenn?”

“Yes,” says Sansa. “How did you…?”

“Jon wrote to me about the fight before our betrothal announcement,” says Daenerys.

Sansa flashes Daenerys a smile. “It was a memorable day.”

“Fifth Legion’s here,” continues H’ghar, “commanded by yours truly. And Sixth started out at the Last Hearth.” He glances at Sansa. She nods. “Heavy infantry again, commanded by someone you know, Lord Tyrion--Sandor Clegane.”


“My sworn champion,” says Sansa, and her voice has gone cold.

*Some story here, something that hurts. Best not to poke it then, eh, dwarf?*

“A good fighter,” is all Tyrion allows himself to say.

Daenerys is looking at Sansa very intently. “The ground?” his queen asks.

“As motionless as it should be,” answers Sansa. Daenerys nods, seemingly satisfied.

*I see we’ve moved on from “die, sorceress” to cryptic-women-speak.*

It must have been quite a breakfast.

*What did they do to Grey Worm to leave him looking all beaten up like that?*

“…half riding towards the Long Lake, half towards Karhold,” H’ghar is saying.

Tyrion curses his inattention, and focuses his eyes back upon the map.
“And we,” H’ghar continues, “ride northeast, to the western borders of the forest surrounding
Karhold.” He moves arrow-markers upon the table.

Something doesn’t sit quite right with Tyrion. “That’s a long way to drive Clegane’s cavalry,” he says, “they won’t be in fighting form by the time they engage with the enemy.

“They will not engage,” says Sansa.

_A feint? With what, two thousand men?_

“Thousands of armored men and horses on the move--the dead have been hearing us coming for days,” says H’ghar. “Already, the bulk of the undead at the Long Lake have been congregating in the Northeast, to bear the brunt of the supposed charge. And at Karhold they’re coming out of the keep, moving north through the forest.”

“It’s working,” adds Sansa.

“Because no commander--undead or otherwise--will assume two legions of horse are being thrown away as a diversion,” says Tyrion, not quite believing it himself. “Do you have a count of the enemy?”

“About twenty thousand or so at Karhold,” says H’ghar, “about fifty thousand at the Long Lake.”

Even Daenerys’s eyes have widened in disbelief.

“And your plan involves throwing away a third of your forces?” asks Tyrion.


H’ghar and Sansa exchange a barbed smile.

Daenerys makes an ‘explain’ motion with her hand.

“For our purposes, the undead can be divided into two types,” says H’ghar. “The runners and the crawlers. About a third of the corpses are intact, capable of great speed and agility. Two-thirds are impaired in some manner, they do not charge, they swarm. The fast ones are dangerous to cavalry, the slow ones cause problems for infantry, but a troop of well-trained mounts will just trample them. All mixed in together, it makes neither infantry or cavalry effective--each soldier needs to take out twenty-five undead, and come out of the engagement alive.”

_That’s not...that’s not possible._

“Our Manouvers at the Long Lake are designed to act as a sieve,” says Sansa. “Compress the bulk of the undead against the Northeast. Then Jon leads his infantry out onto the narrow part of the Long Lake, here, and Sigorn menaces the south of the forest at Karhold.”

“She and I break off the charge, curve away from the enemy,” says H’ghar. “The undead react. They turn around and start charging the “real” enemy. The Night’s King knows the face of the King and the King’s riders--very tempting bait, Jon and Sigorn. The enemy charges towards the army at their rear, but within a watch, the runners have outpaced the crawlers by a mile or more. By the end of the day, the majority of the runners have come out onto the Long Lake, chasing after Jon, and the entire southern part of the forest at Karhold holds only the fast undead.”
“Once the fast runners are in sight, Jon and Sigorn retreat,” says Sansa.
“Another feint?” Tyrion’s brow is furrowed, he is staring intently at the map, wondering what all of this accomplishes, apart from having to deal with only one type of undead at a time.

“Jon and Sigorn retreat,” says H’ghar, “and the undead are on the frozen Long Lake itself, and in amongst the pine forest. Then we blow the depth charges.”

“And the mines,” adds Sansa.

“And the mines,” agrees H’ghar.
“What is a depth charge?” asks Daenerys.
“A small cask of wildfire, packed into a crate of saltpetre, oil, some other things,” says Sansa. “Dropped into the Long Lake just before it froze over entirely, moons ago, with fuses running through the ice to a Firestartes’ outpost.” Then, wonder of wonders, she gives Tyrion a smile. “I got the idea from your defence of Blackwater Bay, my Lord. The saltpetre and oil just make the explosion much, much bigger.”

_Bigger, you say?_

“How much...many...of these charges do you have?” asks Tyrion.

“Enough to set the entire Long Lake on fire,” says H’ghar.

“The fast wights--the runners--they’ll be on the lake, chasing the Kingsbait,” murmurs Tyrion.

“So that’ll deal with about fifteen to twenty thousand of them,” says H’ghar, “dropping the number each soldier must deal with to something less than twelve.”

“And over at Karhold,” says Sansa, “the forest itself will be on fire. Pine trees, impregnated with wildfire, their roots packed with saltpetre...the conflagration will be seen from King’s Landing, I hope. We couldn’t mine the entire forest, only the southern side, so we need the fast-running wights trapped in there when the explosions go off, unable to scatter into the surrounding plains. The slow-moving wights will be dealt with by the subsequent forest fire, with Sigorn’s men holding the forest-line and throwing any corpse that crawls out back into the flames.”

“Nothing will be left,” whispers Tyrion, “nothing will be left of that forest but ash.” He looks up. “You won’t be able to take the keep for a fortnight, maybe much longer--the Wildfire will keep burning.”

Sansa nods. “And that’s when Davos will attack. From the sea, through the bores we have drilled into the underground ice-streams that feed Karhold’s wells...the Ice-Breakers will errupt from within the keep itself, and deal with what undead remain inside the walls. The ratio there is expected to be three-to-one, in favor of the living.”

“Meanwhile, over at the Long Lake,” says H’ghar, “the Mormont heavy cavalry will charge out of the trees and mow down the slow undead on the north shore of the Long Lake. And from the Lonely Hills, Tormund’s men will fall upon the enemy’s eastern flank.”

“At that point,” says Sansa, “it’s a matter of how well we fight, and how many of the enemy each soldier takes.”
“We are operating under the assumption that the Night’s King is an Other god,” says H’ghar, very
Tyrion and Daenerys exchange a look.

“Are you serious?” asks Tyrion.

“Deathly,” says Sansa. “We hope he’s not a god, that he’s just a Greenseer or a sorcerer, but the expert opinion is ‘god’.”

“Where do you go to get an expert opinion on that?” asks Tyrion. Sansa had always been religious, he remembers, but a real god seems...

“Have you heard of any sorcerer that can resurrect the dead?” asks H’ghar, mild.

Occam’s razor? The simplest explanation is the right one?

“What interesting times we live in,” murmurs Tyrion. “That ‘we are at war with a god’ is the simplest explanation for what is going in.”

“Gods are simple explanations for many things,” says Daenerys, “things that are far more complex than men care to admit. Because if the gods were real,” Daenerys pauses, her jaw set in a grim line, “I would despise them.”

H’ghar mutters something under his breath, something that sounds like “Lovely. Another one.”

“Theological discussions aside,” says Tyrion, “what impact does the Night’s King’s suspected nature have on the battle plan?”

“How do you defeat a god?” asks H’ghar.

Silence is his only answer.

“With some judicious testing,” says H’ghar, “we have determined that the Night’s King’s attention can only be split into so many fragments. So while his mind is frantically trying to keep up with the battles unfolding simultaneously on two different fronts far to the south…”

He moves the markers for the Fifth and Sixth legion.
“The diversion is a diversion for the diversion,” whispers Tyrion, staring at the map. “This
Night’s King thinks he is about to invade the lands of men. Turns out he’s getting invaded himself.”

H’ghar nods. “Fifth and Sixth Legions--Sandor and I--we make the five-day ride to Eastwatch in a day and a half, while Jon and Sigorn are still pulling the fast-running wights onto the mined land.”

“Um. How, dare I ask? Shorten a five-day ride to a day-and-a-half?”

_Because if you can do that, we might as well just give the crown of the rest of the world to Jon Stark and be done with it._

“Pulley-sleighs,” says Sansa, “running over the ice-roads we’ve been smoothing out for these last few moons.”

Tyrion’s expression invites further detail.

“We use the same mechanism a cable-ferry uses to cross a river,” says Sansa. “Long lengths of braided metal cable is strung out along the length of the road, and a pulley-and-wheel mechanism on the ‘boat’ itself is used to propel it along the cable. Nine horses to a sleigh, the horses help pull themselves forward. Not a day and a half,” she says to H’ghar, “now that the ice is smoothed out, it takes four watches to get from the Last Hearth to the Wall.”

“I anticipate some ‘engineering delays’,” says H’ghar. “The last time a splinter from the Fifth ran the ice-road, they spent half a day simply waiting for a repair-crew to come out and replace a bearing.”

Sansa’s eyes have narrowed. “Well, it won’t happen when it truly counts,” she says. “My sleigh teams are--”

“Best kept in battle-ready positions, with extra time in the schedule for contingencies,” says H’ghar.

It seems to be a long-standing argument, and one H’ghar is winning at the moment.

“So you and Sandor are up at the Wall, near Eastwatch,” prompts Tyrion.

“And we blast open a breach in the Wall,” says Sansa, “at the same time as the explosions go off in the Long Lake and at Karhold.”
"Sandor and I will pour through the breach," says H'ghar, "and fall upon the army of White
Walkers the Night’s King has gathered around his physical body.”

“First,” says Sansa firmly, “We will stand on top of the Wall and pelt the White Walkers with Wildfire grenades.”

“Pelt them with Wildfire grenades first, yes, how could I forget?” says H’ghar.

“And any man that tries to be a hero and go after the Night’s King alone is to be shot on sight,” Sansa adds.

“That’ll teach him,” murmurs H’ghar.

“What is a ‘grenade’?” asks Grey Worm.

“A thin-walled glass jar, filled with wildfire, moonshine, and obsidian shards,” says Sansa. “A broad candle-wick is dipped into the jar, set alight, and the jar is thrown at the enemy before it can explode.”

How very...lethal. But... Tyrion shakes his head in bemusement. “I cannot even count the number of things that can go wrong in this whole ‘plan’.”

Other than that, I suppose it’s genius. A thing for the history books, if they can pull it off.

H’ghar grins. “We all get to find out together tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

“And the day after that,” says H’ghar, “we bring down the Wall.”

THE NIGHT’S KING

The memories of men are as fragile as the last blooms of frost before spring.

The Night’s King still remembers the concept of spring, but it has been a few thousand years--their count has slipped from him--since he could last recall the contours of her face, the timbre of her voice.

His heart burns with a cold fire; it spills out of his eyes.

The last of her grace, the fire has been his only solace, as intertwined with his bitter sorrow as he had once been intertwined with her.

But seemingly in the blink of an eye, emotions remembered only as wisps from a dream rise with the sluggish blood in his veins.

Anger.

The Night’s King opens his eyes.

“The fool resists my control, time and again,” he murmurs.

The deformed human that flung himself into the sea at Eastwatch--the one that calls himself Patchface--is the Night’s King’s ‘voice’ in the southern lands. Some strange amalgamation of prophet and warg, and yet neither, the man has just enough mind that it can be ensnared by the
Night’s King and turned to some semblance of purpose.

Ensconced at Karhold, surrounded by the dead, Patchface’s task is to submit to the Night’s King’s will, and allow the immortal’s influence to be felt across the Wall.

But Patchface resists, without rhyme or reason, at the most inopportune moments.

The man’s babblings are interspersed with cackles, and half the time he is in his senses, he plays with the wights, making them dance and jump and break bones for his amusement.

Even the dead should have some dignity. To soldier, to fight, to kill. But not to be turned into puppets of dead flesh capering at a halfwit’s whim.

“You will cross the Wall for me, Benjen,” the Night’s King says. There is a way, perilous, for one that has tasted the icefire, but it can be done.

Benjen Stark presses his lips together, and then, slowly, he kneels upon the ice.

The Night’s Watchman turned ice- warg is not a Greenseer. But the fire has been shared with him while he was still living--time will pass, and with each passing year of neverending winter, the boy’s power will grow.

“Do not ask this of me, I beg of you,” Benjen says, then raises his blue-rimed eyes to meet the Night’s King’s. “I have seen Jon raised from a babe, and Bran, and the girls,” his voice drops to a whisper, “I still remember, my Lord.”

The Night’s King exhales, and his breath curls in the air. Then he nods, shortly. No man should be forced to slaughter his kin while being aware of what he does. “If the Wall falls…”

Benjen bows his head again. “I will obey your will, body and soul.”

“*The Wall must fall soon,*” hisses the Weaver standing in the Night’s King’s blind-spot, as they are wont to do.

The Night’s King’s nostrils flare. He used to think the Weavers were the most beautiful people he had ever seen.

Now he just finds them irritating.

They woke from their deep, deathlike slumber, just a few years ago, why, he does now know.

The Weavers in the far north are stirring now, they started but a moon ago. And this time, in the ice that is the marrow of his bones, the Night’s King knows what woke them.

*A Queen is pupating, somewhere in the warmlands.*

The Weavers are beautiful, and terrifying, and it is only the fire in the Night’s King’s eyes that keeps them from open rebellion. Should a Queen rise to unite them, neither the old accord nor all of his power will be enough to keep them from swarming over all the lands of the world. And when the last of mankind falls and all the oceans are frozen over, the Weavers will turn on their Queen and devour her.

Then will come the ending of all things, as layer upon layer of ice buries the bones of history, and the sign that there had once been living things here, that had sung songs and loved and hated and fed and given birth, it will only exist in the Night’s King’s fallible memory.
“You will not blow the Horn unless I command you to do so,” the Night’s King says.

*The Wall must hold.*

At least until his wights empty the warmlands of all living things.

The Weaver’s wings iridescent wings shimmer in the moonlight; it is not pleased.

“*We hunger,*” the Weaver hisses. “*You will give us what we hunger for.*”

With a flick of his wrist, the Night’s King sends a lash of fire whipping across the Weaver’s midsection.

The Weaver is sliced in half; its torso lands on the ground beside Benjen. It’s almost-inhuman expression is frozen in something like surprise.

“*You hunger,*” says the Night’s King mildly, “*so feed.*” And he gestures to the cluster of lesser Weavers, watching from a safe distance.

Even as the light dims from its eyes, the smaller Weavers descend upon the corpse of their kin.

A temporary respite.

*The Wall must hold.*

Chapter End Notes

Muahaha. That is all.
The Smell of Winter

Chapter by FayeKNaime

Chapter Notes

Consider this a very small interlude--a window into the Night King's motives.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NIGHT’S KING
The lesser weavers grow more frightened day by day. They flee south, towards the Wall, in ever greater numbers. By now, it is abundantly clear to all that this is not a natural winter, that the Long Night has come again, that the sun will not rise for a hundred years. Only that Night’s King knows the truth--that the sun will never rise again. It had fallen silent a few moons ago, and though the Night’s Consort cannot hold common ground with the Lord of Light, still, still he had called out. The sun had not answered.

----

The Night’s King is dimly aware of the argument between his White Walkers and a newly-arrived cluster of weavers. The weavers’ voices rise in pitch, breaking into dissonance at the higher notes. Woven into the argument are the low, grating tones of the undead humans. It seems the weavers wish to approach the throne--a weaver Lord has awoken and come seeking an audience with the Night’s King. The audience is unnecessary; the Night’s King already knows what the Lord has come to say--that the weavers must be allowed to flee the Land of Always Winter, that the Wall must be brought down.

And the Night’s King’s answer must always be the same: not until all living things in the warmlands are dead. The Night’s King recognizes the most insistent of the weaver voices. “Come,” he says.

A sudden silence. And then the sound of light footsteps over the snow, not even breaking the crust. A tall figure enters the King’s field-of-view. Male, and garbed in a surcoat of fine white samite, with black seed-pearls sewn into the hem.

The Lord bows deeply, but there is insouciance in his motion. He straightens, and pushes back the hood of his surcoat, revealing a face fairer than any human maid’s, the blue of icefire dancing in his eyes. “Your Majesty,” he says.

The Night’s King gives the weaver Lord a grave nod. “Duke Hellebore,” he says, “I find myself surprised that you are the Lord to awaken first.”

“Not the first,” says the Duke, a trace of a smirk on his blue lips, “merely the most...energetic. So.” He looks over the vast field of undead, sitting still upon the ground, waiting for the Night’s King to warg them to motion. “Your attention is clearly occupied, and your servants have made it clear I must not subject you to the tedium of courtly nicety. So I will speak plain. The Wall must fall. Before the next full moon.”

“That is a very specific time,” observes the Night’s King.

The fire in the Duke’s eyes grows serious, his shoulders straighten. “Another great storm is building around the peak of Craghost,” he says. “The mountain is preparing to shed.”

So that is why the lesser weavers are swarming south.

“If you delay,” the Duke continues, “you will doom the people you have sworn to protect.”

“Time passes,” says the Night’s King. Lush forests turn to deserts, what was once fertile plain sits
at the bottom of the ocean. Animals, displaced from their habitat, go extinct. “Perhaps your people have outlived their time.”

The Duke’s nostrils flare. “Look around you! Ice, and snow, and everlasting night.” The Duke takes a breath. “No, stepfather, you must find another argument, because the Long Night is ours.”

Stepfather.

Something in the Night’s King hurts, though he has forgotten the words to describe the pain.

“It is only the third storm of the season,” the Night’s King says mildly. The winter storms grow in power as the night takes hold, each more contagious than the last, each covering more ground. “It will not reach your cities, even in the far north.”

The Duke shakes his head. “Six spinsters have prophesied elsewise. The storm will reach twenty leagues south of the Wall, it will drown the entire north in dust.”

The prophetess-priestesses of the Night are canny, their hissing notoriously hard to decipher. But they are never wrong.

The mountains are shedding.

There are valleys deep within the Frostfangs the sun has never touched, even at the height of summer. There, in the shade of the mountains, bloom forests of crystalline spires.

The first time he saw the soaring spires, he marveled at the skill of the weavers--he still called them the Others, then.

Later, of course, he learned that no hand had shaped those structures, nor were the spires akin to termite mounds or anthills, home to some industrious creature of the snowbound hills. Touch one, and it dissolves into dust; the dust invades your mouth, chokes your breath from your lungs. Not dust, but spores. And when the spores finds the warm and wet and dark places inside you, they grow. Eventually, you die. And when you do, the tendrils and shoots that have grown within you, like wires animating a puppet, your corpse is puppet-walked to a new, dark valley, and there you lie down and wait for a crystalline spire to grow out of you.

There is no malice to it--when a mold-colony has reached the limit of its growth, the edge of the shadow of the mountain under which it grows, it simply seeks a host that is immune to sunlight. The mold seeks only to propagate itself.

All creatures that have lived through a snowstorm blowing off the Frostfangs have spores inside them. That is the smell of winter--the musty odor of mold and flesh long turned to dust--the almost impossibly small particles that seed the heart of every snowflake and ice-crystal.

When sun rises, weak though it may be in winter, the spores fall apart, and burrow for they cannot overtake the body of a man that sees the sun. Unless, of course, the mold has grown so dense within him that it erupts from his bones like spurs, like horns. Like a crown. That is how a King is made. That the Night claimed him, that the Night shared her fire with him, and gave him the strength to fight back against the mold growing inside of him..that was grace. That he was a warg and he could fight back, that was mere luck.

Because when the sun sets for a Long Night, nothing can stop the spores from taking root. It is the mindless implacability of the mold that terrifies the weavers. It is the mold that drives them south, to the warmlands, seeking to stay ahead of the growing edge of the fungal forest of dust-spires.

“Why do you hesitate to blow the horn?” asks the Duke. His eyes narrow. “Is it that the humans are your people? Still? Does a part of you hope they will flee?”

The Night’s King sighs. “Humans will not abandon their places of power. They must be killed. Once the humans are dead, I can march all their corpses north, to the Land of Always Winter, have them bury themselves ten feet deep in snow.”

The Duke gives the King a narrow-eyed look. “As you have done with corpses these past eight thousand years. But now you wage war using them,” he gestures to the army of undead spread out on the icefield before them, “as soldiers.”

“I starve the fire of its fuel,” the Night’s King says. “A controlled burn.” A fireline.

The Duke’s brows are furrowed. He does not understand.

The Night’s King hesitates then.
He has never spoken of some things, it would not do to show weakness. But the Duke has come, unarmed and unaccompanied, into the heart of the King’s undead army, bearing his concerns upon his sleeve.

Trust begets trust.

“Macranthus,” he says gently, using the name the Lord before him wore when he was still a child, “The fungus grows differently within a weaver. I cannot warg it. I cannot control weaver corpses.”

Silence.

“If the Wall falls, and an infected weaver makes it into the warmlands...”

The Night’s King says no more for he has seen the fear creep into his stepson’s eyes. The Duke understands, at last.

Chapter End Notes

This felt out of pace (ha ha) in the heat of battle, so it gets its own interlude.
Chapter Notes

I haven’t abandoned this, obviously. There’s too much cool stuff coming that I’m really excited about. Just takes a long time to write and time and prune...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE NIGHT’S KING

A spider weaves a web, and sits motionless at the center of it till a morsel gets caught in the strands.

His web of power is woven out of the fragile, dusty strands of mold; a corpse hangs at its every node. The web stretches out over the North, invisible, a whispering undeath. But because of the accursed magic of the Wall, the web south of that great edifice is dim to the Night’s King’s inner senses. He can feel the strands there twisting and pulling at him, but he cannot touch them unless he wargs through Patchface—a bright point in the web, the fly that thinks it too is a spider.

A strand twists and turns, pulling at his attention.

Patchface is sleeping.

The Night’s King slips into the halfwit’s skin, and then through that bridge, into the twisting snarling corpse-puppet that is pulling at his attention.

He opens his eyes as a man that was once called Waymar Royce.

WAYMAR ROYCE

Black ice underfoot black sky overhead

A dim memory from his long ago life: the Long Lake.

Cliff-walls rise to either side of him.

The ice groans underfoot; it groans under the weight of the twenty thousand corpses swarming over it.

The choice morsel, the sweet morsel, so full of oozing warm life. It is somewhere up ahead in the white mist.

Grey eyes.

He raises his head to the sky then, and screams.
THE NIGHT’S KING

The icefire comes. It burns the hunger from his veins, the white dust from his thoughts, and when the cobwebs of death clear, he is left is floundering in confusion.

The army of wights he had assembled at the Long Lake were supposed to be massing to the northeast, to meet the charge of horses coming from the Last Hearth.

Where are the horses and their riders?

Why is his army pulling itself to pieces running south over the frozen lake? What prey lures them so powerfully that they forget the commands he has implanted into them?

Grey eyes. Grey eyes.

The King in the North.

He had assumed it would take fifty thousand wights laying siege to Winterfell before the King in the North came out onto the field. Men hold to their places of power.

Eat sweet flesh and snap the bone and...

Patchface is stirring, agitated by the corpse-hungers. But this time the Night’s King allows Patchface no breath to rebel; he surrounds the fool’s thoughts with a pincer grip, and spits out his awareness into the warm air south of the Wall.

The wights have been pulled onto the narrow part of the Long Lake. The cliffs funnel the dead to the left of him and the right of him, squeezing them together, the dead piling up behind him, arms outstretched.

An ambush.

The King in the North plans to hold off the wights at the narrow part of the lake, rain down arrows from above, reduce their number before the horses from the Last Hearth charge into the rear.

The wights are lost to the hunger. Most often, the older the corpse, the less useful it is. Each passing day the mold eats and spreads through its brain until all that is left is a small stump of primal instinct at the base of its skull.

The corpses at the Long Lake are old, frozen into inarticulate hunger, with fresh bloody bait dangled in front of them. The Night’s King will have to warg them one by one to reassert control. And by then they will be within the gorge, and within reach of the arrows.

The battle has been won by the Stark boy before it was even engaged.

Except, of course, that winning battles is not the Night’s King’s objective. ‘Tis the living that need to win battles; for the Night’s King, a battle is simply the most efficient way of making corpses.

He pulls away from the wights charging over the lake—they are nothing more than a distraction now. What the Night’s King needs is a single wight, in the right place.

Again and again and again he wargs his dead, looking for the features of the landscape that will tell him he is behind the Stark boy’s army.

There are very few wights left intact in the open. Most of them are very far away. The villages of the dead have been reduced to smoking ruin.
There are no wights in the right place.

He sighs.

*Very well. Let us find a fresh corpse.*

**THE WHORE**

Her cunt was cut to pieces and her legs were bent over and broken and then she was strangled to death with a strip of cloth, and buried in a shallow grave.

She is still fresh, the snow has taken the tips of her fingers and her toes and her tits, but the eyes were closed and when he opens them he can see.

A swath of snow, flattened down, smelling like a midden.

An army camped here but a day ago.

Then it moved north.

The stars are out tonight; dark shapes on the horizon blot out the starlight--the Lonely Hills rise to the northeast.

He has found the right place.

As she rearranges her limbs and pulls herself upright, a tinkle of coin falls out of her mouth.

Far away, the Night’s King thinks: a camp-follower, a whore, paid to fuck a soldier, fucked to death, then paid.

*So men have not changed.*

With an uneven gait--her legs don’t work right--the corpse lurches over the campsite, towards the throb of red, warm blood, somewhere to the northwest.

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Her mouth has frozen in a rictus snarl as she circles the mound of snow again and again and again, she scratches at the snow with fingers blackened and curled by the cold, but she cannot get through.

She can feel them--the steady thrum of heartbeats inside the mound, under the frozen earth, there is fresh blood just on the other side.

She cannot get through.

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“Not going to fucking piss in a jug.”

She turns, slowly, towards the sound.

A man stands in front of a dark hole in the mound of snow. A steaming arc of piss lands on the snow in front of her.
The man looks up, his mouth is open.

She tears out his throat before he can scream.

Then she stumbles into the hole—the door—into the mound.

The corpse behind her dribbles bile and saliva from the hole in his throat as he rises, and follows her into the snow mound.

The snow pile is a wooden house, buried in snow, snowfall after snowfall.

Inside there are two men.

“Jeorg, you wildlings need to learn how to piss indoors, like civilized people. Jeorg? What—”

The second man has unsheathed a sword, but it is too late. The whore is behind him.

---

For but a moment she casts a glance over the house.

There are ropes—braided cords—coming in through holes in the floor, ending at a strange collection of shuttered lanterns that burn with small, blue flames. A large bronze bell hangs under a snowed-in window, its clapper tied to yet another braided cord running into a hole in the wood.

What the purpose of the house was, she cannot tell. It hardly matters.

As the wights lurch out the door and into the cold, the bell starts ringing, almost as if some frantic hand was tugging at the cord tied to the clapper.

There is no one left to answer.

**GENDRY**

“Smith! Smith!”

The urgency in the soldier’s voice reaches through Gendry’s fog, rouses him out of his tent.

“What’s the matter, man?” asks Gendry.

“Do you know anything about bells?” the soldier asks. He’s wearing the blue armband that marks him as a member of the Firestarters.

“Bells?”


**THE WHORE**

She crests the short hill, wading through waist-deep snow, and the fresh corpses line up beside her. There is an entire army ahead of them, men in untidy clusters shifting from foot to foot, torches smoking as mist rolls in from the foothills at either side.
The soldiers are facing away from her. Towards the body of the Long Lake. Nobody notices the shambling corpses coming up behind them until it is too late.

She hooks an arm around a man’s throat, drags him down, rips out a chunk of his face with her teeth. Fresh blood stains the trampled snow; the man’s heels drum on the ground, his comrades are turning but the three other wights are fresh, they’re fast.

Most of the army is still looking away.

The freshly dead soldiers—six of them—stop moving.

And then they rise.

HOSTLER WILL

He stands impatiently in the middle of the throng of soldiers, he’s too short to see anything. The ground underfoot is packed-down snow.

Somebody pushes him, hard, he stumbles.

“Hey! Watch—”

Pain. Darkness.

He rises.

He hungers.

There is fresh meat in front of him.

He raises a hand, his hand feels almost too heavy to raise, he puts it on the shoulder of the shoulder of the shoulder shoulder shoulder shoulder.

He bites.

ARMSMAN DOYLE

He needs to take a piss, but he’s too scared to leave his position. He’s safe where he is, not right at the front but close enough that he can see the knights and riders at the front line—the real soldiers. They won’t let anything get through.

Someone lays a hand on his shoulder. Doyle starts to turn.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

Hunger.
THE WHORE

She raises a fist into the sky.

The newly made wights stop their advance, and rise to their feet, and look up with blind eyes towards her, standing on the hill.

JON

Some motion caught at the corner of his eye attracts Jon’s attention. He looks up, beyond the rise to the south, and sees a dark figure silhouetted against the star-bright sky. And, as he had known in Hardhome, so he knows it now.

He’s here. The Night’s King is here.

At Hardhome, there had been nothing but fear and desperation curdling in his stomach. The man he is now has drunk deep of the well of despair and been nourished by it, he has feasted on the bones of betrayal and found strength in the eating. He is not afraid.

An scream of rage bellows out of Jon as he raises his sword to the sky.

THE WHORE

Her attention is drawn to the figure at the head of the army, out a hundred feet onto the ice of the Long Lake. The figure turns, then pauses, then raises his sword in her direction, he shouts and the inarticulate sound of rage rings out over the ice-entombed landscape.

The boy from Hardhome.

A small, sad smile twitches at the corner of her ruined mouth.

What a king he would have made, had he been allowed to live.

Heeding their King’s shout, the army is turning, slowly, too slowly, men realizing the undead are in their midst. She hears the call taken up by the Stark soldiers.

“Wights! Behind us! Wights!”

She spreads the fingers of her upraised hand: go.

Like a pack of slavering hounds let off the leash, the corpses below her swarm the living. And she lets herself fall, her attention divided into fifty. Then hundred.

Fresh corpses wearing the Stark colors.

JON

“Protect the King! The King!”

It has been but a few heartbeats, it feels like, rage still courses through his veins, but he is being
jostled into the center of a tightening ring of his soldiers—the Kingsguard, the loyal hundred.

“To the King!”

“No!” Jon snarls, trying to push through the noose tightening around him without hurting the men, “No!”

Get me to the front.

A tide of death is rippling through his army, men turning to dead-eyed wights where they stand, then turning upon the man in front of them.

“Calm, Jon,” a cold voice whispers beside him. “He’s coming for you .”

Jon blinks, the rage searing to ice in his bones. He glances down and meets the storm-grey eyes of his sister.

“We’re standing on the Long Lake,” she reminds him.

Wildfire.

He nods, tight.

Let him come.

“Pull back!” he commands.

“We can’t!” shouts Sam, from somewhere behind Jon. “Wights coming in hard and fast from the north.”

“Move east!” Jon commands. “Move and hold! Don’t let them surround us!”

WAYMAR ROYCE

He falls upon the living man, bites into a hand, the warm rush of blood sates him for a moment. But the sweet flesh, it is not this one, it is the one that he cannot yet reach.

The King in the North.

The Stark.

The wights hunger for Stark flesh.

JON

High ground , thinks Jon bitterly, at least we have the high ground .

They stand on mound of the dead, ringed ‘round by a sea of the undead snapping and snarling at their heels. The army of a thousand has been reduced to twelve living men. Him, and Arya and Sam, and nine of the King’s Riders.

This is it, then. The last stand of the Bastard King—raised high on the corpses of his own soldiers .
His breath steams white before him from the exertion; his elbow has long become numb. But his arm keeps raising his blade, again and again, and wherever his blade touches a wight, or Arya’s blade does, the wight falls, and makes the mound taller.

There is a lull in the battle.

“Arya…” he murmurs.

“Almost all the wights are on the ice now,” she replies, her voice entirely dispassionate.

“No…way…out…for us,” gasps Sam.

Should I fall to my knees and beg forgiveness? From Arya? From Jaqen? How?

“Jaqen knew,” says Arya. “Make it count. Keep the Night King’s attention fixated on us—no warg will recover from so many simultaneous death-blows.”

A glorious suicide—that’s all our battle plan amounted to, in the end.

Jon takes a deep breath. “First Legion is lost!” he shouts. “Give the command to blow the charges!”

A rider to his left—a Mormont man—raises his battle-horn to his lips.

WAYMAR ROYCE

A lone, mournful note rings out over the ice. The note is calling him to battle it is calling him and he does not know how to answer.

In the confusion of his anger, he sees a man in front of him, a wildling, raising a war-axe. He throws himself at the man, pins the man against a mound of corpses as he tears out the man’s throat. Then he looks up.

There are flashes of steel from the humans up above. The Stark carries dangerous steel. Wights climb the mound of corpses and are cut down by the steel. The Stark remains out of reach.

Instead of climbing the mound like the others, he digs into the swiftly cooling flesh in front of him, he burrows into the mound and begins crawling upwards from the inside.

Other wights, seeing what he does, follow.

JON

The fire does not come.

Arya’s eyes have filmed over, white. “They can’t hear us,” she whispers. Then, louder, “The bells are ringing, nobody’s answering. Bran’s already sent help.”

The Mormont man hasn’t heard her, or if he has, he doesn’t want to believe because he raises the horn to his lips again, and again the low note reverberates around the battlefield.

And it is answered! A horn-note of higher pitch, ringing out from the southeast.
“The reserves!” shouts a rider. “The reserves are coming!”

THE WHORE

She rages, and she mows down the newly arrived Stark soldiers till she stands in front of a giant of a man wielding a warhammer.

The man’s eyes widen as he looks at her, he hesitates.

She snarls, and lunges for him.

She is cut down, abruptly, before she reaches his throat.

She slams into hard snow, senses reeling from the abrupt change in motion.

She lies twitching on the ground and hears, “have a care, Mastersmith, Arya would be very disappointed if you died out here.”

GENDRY

He nods thanks to Prince Daorys, then swings his warhammer down on another wight rushing at him, he smashes the man’s face to a pulp, and still he keeps coming. Again and again Gendry bashes at the corpse till at last it can’t get up any more.

It’s still alive. Moving, at least.

Gendry wipes at his face and looks north, out over the lake, towards flickering torches that illuminate a small knot of men fighting on top of a small hill.

The Starks. And the last of their protectors.

A vast ocean of undeath stands between Gendry and them. Even as he watches a figure on top of the hill stumbles, seemingly pulled down to the ground and held there as he thrashes.

Please don’t be her.

The reserves are pitifully few--two hundred women and a handful of firestarters. The rest of the reserves will follow, but it won’t be enough.

“Smith!” Prince Daorys says. “The hut!”

Gendry snaps out of his daze.

Get to the hut. Light the fuses. Blow the charges.

And then?

“Arya!” he yells and turns around to race back down the rise.

Daorys grabs him by the shoulder. “Trust Bran.”

“No! She’ll be trapped out there on the ice! We have to get her out, we—”
A hard smack across his face.

_He slapped me?_

“You think I don’t want to charge at the wights?” asks Daorys. “My world is out on that ice, smith, and the king I’ve _knelt to_ right beside her, and I can make out every expression on their faces, even from out here.”

The cold intensity in Daorys’s voice takes Gendry aback. All he’s seen from the man so far is lighthearted commentary and swordplay.

“Assassin or smith,” says Daorys, “the game afoot is war, and we’re to play soldier. So we’re going to play at being the best damn soldiers in Jon Stark’s army. And a good soldier…”

_Follows orders._

A shadow passes overhead, swift, too swift to be a cloud. Then another.

**THE NIGHT’S KING**

His mouth is filled with hot blood.

A screech rends the air.

The corpse he is warging loses control of its bladder.

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Dragons in the sky. A dragon the size of a keep.

_How did it grow so big?_

_Dragons? I want to see!_

He gasps, tries to keep control of the corpses, but the _warg_-trance slips—Patchface seizes control.

And thousands of dead men turn to watch the path of the beasts circling the sky, stupefied.

**GENDRY**

Stunned silence reigns over the battlefield—even the wights have stopped moving, and are staring up at the sky.

Black wings have blotted out the stars. They are shaped like bat wings, but a hundred, a thousand times larger—he cannot make any comparison of size.

It feels like the world has slowed to a crawl, like a dream, and he sees a dragon alight on the ice beside the hill, he sees it open its maw and inside its gullet there burns a flame, like the hottest part of a forge, writhing to be let free.

It roars, and a gout of flame cuts through the wights gathered at the base of the hill.
In the light of the dragonfire, Gendry sees that the hill is not a hill. It is a mound of corpses—and wights are climbing up its side, stepping on the dead to reach the top.

“Move, you fools,” whispers Daorys, standing beside Gendry.

One black figure jumps off the hill—somersaults on the way down, only to snag a grasp on the pommel of the saddle atop the dragon’s back.

*Arya.*

*Saddle?*

There’s someone on top of the dragon. Gendry cannot tell who, but it’s not hard to guess.

Another figure jumps off the hill, then another, but they’re not falling, they’re sliding along…

*Oh.*

Arya has tied a rope between the hill and the dragon’s saddle, the men on top of the hill are rappelling down.

“Assassin training,” says Daorys, patting Gendry on the shoulder. “Useful stuff. Come, order yon Valkyries to cut us a path to the hut.”

*The hut.*

He raises his voice. “To the hut!” he shouts. “Women! To the hut!”

**THE NIGHT’S KING**

He struggles with Patchface, mind-to-mind, when they are both startled by a bright bloom of light over the horizon—the entire sky is aglow with green fire.

Patchface—the Night’s King—looks around him.

He is still in Karhold. But he is surrounded by the living, men and women with polearms and hooks and torches, prodding him towards the maw of an open well.

He—Patchface—recognizes one of the faces.

“Onion Knight!” the fool cheers, entirely distracted, and grabs an old man by the polearm, drags him towards himself, bat ting aside the old man’s attempts to get free. “I missed you!”

A roar. He feels it like thunder, through the bones of the dead, through the ground, through the air.

The death-blow of a thousand wights slams into him.

He overbalances.

Both of them fall down the well, and the fool has the old man clutched to his chest.

The polearm goes through them the bodies as they land on hard ice.

The old man, the fool’s “onion knight”, is dead already.
The fool, pierced through with ice, is bleeding out.

*Save me. I served you well.*

*You were rebellious,* the Night’s King observes.

*I was a good fool.*

The Night’s King sighs.

*You are beyond the wall. I cannot save you unless you are dead. I cannot reach you once you are dead. A quandary.*


*Good night, fool.*

He opens his eyes to the landscape beyond the Wall.

Green fire burns at the base of the Wall.

He snaps his fingers and one of his White Walkers rushes up.

“There are humans on the wall,” the White Walker grates. “Rangers, and more. They are throwing fire.”

The Night’s King sighs.

“Pull back,” he says. Crastor’s sons are dim-witted, they do not react quickly enough when it is needful. “Where is Benjen Stark?” he asks.


The Night’s King nods.

*Good night, Benjen Stark.*

“Your plan has failed, Night’s Consort,” says a melodious voice to his left. He turns to see his stepson, the Duke Hellebore, leaning casually upon a plinth of ice.

“I see no failure,” says the Night’s King. “Another thousand humans are dead. It is progress.”

The Duke says nothing. And in the distance, over his shoulder, the Night’s King sees a score of Greater Weavers carrying a bier—a platform draped with black samite. And upon the bier there sits a weaver woman of great beauty—a spinster—cradling a horn at her breast.

The Horn of Winter.

“No,” says the Night’s King.

“Too late,” says the Duke. He nods to the King. “I tried to give you time, Stepfather. But when you lost your fool…” he shakes his head.

The Night’s King raises his head to command the White Walkers, but as the Duke says, it is too late.

The spinster raises the horn to her lips.
The sound that issues forth is like no horn-note he has ever heard. It sounds like a screeching
dissonance, like nails grating on a windowpane, like mockery, and then it changes, it sounds like a
child’s laughter, like flutes in a meadow, like a mill grinding wheat, like the babble of a brook in
spring, like all the beautiful sounds he has heard, and forgotten.

The Wall groans and shudders as if it is a living thing.

Which it is, of course.

Chapter End Notes

So once again I have to apologize for the slow speed of writing and replying to
comments...real life is so not like fanfic, can't skip the unpleasant and tedious sections,
 alas.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!