A Rose and a Lion

by Gracques

Summary

Tywin Lannister is dead. Tyrion Lannister becomes Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West three years before the beginning of Season 1. A new alliance will be forged that will change the political balance of Westeros and the War of the Five Kings.

Notes

This fic tries to imagine what may have happened if Tywin Lannister died three years before Season 1. It will set a series of events that will change the events around the War of the Five Kings.

Just like my first fanfiction, "A Shadow and a Wolf", this fanfiction tries to be the most realistic it can be, trying to imagine how the story of Game of Thrones could have been changed by a single event. The fic is following the TV show. It will borrow elements from the books from time to time, but only when they don't contradict the TV show.
There is only one thing I changed from the show in that fic by privileging the book version. I decided that Tyrion would be 25 years-old (his age at the beginning of book one) in 298 AC when Season 1 starts, and not 31 years-old like in the show.

This fic will be published at a slower pace than "A shadow and a Wolf" since for now I focus on the latter. There will be 1 or 2 updates per month at first, but the updates will grow more frequent once the other fic is almost over.
They were riding tirelessly. Time was counted. Tyrion had been distracted from his pleasure in a whorehouse in Lannisport by the sudden arrival of his uncle, Ser Kevan Lannister. He had been drinking wine while a young girl with blond hair was pleasuring him when Kevan had emerged into the room, ignoring the closed door.

“Tyrion, you must come back to Casterly Rock. Now!”

It had taken a few more seconds than usually to Tyrion to react to this unexpected appearance. “Should I explain you the meaning of a closed door in a whorehouse, Uncle?”

“Tyrion.” It was then when he looked more attentively to his uncle’s face that Tyrion realized something grave had happened. He seldom saw Ser Kevan in such a distressed state. “There’s been an accident at the harbor. Tywin… Your father. He’s been injured. Gravely injured. He’s dying.”

Tyrion had the impression the Mountain had just struck him with all the force of his right arm. Tywin Lannister, the Old Lion, dying? Did he drink too much? Tyrion had straightened after a moment. “Uncle, what are you saying?”

“Tyrion, your father is dying. He asked for your presence. He said he wants to speak with you.” Tyrion wondered if there was a man stronger than Gregor Clegane in the Seven Kingdoms, because he wondered who could have hit him so hard this time. “Quickly now. We don’t have much time.”

Kevan had grabbed him by the arm and Tyrion had awkwardly put on his clothes in his drunken state. He didn’t forget to pay the girl before he left. A Lannister always pays his debts. Always. Even when his father is about to die. And now here they were, on the short road leading from Lannisport to the Rock, riding their horses to death to arrive before it was too late. Tyrion’s mind was in turmoil. A few minutes ago he had been drinking and fucking, and now he was heading to see the man who always hated him and never wanted him as a son. Why? Would his father have done the same for him? Yet, his father had asked to see him. Again, why?

They rode under the Lion’s Mouth and dismounted into the main courtyard, leaving stable boys to take care of their horses. Kevan led Tyrion to the top of the Rock where his father’s apartments were. It was a long and tiresome climbing. On the way his uncle explained what had happened. They were visiting the wharves of the city when there had been a problem with the mast of a ship they were inspecting. The beam holding the sailing had fallen on Lord Tywin, an extremity pointed directly at his chest, crushing a huge part of his tummy. They had brought him back to the castle where Creylen had tried to heal him, but there was nothing to do. Soon, Tywin Lannister, the Lord of Casterly Rock, the Lord of the Westerlands, the Warden of the West, the richest man in the Seven Kingdoms, probably the most feared and one of the most powerful, would die, his ribs, lungs and waist squashed by the mast of a ship. What a boring and miserable way to die.

When they reached his father’s rooms, Tyrion was sweating from everywhere. His short legs made it very difficult for him to climb all these steps, so to climb them while running was more than horrible.
Anyway, here they both were, Tyrion and Kevan Lannister, before the private chambers of the Lord of Casterly Rock. Usually, there were two guards at each side of the closed golden doors, but now there was a crowd of people before the doors that were kept by a dozen guards. The people included servants, other guards and soldiers and minor family members. When the men guarding the doors saw the brother and the son of their lord, they made a way through the crowd to let them enter.

There were other guards inside the rooms. Only in the living room, there were six of them. The living room wasn’t properly speaking a living room. It was more a solar from the way Lord Tywin had organized it, with a huge desk in the center of it with everything needed to work. There were no objects of comfort and, despite all the gold surrounding the place, it bore the mark of the austere man Tyrion’s father was. The gold was mostly there through the symbols of House Lannister and trophies his father gained through his achievements. There was a huge banner of House Lannister trimmed in red and gold, a huge representation of a menacing lion carved in the purest gold someone could find, and luxurious objects that had belonged to the leaders of great houses Tywin Lannister had defeated. In a corner was placed the throne in which Lady Tarbeck once held court in Tarbeck Hall. On a table near the window was a silver cup that was taken when Lord Roger Castamere was defeated while attempting to rescue Tarbeck Hall. The relic that had always interested Tyrion the most was the skull of the last of the dragons, hidden within a lead box. The skull was only the size of an apple, but despite this Tyrion had always wanted to see it, something his father forbade him all the time. The box had remained sealed ever since Lord Tywin brought it back from King’s Landing at the end of Robert’s Rebellion.

Two guards stood before the door leading to the bedchamber, one at each side. They allowed Tyrion and Kevan to enter. Tyrion was horrified by what he saw. His father was lying in his bed, blood soaking the covers under him, his doublet removed to reveal a bloody chest wrapped in thick bandages also soaked with blood. His father’s body looked misshapen, deformed, as if someone had twisted it. A raucous breathe was escaping from his mouth. There were only two other people in the room, the old maester Creylen and Tyrion’s aunt, Lady Genna Frey. She, Tywin and Kevan were the only children of Tytos Lannister still alive, Tyrion’s uncles Tygett and Gerion both being dead a few years ago. Maester Creylen was observing his lord’s wounds. He seemed to panic, something that rarely happened to him. Genna was kneeling on the floor, her face close to her brother’s who seemed to talk to her in whispers between two difficult breathings.

As soon as they entered into the room, Kevan went to his sister’s side and knelt. “My lord.”

The Lord of Casterly Rock turned his eyes away from his sister to look at his young brother and closest advisor. “What advice do you have to give me right now, Kevan?”

 Ser Kevan Lannister went on his feet immediately. He was in obvious distress. It was no surprise since his brother was dying before his eyes. “Keep your forces. You must rest.” Kevan turned to the maester. “Is there anything you can do, Creylen? Anything?”

Before the maester could answer, the Lord of Casterly Rock replied. “Creylen already told us there is no way to save me. My bowels were pierced by a piece of wood, some of my ribs are broken, I have a lung half crushed. The only thing he can do is to lower the pain. I will die soon. Is he there?”

Hesitantly, Kevan turned to Tyrion. He had stayed in retreat, looking at the scene from a few meters, not sure if he should approach the bed where his father laid. Genna and Creylen followed his uncle’s eyes with their own. But most of all, Tyrion felt the gaze of his father on him, the icy green eyes who always looked at him in disapproval, disgust and hatred. Right now, his father’s eyes were fixed on him with the same expression. Even close to his death, Tywin Lannister would always look at his second son like an embarrassment for House Lannister.
After a long moment during which he stared at him, Lord Tywin turned to his brother. “Where did you find him?” Kevan hesitated. “No need to answer. I have a good idea where he was. Leave us alone. I want to speak with my son.”

The last sentence caused a shock in the piece. Tyrion was the most surprised of all the people who were present. Only the man who spoke and Genna didn’t look surprised by this, or at least not too much. All the same, the maester, Kevan and Genna immediately left the room. Even when he was about to die, Tywin Lannister was obeyed by everyone without discussion. The guards closed the door when Genna passed through it last, and Tyrion was left alone with his father.

For a moment, both remained there, looking at each other. Tyrion had always found it difficult to hold his father’s gaze, and right now it was more difficult than ever. Tywin Lannister was dying, and still he looked at him like a wretched and misshapen little creature who shamed the family. Tyrion managed with great effort to hold his father’s gaze. Finally, Tywin Lannister spoke.

“All three.” Tyrion slowly walked towards his father until he stood next to him, his face at the same level than his father’s. That was quite unusual. Lord Tywin would always look down on him, in all the senses the expression could take. Right now there was one sense of the expression that was no longer true. “You were in a brothel.”

That was a statement, not a question, and Tyrion had no reason to deny it. His father spoke while coughing, waiting after every few words he enunciated. “I was.”

“You probably think you’ll be free once I’m dead.”

“Well, as you once told me Father, no man is free. Only children and fools think elsewise.”

Something that looked like the beginning of a smile appeared on the corners of Lord Tywin’s lips, but also perhaps something like a surprised expression in his eyes. His eyes settled on Tyrion were still hard, but looked less hard than before. “I always thought you never listened. I always thought you were a stunted fool. Perhaps I was wrong.”

“Half wrong.”

“You will have to stop visiting whorehouses. You can bring a whore inside the Rock if you want from time to time, you wouldn’t be the first Lord of the Rock to do it. But no one can know about this except you. The Lord of Casterly Rock cannot be seen visiting, or even be suspected to spend times with harlots.” Tyrion didn’t understand his father’s words, but Tywin Lannister didn’t let him time to question him. “You’ll have to spend less time drinking with thieves and bedding harlots, and to put all your attention on the task to rule the Westerlands, and to keep House Lannister strong against the other houses. You’ll have to make sure they keep fearing and respecting us. You’ll have to make sure Robert understands he needs us to keep the Seven Kingdoms under his control. You will marry a suitable woman, and father children named Lannister, and never turn your back on your family. You’ll have to make sure the family name lives on. It’s all that lives on. You’ll need to continue the work I started.”

Tyrion was agape before everything his father was telling him. “What are you talking about? Why are you telling me all this?”

“You know very well what I’m talking about.” His father’s voice looked angry, but also tired and somewhat regretful. “Jaime is blessed with abilities few possess. He is blessed to belong to the most powerful family in the kingdoms. He is still blessed with youth. And what has he done with these blessings? He served as a glorified bodyguard for two kings, one a madman, the other a drunk. For more than thirty years, I’ve tried to teach him, and he never understood. Serving as a glorified
bodyguard seems to be the sum of his ambition.”

Tyron knew his father always wanted Jaime for his heir. He had been so furious when Jaime was named in the Kingsguard that he resigned his tenure as Hand of the King. He never forgave the Mad King for this, and he never forgave Jaime either for staying in the Kingsguard.

“Don’t get me wrong. I never wanted you as a son, and even less as an heir. My will is clear that your brother is my heir. But if Jaime refuses to succeed me as Lord of the Rock, and he will certainly refuse, you will be the Lord of Casterly Rock, and there will be nothing I can do against it. So stop acting like the shame of the family and behave like a Lannister should.”

Tyron didn’t know if he had to be happy or angry. His father nearly acknowledged he would be Lord of Casterly Rock after he died, but he did it reluctantly and stated very clearly he didn’t want Tyron as a son. The prospect of a certain and near death didn’t change the Old Lion.

“Is there anything else you wanted to tell me, Father?” Tyrion answered coldly. If his father wanted to be cold with him as he left this world, he didn’t see why he should behave any differently towards him.

Tyron’s father stared at him for a long moment, until the last question he would expect came. “Will you cry for me when I’m dead? Are you sad about it?”

After recovering from the shock this question caused, Tyrion answered with another one. “If the situation was different, if our roles were reversed, would you cry for your son?”

“No,” Lord Tywin said after a few seconds. Then don’t expect me to mourn you, Father. “My father would have, if I had died before him. I wept when he died. I mourned him. He was a weak man, but he was the man who sired me. He was my father. A man who loved all his children. Despite all his flaws, he was the man who brought me up.”

Tyrion was surprised to hear this. He couldn’t imagine his father weeping. Even right now, as he was about to die, Tywin Lannister was close to anything but crying.

“Have you ever wondered why I kept you alive when you were born?” Tyrion was startled by the question. “I wanted to carry you into the sea and let the waves wash you away. Instead, I let you live. And I brought you up as my son. Because you’re a Lannister. Because you’re my son. Because that’s what your mother asked me before she died. This is the last thing she asked from me before she left us. She died holding you in her arms, as if she tried to protect you. If you have any hint of respect for the woman you killed to come into the world, then be the lord House Lannister needs. Very soon, I won’t be that lord anymore, and your brother is unwilling to be it. You’re all that’s left.”

Lord Tywin coughed and closed his eyes, pain obvious on his face. “Now go. Give me some peace for the few hours I have to spend in this world.”

Tyrion remained some time, looking at his father gritting his teeth in pain. Should he do something about it? His own father was suffering right under his eyes. Any son would do something to lessen his father’s pain as he was about to leave this world, but any father would love all his children, no matter who they were, what they looked like and what they did. The man lying right before him just confessed he wanted to kill him the day he was born. He made Tyrion come here only to humiliate him by telling he would only be Lord of Casterly Rock because they had no other choice. Tyrion left after a moment, leaving his father to die in suffering.

On the other side of the door, the three of them were waiting, Genna, Kevan and Creylen. They all looked at him as he closed the door, as if they expected him to say something. A heavy silence took place that Tyrion broke.
“He asked for milk of the poppy.”

He walked away with no other word. Right now, he wanted to be alone. He went down to the middle levels of the Rock. Tyrion’s chambers were at the same level than the room where he spent most of his time at Casterly Rock. He was the one to ask his father one day to move him at the same level than the huge library of the castle. That made him move at lower levels, but Tyrion didn’t mind. He wasn’t eager to live in the upper levels of the castle, near his father, and it made a lesser climb to make each time he came back home, and less time to walk every time he wanted to visit the library. His father hadn’t opposed when Tyrion had asked him years ago, probably happy to have the Imp farther from him.

Tyrion entered his rooms with the furniture conceived for his size and sat. In the end, he hadn’t let his father suffer. Tyrion had wanted Lord Tywin to suffer just like he made him suffer all his life. But in the end, he had told Creylen to ease his father’s pain with milk of the poppy. He said it to say something to them, anything but what was told behind these doors, but he told Creylen to do something good for the father who never wanted him. In the end, he had done what a son would have done.

I wanted to carry you into the sea and let the waves wash you away. Instead, I let you live. And I brought you up as my son. Because you’re a Lannister. His father’s words echoed in his head. Because you’re my son. Because that’s what your mother asked me before she died. Tyrion never knew much about his mother. His father barely acknowledged him as a son and never spoke about his wife to anybody, so why would he have talked to Tyrion about the mother who died the day he was born? Tyrion had never known any of this. She died holding you in her arms, as if she tried to protect you. That was how Lady Joanna Lannister died, holding the son who killed her into her arms.

Tyrion tried to forget what just happened by reading. He had two huge piles of books, one ready to be read, the other one already read. He took one of the books he never read before, a book on dragonglass. He tried to lose himself into the reading, but failed miserably. No matter how hard he tried to focus, the words went through his mind without making any sense. He couldn’t stop himself from thinking about his father about to die in a room several floors over him, or about his mother who died pleading his father to let him live, or about the woman he loved being raped by dozens of men. He left his rooms to see if there was any work in the library that could distract him, but all the books he tried couldn’t force the dark thoughts out of his mind. He went back to his chambers and thought for a time about going to Lannisport and spend the night in the brothel where he left the blond haired girl a few hours ago, but he didn’t think it would be appropriate to visit a whore while his father was dying. Tyrion knew he owed his father to disobey his orders and to embarrass him, but he didn’t do it. He couldn’t help but refuse to shame his father in his last hours. Instead he drank wine, and he drank a lot of it. He asked the servants to bring him the best ones from the cellars. It didn’t help him to feel better, but he kept drinking all the same. No one was better than him for this. Drinking, whoring and reading. No man or woman can match me at these things.

Tyrion didn’t sleep of the entire night. He knew it would do him no good to sleep. Even if he managed to, he would only make nightmares. The sun set on the horizon, the moon came and left and dawn came. Tyrion spent his time drinking, tried to read a few pages from one book or another from time to time, and ruminated. He ruminated about the last words his father told him. He ruminated about all the times his father punished him or mocked him for being a dwarf. He ruminated about his uncle Gerion who disappeared in Essos a few years ago. He ruminated about his time spent in charge of the drains and cisterns of Casterly Rock. He ruminated about his marriage. He ruminated about his childhood. He thought about everything that happened during the twenty-two years of his life. His memories also went to happier events from time to time. He remembered the gifts Jaime offered him for his various name days. His tumblings through Casterly Rock. His
recitation of the sixteen wonders described by Lomas Longstrider during feasts. The jokes he shared with his uncle Gerion. The kindness of his uncle Tygett. His wedding with Tysha. The discovery of the dragon skulls under the Red Keep. Sadly, each happy memory brought a dark one, while each dark memory couldn’t bring a happy one.

Two hours after the sun rose, the page in Tyrion’s service entered his rooms. “My lord,” he began, “Ser Kevan, Lady Genna and Maester Creylen are here to see you.”

Tyrion threw a hand in the air. “Let them in.” He slowly rose from his seat, standing on more or less sure feet. Despite everything he drank during the night, he could still stand with some dignity, though not as surely as when he was sober.

Ser Kevan Lannister, Lady Genna Frey and the maester of Casterly Rock came in one after one. The three faced Tyrion, Kevan in the middle with Genna on his right and Creylen on his left. All had a devastated expression on their face, though not in the same way. Creylen bore a worried look and played with the folds of his robe, Kevan was almost shaking and Tyrion could hear his unsteady breathing as much as he could see it, while Genna remained mostly calm and unmoving, though her eyes betrayed her sadness. Kevan was the one to speak.

“Tywin is dead.”

His voice was hoarse. Tyrion never saw his uncle in this state. Tyrion supposed he should say something, but nothing came out. He felt nothing. His father was dead. It didn’t seem to be the end of the world. Nothing seemed to have changed with his father’s departure. He simply nodded to mean he understood. The three people before him didn’t move, still looking as if they were waiting for him to make some declaration, but none came. For once, Tyrion had nothing to say. His sharp tongue couldn’t find something clever or funny to say.

Finally, his aunt stepped forward. She had tried to act like a mother to Jaime, Cersei and him, not without success, though even she couldn’t replace their mother. She bowed and came on her knees, keeping her face directed towards the floor.

“My lord.”

For a moment, Tyrion stood idle. What was going on? Why was his aunt kneeling before him and calling him My Lord? Tyrion then realized Kevan and Creylen had gone on one knee as well, their faces towards the floor as well. Tyrion realized what was happening. My father is dead. I am Lord of Casterly Rock.

A few hours later, Tyrion didn’t remember what he did afterwards, nor how he left his rooms, but he knew that during the day, Kevan and Genna summoned all the people in Casterly Rock. Family members, knights, guards, soldiers, servants, cooks, handmaidens, pages, everybody of all ages and all conditions were assembled in the Great Hall. Tyrion sat in the throne carved in gold with a golden lion head at its top and everyone in the Rock saluted him Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport and Lord of the Westerlands. He didn’t have yet the title of Warden of the West. Robert Baratheon had to give it to him once he would learn Tywin Lannister was dead.

In the weeks that followed, preparations were made for the coronation ceremony and the funerals. Kevan wrote to King’s Landing to inform the king and the small council that the Lord of Casterly Rock had left this world. Genna took care of informing Cersei and Tyrion wrote to Jaime. It was the only letter he wrote. His brother was the only one he wanted to share the new with. Tyrion’s things were moved to his father’s rooms, now his rooms, at the peak of Casterly Rock. Tywin Frey, Genna’s second son, became his personal page and squire. Ravens were sent all over Westeros to the other great houses, and to all the houses and cities in the Westerlands to spread the news that Tywin
Lannister, the Old Lion, was dead.

It took a month to organize the coronation ceremony and to let the noblemen and noblewomen of all the Westerlands arrive at the Rock in time. All this time, Tyrion spent most of his days and nights in his new rooms. It felt odd for him to occupy the chambers that had once been his father’s. Tyrion was already familiar with the duties a high lord had to fulfill. His father may have hated him, but he gave him the education every child of noble birth had a right to. Tyrion had found a new way to forget about his problems and to spend time: work. He quickly realized he loved it. Reading reports from army’s officers, mining engineers, tax collectors, shipyard supervisors, stewards, the master-at-arms, Creylen, knights and other lords was very easy for someone who spent his life in books. He worked closely with people to solve different problems in Casterly Rock, Lannisport and the Westerlands. The matters Tyrion had to handle could vary a lot, from the fighting against outlaws and pirates and the maintenance of the streets of Lannisport to the administration of food stocks and granaries and the collection of taxes on trade, crops, fisheries, forests and mining. With these problems, Tyrion could occupy most of his days. The learning to be Lord of Casterly Rock didn’t prove very difficult for him. Kevan himself looked impressed by him.

However, if ruling the lands around the Rock and the Westerlands could occupy his days, things were different for nights. For the first week, Tyrion mostly spent his nightly time drinking and reading, but in the end he grew bored of it. He needed a woman. His father told him he could bring a whore from time to time as long as the other people didn’t know. Tyrion supposed it would be no problem if he kept a whore in his service all the time. He only had to hide her among the servants.

During his second day as Lord of Casterly Rock, Tyrion had visited the kitchens to know more precisely how things were done there. He had spotted a girl on her knees cleaning the floor with a wet cloth. The second time he visited the kitchens, he asked her to come into his chambers tonight. The girl had come like Tyrion ordered her. He was the Lord now, so everyone had to obey him. She was very young, around fifteen he would have said. She had red hair, blue eyes, a lovely round face, a generous bosom and a slender frame. Her hands were red from all the rubbing she performed on the floor each day. Tyrion thought she had tried to make herself presentable before she came by washing her face, but she still bore the marks of her daily work. Despite her unwashed face and unkempt appearance, she was beautiful.

“What’s your name?” He had asked her.

“Alla, m’lord.” She answered timidly, looking at the floor. She was afraid of him. She didn’t have to be. He wouldn’t hurt her. Tyrion never hurt the women he spent time with.

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen, m’lord.” Tyrion’s heart dropped. He had known another girl who was fourteen, or at least who had been fourteen. The girl kept staring at the floor.

“Go to the bed,” Tyrion had ordered her. She had obeyed without a word and sat on his bed, the bed his father had been sleeping in only a few days ago. Tyrion stood before her, watching her. She kept her eyes cast down. “Take off your clothes.”

She did what he told her and soon she was naked before him, still sitting on the bed, refusing to look at him. She had a lovely body. A very lovely body. But there was something else than her beauty that attracted Tyrion’s gaze. She had bruises on her arms, on her legs and on her tummy.

“Show me your back.” She turned on herself, letting Tyrion see the other half of her body. Bruises covered all her back as well. Tyrion knew work conditions could be difficult in the kitchens, but to this point? He touched one of the bruises with his right hand. He felt the girl shiver under his palm.
“It hurt?” he asked.

“No, m’lord.” Her voice was barely audible, no more than a whisper.

“Alla, turn on yourself. Face me.” She executed his order like she did since she arrived here. “Look at me, Alla.”

Slowly, hesitantly, she lifted her face to look at him. There were tears threatening to break in her eyes. She was only a child, a scared child with nothing, forced to do as she was told. Tyrion felt terrible for her. A moment ago, all he had wanted was to take her into his bed and fuck her, but now he couldn’t. Tyrion went to a nearby table where there was wine and poured a cup. He brought it to Alla and offered her to drink it. She looked unsure about what to do, but before Tyrion’s insistence she finally took the cup and started to drink. She nearly spilled the first gulp and Tyrion warned her to drink slowly. She wasn’t used to wine, so she had to take it little by little. Tyrion kept examining her bruises.

“Where did you get all these bruises?”

The question startled the girl, but she finally gave in and confessed the bad treatments she had to endure all day. There were men, mostly guards and soldiers working in the Rock, who came almost each day to abuse her or some other girls working in the kitchens. Some hit her and the bruises could stay there for days. Tyrion knew the women in the kitchens could be mistreated, but the girl looked so lost and remembered him so much of another he once knew that he decided to do something for her. Alla slept into his bed this night, but without him. Tyrion remained in a chair, drowsing, thinking about what could be done. In the morning, Tyrion sent the girl back to the kitchens. He gave her a silver stag for her trouble and told her to hide it at all cost. Tyrion then went to the kitchens again and spoke with the cooks who overlooked the work there. At the end of the day, he had three names.

Next morning, Tyrion assembled the whole household of Casterly Rock with all the men living in the barracks. He had the three men who forced girls in the kitchens the day before to make love to them put on their knees, entirely naked before all Casterly Rock. Tyrion ordered each would receive ten lashes and everyone learned what happened at the Rock when a man forced himself upon a girl. There were a few more examples in the two weeks that followed, and soon the serving girls of Casterly Rock received more respect than they ever received in their whole life. Tyrion had gone back to the kitchens only once after he enforced these new measures, and he saw Alla scrubbing the floor like before, her hands still red from the effort, but without bruises on her arms. She smiled at him when he walked before her. One of the consequences of this, strangely, was that one night, two weeks after he made her come to his chambers the first time, Alla came of her own to his chambers and undressed before him. Despite his assurance that she didn’t need to do that, she said she had to thank him. She felt she had to do it, and didn’t think he would mistreat her. In the end, Tyrion spent the night with the lovely red head, only she did it willingly instead of being forced to do it. Tyrion gave her two silver stags on the next morning.

However, Tyrion shared most of his nights with someone else. He had remembered a beautiful tall woman in the beginning of her twenties with black hair and green eyes, a flat face and a body that barely allowed any curves who was working in a brothel in Lannisport and that he had enjoyed a lot the few times he visited her. Tyrion had sellswords bringing her inside the Rock in secret, disguised as a servant. From the second week after his father’s death, she spent all nights with him, except the one when Alla thanked him. That was some kind of revenge for Tyrion, to bring a whore in his father’s bed, his bed now he had to remind himself more than once.

Jaime and Cersei had answered they were coming back to Casterly Rock immediately when they received the ravens. King Robert wouldn’t come to pay his last respects to Lord Tywin. Not that the
stag had any respect for the Old Lion anyway. He only sent a raven, signed by Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King, acknowledging Tyrion in his titles and giving him the title of Warden of the West. Genna had organized the funerals and the coronation to take place exactly one month after her brother’s death, and Jaime and Cersei were still weeks away on the Goldroad when the day came.

Overall, Tyrion was recognized Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West by all the bannermen of House Lannister on the morning. Each lord, lady and landed knight came to pledge himself, or herself and his or her house to him in the Great Hall. This ceremony took almost all the morning. In the afternoon, Tyrion led the procession that carried his father’s body through the streets of Lannisport and all around the Rock until they brought it to the Hall of Heroes where the graves of all the previous Lords of the Rock, sometimes with their Lady, were laid. The procession was preceded by an exposure of Lord Tywin’s body in the sept of Lannisport where noble people could come and pay their final respects to their deceased liege lord. A feast followed and many toasts were made, though Tyrion didn’t think those made in his or his father’s honor were sincere in any way.

Tyrion had found the procession quite gloomy. He supposed a burial had to be gloomy, but it was the type of gloominess he didn’t like. People didn’t weep for his father. Tyrion knew very well Tywin Lannister hadn’t been loved by almost everyone, from the smallfolk to his most important bannermen. He had been feared and respected, sometimes even praised for his deeds, but never loved. Anyway his father never expected his subjects to love him or tried to have them love him. Love was useless in his eyes. Everyone in the Westerlands had had no love for Tywin Lannister, and Tywin Lannister had had no love for anyone in the Westerlands. Except his wife perhaps, before she died. No one would cry for his death, and many people were probably happy.

In fact, Tyrion had noticed he was the one the people were looking at. They were probably afraid of him. They knew who Tywin Lannister was, but they had no idea who his son was. What kind of lord was he? What would he do? What was to expect from him? The smallfolk were uncertain about their new lord. The minor lords and landed knights showed him respect, but Tyrion thought he saw many of them laughing at him in their cups during the feast that closed the day. Tyrion decided he would show them who he was.

Tyrion left soon during the feast and walked to his chambers. Kevan had left too before, grief devouring him certainly. Tyrion slowly climbed to the top of the castle and finally reached his private rooms. He longed for Ellaryn’s body. That was the name of the whore he hired three weeks ago. He didn’t see how he could sleep even a little without her. When he went through the golden doors and penetrated in his bedchamber, however, it wasn’t Ellaryn he found, but his uncle.

“What are you doing here?” Tyrion asked immediately, harshly.

“We need to talk.” His uncle’s voice was very calm and showed no emotion. His eyes however showed determination when he looked about to fall for almost the whole feast.

Tyrion looked around him. Ellaryn wasn’t there. “Where is she?”

“I sent her away. You don’t have to worry. I only paid her and told her to leave. No harm came to her. I’m not Tywin.”

Tyrion sighed in relief. He didn’t want the story to repeat itself. “That’s useless, Uncle. I’ll bring her back tomorrow.”

“No, you won’t.” Kevan was firm. “This must end, Tyrion. You are the Lord of Casterly Rock now. You can’t keep doing this kind of things. It reflects badly on the whole family.”
“Just like I gave a bad image of our family before. I don’t remember you caring so much about what I did in my spare time.”

“Because it wasn’t my duty to do so. Things are different now. I was your father’s advisor for many years. Most of the time we agreed, but there were times I disagreed with your father’s decision and I voiced my opposition. Now I must do the same with you.”

Tyrion scoffed. Kevan Lannister seldom had an idea Tywin Lannister didn’t have before. “I’m performing my duties of lord during the days. What problem is there if I bring a whore into my bed at night if it doesn’t affect my work at day? Your brother himself told me I could do it as long as I wasn’t caught. He said I wouldn’t be the first Lord of the Rock to do so.”

Kevan looked surprised for a second, but it only lasted a second. “As I told you, I didn’t always agree with your father.”

“Did you always voice your opposition?”

Kevan pursed his lips for a few seconds before he answered. “No. Your father was never a man who appreciated to be contradicted. If I had opposed too often, he wouldn’t have allowed me by his side any longer. It was better for me to shut up from time to time than to never have anything to say.”

Kevan sighed heavily. “I know Tywin looked hard for you. To me too he looked hard. There are things he did… I disapproved. But he was no harder than he had to be. Our father was kind, gentle and amiable, but also weak. Our house came close to downfall under his rule. Tywin had to restore House Lannister. For that he needed to be hard. There was no other way.”

Tyrion rarely saw his uncle so emotive. “Couldn’t he have been gentle and strong at the same time?”

“Perhaps,” Kevan conceded after a few moments. “You didn’t grow up in the circumstances I and Tywin grew in. He was my brother. I respected him, and I loved him, like every brother loves his brother.” Tyrion could understand. He loved Jaime. Perhaps he even loved Cersei, despite the hatred she always showed towards him. “But I know Tywin wasn’t perfect. I know he did horrible things. Some were necessary, some were not. But he did bring our family back on his feet. That is a fact, and we cannot let everything he built fall into pieces.”

Kevan went to sit. He was obviously tired. Tyrion followed him, sitting face to face with his uncle on the other side of a table. His uncle had been his father’s advisor for many years. His father may not have kept him at his side only because he always said the same thing than him. Tywin Lannister had nothing to do with sycophants.

“So, you think I will bring back the era when House Lannister was mocked just like I bring whores in my bed?”

“No. I know you’re not your grandfather, Tyrion. To be honest I’m impressed. You showed great abilities to rule ever since your father died. Tywin himself would have admired you. But you cannot continue to live the way you did before. You are no longer a second son everyone is laughing at because he’s a dwarf. You are the Lord of Casterly Rock, the leader of our house. Everything you do reflects on all your siblings, and on the reputation of the family. You must stop drinking, whoring, gambling and making bawdy jokes. You must be a lord. Our lord.”

Tyrion didn’t know if he would be able to do so. He already missed the girl he spent the last nights with. “I don’t know if I’ll be able.”

“You’ll have to.” Kevan’s tone showed there was no place for discussion. “We recognized you Lord of Casterly Rock because we thought we needed you, so don’t make us regret our choice.”
That statement let Tyrion perplexed. “What do you mean? Your choice?”

Kevan looked down a moment before he explained everything. “Tywin died in the middle of the night. Immediately after Creylen confirmed his death, Genna asked for him to bring Tywin’s will. I and Creylen thought it would be better to wait the morning to open it, but Genna is difficult to argue with. Once her mind is set upon something, nothing can divert it.” Kevan gave a dry laugh. “That’s strange, when we think about it. My brothers and I barely had anything in common with Tywin, but Genna looks a lot like him. If she had been a man, she would have been his advisor in my stead. Creylen finally complied and brought the will. We opened it in the Maester’s Tower and read it. Mostly, Tywin let something to everyone in his family, even you, but it was the succession for Casterly Rock that was the most interesting.”

“He designated Jaime as his heir. I know. He told me.” Tyrion interrupted his uncle who resumed immediately.

“Yes. He made Jaime his heir. But Genna told us Jaime was a kingsguard and hence couldn’t marry or inherit. Creylen agreed with her. I was of the opinion to wait for your brother and your sister to come back so we could discuss about it, perhaps find a way to have Tywin’s last wishes respected. I wanted to send a raven to King’s Landing to inform them of this and see if the king would be ready to release Jaime from his vows. But Genna opposed. Do you know what she said?”

Tyrion shook his head. What could Genna have said?

“She said Jaime wasn’t fitting to be Lord of Casterly Rock. That he had some of his three uncles inside him, but nothing of his father. That anyway Jaime didn’t want to succeed his father and had never wanted to succeed him. She said you were Tywin’s son. The only one of his children who could maintain what he built in the last decades and build on it.” Tyrion was agape before this. His aunt really said that? “And the worse was that Creylen agreed. He said Jaime and Cersei didn’t have the will or the skills to lead House Lannister. He wasn’t categorical like Genna, but he approved what she said. I found myself alone and I had to concede. So we went to your chamber not long after and knelt before you, recognizing you as our lord. Up to now, it seems we made a good choice. But I don’t want this decision to turn against us. I want it to remain a good decision.”

So, that was the truth. Genna, Creylen and Kevan came to recognize him Lord of Casterly Rock because they thought Jaime and Cersei wouldn’t be able to rule the Westerlands like he would. Tyrion felt proud about that. There weren’t many people who appraised him for who he was, but now it seemed there were some at the Rock who recognized he was better than his brother and his sister. He didn’t mind if Jaime would be better than him, but it would bother him if people believed Cersei was more worthy than him. His aunt, his uncle and the maester weren’t far from performing a coup in some people’s eyes, but they had excellent reasons. Tyrion was the lawful heir to his father since Jaime donned the white cloak, no one could argue with this. No kingsguard was ever released from hi vows, and Jaime would never leave the Kingsguard. He would never want to leave Cersei’s side. Tyrion knew very well what was going on between them, and he forgave Jaime for that. He could forgive him almost everything.

Tyrion thought about what his uncle said. It was true, he was a great lord now. He had duties. Could he really keep living like he always did? He didn’t know.

“No drinking. No whoring. No gambling. No japing. No joking.” He sighed. “Life will be quite dull. Well, I have work to occupy my days, but for nights that’s another story. Even I can get bored of books in time, and my sleep is shit.”

“You’ll have to. The future of our house may depend on it.” Tyrion didn’t know if he would be able to stop all of this so suddenly. If only he was only asked to stop whoring or drinking, he would still
be able to rely on the other one to forget about the one he stopped, but to stop both? He would need to keep his tongue as well, something he wasn’t used to. He could do without gambling without problem he thought, but the other things would be far more difficult to end.

“There is another reason why I came, Tyrion. Lord Gawen Westerling came to see me during the feast. He offered me to marry his eldest daughter to you.”

Tyrion was startled by this. “Really? He was drunk, probably.”

“No, he wasn’t. He was very serious.” There was no trace of humor in Kevan’s demeanour.

“Then he must have gone mad. Only someone insane or desperate would want to marry his daughter to me.”

“You are the Lord of the Westerlands, Tyrion.” Kevan looked exasperated in some way. “Whoever marries you will become the lady of this castle, and the richest woman in the Seven Kingdoms. Don’t be surprised if some families are willing to marry their daughters to you.”

Tyrion hadn’t thought about this. He had lost all hope to marry one day after the failure of his first marriage. “I wish they had been interested before.”

“Your father tried to arrange you a marriage many times when he was still alive. Not long after you were born, the Princess of Dorne, Anera Martell, came to visit Casterly Rock with her youngest children, Princess Elia and Prince Oberyn. She had been a friend to your mother when they both lived in King’s Landing and had wished she could arrange a marriage between Cersei and Oberyn, or between Jaime and Elia, or even both. But your mother died and Tywin refused the betrothals when Princess Anera proposed them. He offered you to marry Elia Martell instead.”

“I guess the Martells didn’t take it quite well.”

“No, they didn’t. They were insulted, truth be told.”

“We can’t blame them for that.”

Kevan resumed as if Tyrion never spoke. “Later, Tywin tried to arrange a betrothal between your brother Jaime and the youngest daughter of Lord Hoster Tully, Lysa Tully.”

“It seems it didn’t work out well.”

“Not by your father’s fault. King Aerys named your brother in the Kingsguard. When it happened, Tywin tried to propose you to marry Lady Lysa instead of Jaime.”

“And I guess he was refused again, and that like the Martells the Tullys felt insulted.”

“Lord Hoster Tully replied his daughter required a whole man.” Tyrion wasn’t sure Lysa Tully was happier to marry a man thrice her age instead of a man half her size. “He tried to arrange a marriage between you and a daughter of Lord Leyton Hightower, then of Lord Yohn Royce, but they both declined as well. He even tried to offer you to Delena Florent.”

“The woman deflowered by Robert in his brother’s wedding bed? My father had to be really despaired.”

“Her father preferred to marry her to one of his household knights. But now things are different. You may be a dwarf, but you are also a great lord. One of the most powerful in the Seven Kingdoms. I don’t expect Lord Westerling to be the last one to offer his daughter or a woman of his family to
“I was married, once. We both know how it ended,” Tyrion said with a gloomy voice while looking away.

He thought Kevan waited for a moment before to reply. “Tywin is dead. And the woman you’ll marry won’t be lowborn. She will be a lady, the Lady of House Lannister.”

Tyrion looked back at his uncle. “Who is the daughter Lord Westerling talked about?”

“Her name is Jeyne. But I wouldn’t advise you to accept this offer. Lady Westerling is a Spicer. Her grandfather was a merchant and his wife some witch from across the Narrow Sea according to some people. The Westerlings are poor and have nothing to offer us. They are only trying to use the situation to have one of them in a good position. A marriage between you and their daughter would be very good for them, but they wouldn’t bring us anything.”

“How is the girl?”

Kevan took an exasperated look again. “Tyrion, we have nothing to gain from such an alliance, and much to lose.”

“I only want to know a few things about the girl. Who is she? How does she look like? How old is she?”

His uncle pressed his lips, disapproving. “I never saw her. From what Lord Gawen told me, she is quite pretty. She has brown eyes and hair, chestnut curls, a lovely face, and she is quite slender. She just flowered apparently. She is twelve.”

Tyrion averted his eyes on the side. A father was ready to give his little girl of twelve to him, the Imp, the whoremonger of Casterly Rock. What kind of father would be ready to do such a thing? Tyrion’s father would, probably.

“I think we can refuse. You’re right, an alliance with the Westerlings has no advantage. Though if they were the only ones ready to offer me a woman, we would be better to not answer right now.”

“I think it is unlikely we won’t receive other offers, but I will delay our answer,” Kevan said. “You need to marry someone from a great house. Someone worthy to become the Lady of the Rock. Someone who comes from a family that an alliance with them would make us stronger. Your father married his first-cousin. It may not have been the best choice, but Tywin wouldn’t have married someone else.” Tyrion remembered his uncle Gerion once said Tywin Lannister was never the same after his wife died. Surely he had loved her dearly. “Our bannermen need to be humored. Many might want a woman from their family to become the new Lady of the Westerlands.”

“So we can forget about any idea to have me marry Cerenna or Myrielle.” That didn’t bother Tyrion. His cousins were never close to him. The only one he was fond of in some way was Joy, his uncle’s natural daughter, because she was an outcast like him and because Gerion was always the uncle Tyrion the closer to. All dwarves were bastards in their father’s eyes. “Who would be the best choice?”

“You could choose among the other great families of the Westerlands. The Crakehalls, the Farmans, the Marbrands, the Leffords. Many have marriageable women.”

Tyrion reviewed the most powerful houses of the Westerlands in his head, until he remembered a memory from three years ago. “Lord Lefford has a daughter, if I remember well. Alysanne Lefford, is that her name?”
“Yes, that is,” Kevan confirmed. “That wouldn’t be a bad choice. The Leffords are the richest family in the west after us, and Lady Alysanne is the heir and only child of Lord Lefford. If Lord Lefford was to accept, this would bind our two houses together, and give the Golden Tooth along with the Rock to the children you would have with the young woman.”

Tyrion had travelled through the Westerlands three years ago and had stopped at the Golden Tooth during his journey. Lord Lefford had been courteous enough with him. After all, the Lord of the Golden Tooth couldn’t show disrespect to the son of Tywin Lannister. The Old Lion wouldn’t have tolerated one of his bannermen to mock a member of his family, even his misshapen dwarf son. However, it had been obvious he only felt disdain for Tyrion and only reluctantly allowed him to stay at the Tooth for the night. His daughter had been kinder. She had spoken with Tyrion during dinner, even smiling at his bad jokes. She had talked with him about the wonders described by Lomas Longstrider and didn’t seem to hate or despise him. Tyrion remembered her to be quite tall, with long legs, brown hair braided in tresses, green eyes, a high chin and a face that was neither square nor round. She had been fifteen when Tyrion had met her. She had to be eighteen now, and she was still unwed. A beautiful young woman, and intelligent with that. Tyrion couldn’t really ask better since she was also the heir to the Golden Tooth.

“Perhaps we should ask Lord Lefford then.” Tyrion could already imagine him wed to the future Lady of the Tooth. He would probably be able to do without whores for the rest of his life if he married her.

Kevan looked hesitant. “The Golden Tooth would be a very good choice, Tyrion. But we mustn’t only look at the Westerlands. We must also search outside our borders.”

“I thought we had to give some satisfaction to our bannermen.”

“Yes. But if you marry one of your bannermen’s daughter, the other ones will grow envious. That’s why your father wanted to marry Jaime to Lysa Tully, so none of the minor houses would complain we privileged someone else from the west.”

“Well, it’s a little too late for that. I doubt the Hand of the King will want to surrender his wife to me.”

“There are other options,” Kevan stated. “Your father tried with the Hightowers and the Royces before.”

“And he failed. You want us to try again?” Tyrion didn’t really want to look at other possible brides. He knew Alysanne Lefford. She wasn’t ugly nor stupid, she was the heir of the second richest family in Westeros probably, so why look for someone else?

“I already tried again.”

Tyrion nearly jumped at the revelation. “What?”

“I sent a raven to another powerful lord to propose a marriage between his daughter and you. I sent it two days after Tywin died. I’m still waiting for his answer.”

“You tried to arrange me a wedding without telling me?”

“You weren’t in a good state to discuss about this matter back then. You already had a lot to do with your other duties. And I couldn’t wait. An alliance with this house would give us opportunities we didn’t have for centuries. It could make us much more powerful than any alliance with a family of the Westerlands. We cannot let go off that chance.” Tyrion was angry all the same. Couldn’t he have
something to say about the choice of his wife, at least? “I suggest we wait for the answer. If they are not interested with my proposal, then we will look for the Leffords and the other families in the Westerlands. If they are interested, I think you should consider this betrothal very seriously. That chance won’t present itself again before long.”

“Allright, Kevan. I will wait.” Tyrion was still unhappy about this, but after all he was the Lord now, and if he didn’t want of this marriage, he could still refuse it after the answer came. “May I know who did you write to? Who are you trying to get myself married to?”

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: the rose
Chapter Notes

So, now you know who is the rose in this story. I'm sorry for everyone who hoped it would be Sansa, but I hope I already fill some of your hopes with my other fic. I wanted to explore a possible marriage between Tyrion and Margaery in this fic. You must also consider that I follow the show, and we are three years before Season 1. This means Sansa is only ten-years-old at this moment. She is far too young to marry and didn't flower yet. Furthermore, I don't think Ned Stark would accept to marry his daughter to the son of Tywin Lannister, even for all the gold of Casterly Rock.

I assume that Margaery was eighteen at the beginning of Season 1, so she is fifteen at the beginning of this story. Since Tyrion is twenty-two, there is a gap of seven years between them, which a very decent age gap for a medieval society.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY I

They left Highgarden around midday for the picnic they had agreed upon while breaking their fast. While the morning was spent in embroidery, music, dance, court, writing and sums lessons, they had the afternoon for themselves and decided to wander out of the castle. It was a beautiful day, without a single cloud, the fresh breeze from the Mander caressing their faces as they went into the countryside. Some of the girls raced on their horses and mares while others remained behind, riding peacefully and slowly, enjoying the beautiful weather and the beauty of the landscape while talking, joking and laughing. Smiles were on everyone’s face.

Lady Margaery of House Tyrell didn’t race like some of her cousins did. She remained behind with two of her handmaidens and Alla, the shyest one. They had guards following them to ensure their safety, though Margaery doubted anyone would attack them so close to Highgarden. If they were to meet people, it was more likely that it would be to ask her for charity than to attack them. She had begun to get involved in the charity works her mother managed two years ago, and the people had come to appreciate her a lot wherever she went. They were running to her as soon as they learned that Margaery Tyrell and her friends were there.

That was the reason why Margaery had argued for a short trip on the Mander with a pleasure boat, but her cousins had been unanimous about an excursion in the countryside and she had to yield. She would have preferred to take no chance of being bothered today. Instead they rode to a nearby hill, a few miles away from the castle, Margaery hoping they wouldn’t be disturbed. Elinor and Megga reached the hill before them since they were racing to arrive first. Margaery dismounted when she arrived close to her cousins at the top of the hill. Her two handmaidens started to unpack the food they brought for the afternoon and to prepare the picnic near the shadow of a tree while Margaery and her three cousins picked flowers, ran and jumped all around.

Margaery watched from the corner of her eyes her two handmaidens preparing everything. The one with black hair was diligent and placed blankets, dishes, cups, food, umbrellas and everything at the right place with perfect accuracy and convenience. Margaery seldom saw such an efficient
handmaiden. The other handmaiden, the one with brown hair, hesitated from time to time about how and where to place that thing or that other thing, and moved a few objects on suggestions from the black haired one. Perhaps I should ask for more northern handmaidens. If they are all like her, I will have the most diligent retinue in the Seven Kingdoms.

When the picnic was ready, Margaery, Elinor, Megga and Alla all took place and began to eat peaches, pears, apples, melons, fireplums, bread, salmons, oysters, ham and many other things more delicious than the other. They were served wine by Margaery’s handmaidens. After a moment, Margaery invited them both to sit with them and to enjoy the day. If the girls needed to take something else from the things they brought with them, everyone only had to take it by herself. They were between friends here. While the daughter of Lady Ollena’s former handmaiden joined them, the one with black hair excused herself and went to the extremity of the hill, looking away in Highgarden’s direction.

The girls gossiped, talked, joked, laughed, giggled, sometimes threw food at each other, and then it was time for sweets. They all went to bring some from the bags they brought and Margaery’s handmaiden who steer clear of them came to help. Once the sweets were in place, she went back to observe the castle. After some more time discussing with her friends, Margaery couldn’t support it anymore. She took a few honey cakes in a plate and went to see her handmaiden who stood alone.

“Mira, you should eat something at least.”

“Thank you, my lady,” the northern girl answered and she began to eat the first cake. “It’s delicious.”

Mira returned to her contemplation of Highgarden. It was the most beautiful castle in the world, and it was Margaery’s home. It was all white and stood on a hill with gently slopes. Three concentric rings of crenellated curtain walls defended Highgarden, though they hadn’t proved useful for centuries. The towers were slender and graceful as maidens, ivy and grapes climbing and covering all of them. From the hill where she stood, Margaery could distinguish the briar maze between the outermost and the middle wall as well as some waterfalls inside the castle. The castle sept could be seen as well from there, but Margaery thought Mira was probably looking at the only weirwood tree they could see from the three that actually composed the godswood. Mira prayed there quite often. She was the first person in decades to use the godswood of Highgarden for religious purpose instead of leisure.

“You should sit with us,” said Margaery. “Even Sera is there.”

“Thank you, my lady. But I’m afraid someone wouldn’t be pleased with my presence.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Megga has some grudge against me since yesterday.”

Margaery was quite surprised by this. “What happened?”

“Nothing very important, my lady. I was just walking in one the gardens when Megga started to name me almost all varieties of flowers there were here. She told me all specimens of flowers were in the garden. So I told her it was obvious she never visited the North.”

“Why?”

“She told me I probably knew nothing of flowers since I came from a place where there were none. So I gave her a lesson about winter roses and ice tulips.” A little smile appeared on Mira’s face. “She didn’t like to be wrong.”
Margaery had to laugh about it. “Megga,” she said with a half exasperated voice. “You must have told her something else.”

“I told her she knew nothing about the North. I didn’t say it nastily, my lady.”

“No, I’m sure of that. Well, that shouldn’t stop you from coming with us. You’re my handmaiden, Mira, and I order you to sit with us and to enjoy the afternoon.”

“I have no choice then.” Mira surrendered and followed Margaery back to the group of girls. Margaery took back her place between Alla and Megga while Mira sat next to Sera, her other handmaiden. Mira mostly talked with the latter. Time passed as they ate pastries. Megga was the one to eat the most of them and quickly started to give her opinion about all of them.

“Honey cakes are too much sugary, too sweet. Strawberry shortcakes are better however, and pear pies are even better. But nothing beats lemon cakes. They are the best ones. We can choose whatever we want. There are sweets for all tastes. I’m sure we don’t have that much choice in the North. Isn’t it, Mira?”

Mira was eating another honey cake. It was her third, but along with a little lemon cake they were the only sweets she took when Megga had already taken a dozen and had many others in her plate. She was already round at nine and talked loudly. Margaery understood that Mira had been sincere before. Megga was targeting her when talking against honey cakes. The northern girl turned to Megga to answer very quietly.

“No, we don’t. We have some sweets, of course, but not many. The North is a rude land. We eat what we can harvest, hunt and fish mostly.”

“It seems I know more than you in that, Lady Mira,” Megga said with a wicked smile.

“I can’t argue with you about it, Lady Megga. I spent my time at other things than knowing all the pastries in the world. And everyone discovers very quickly you know more about pastries than anyone else in Highgarden once they meet you.”

Megga had her mouth wide opened. She didn’t expect this reply. Margaery had to repress a chuckle. Mira went back to speak with Sera while Margaery resumed a conversation with Elinor.

After the picnic was over, they went hawking for most of what was left of the afternoon. They came back to Highgarden a few hours later and Margaery went to her chambers in order to take a bath before dinner. While she relaxed in the bathtub filled with a fragrance of rare red rose from the Arbor, she talked with her two handmaidens. While Sera was enthusiastic about everything happening in Highgarden she talked about, Mira remained silent for most of the time, mostly fetching Margaery’s clothes for the evening. Margaery knew Mira didn’t enjoy gossiping very much.

“Sera, you may take your leave for the evening. I won’t need you anymore. Mira will keep me company.”

Sera seemed taken aback by this. “My lady, I can stay. It doesn’t bother me.”

“I know, Sera. I just want some time alone with Mira. Please leave us.”

Sera left with a sulky look on her face. Margaery would talk to her tomorrow. Mira stood before her, her head bowed. “You wish to speak to me, my lady?”

Margaery smiled. “Yes, Mira. Take a seat. Make yourself comfortable.” The northern girl complied and brought a chair to sit by Margaery’s side, right next to the bathtub. Margaery eyed the girl for a
very long time.

Mira Forrester had arrived at Highgarden two months ago. She had black hair, green eyes, a pale
skin, a slender frame and a long face, more square than round. She was the eldest daughter of a
minor lord of the North sworn to House Glover of Deepwood Motte, but her mother came from an
ancient house of the Reach almost entirely wiped out during Robert’s Rebellion. Despite this, Mira’s
mother still had relations in the Reach and had arranged for her daughter to serve as a handmaiden in
Highgarden, wishing Mira to learn the ways of the southern courts. Mira had come to Highgarden
with four bearded men of the North in her father’s service, only with gowns made of wool in her
bags, far too hot for the weather of the Reach.

Mira wasn’t shy, but she was reserved and didn’t talk a lot. Unlike Margaery’s other friends, she
didn’t enjoy gossiping or small talk very much. Margaery’s parents and her grandmother had dined
with her when she arrived to welcome her, since she was a hightborn lady. Margaery had been
present at the dinner as well. Although her mother and her father found Mira quite simple and
somewhat mannerless, Margaery and her grandmother had found her quite intriguing and intelligent.
Lady Olenna had tested the girl of thirteen with her sharp tongue, and Mira always answered to
Margaery’s grandmother directly, not being rude but saying what she thought while staying calm and
quiet like Margaery rarely saw someone capable of doing so when facing the Queen of Thorns. The
next morning, Mira had invited Mira in her chamber to break her fast and had a private
discussion with her. Mira talked about her family, about her interests and what she loved, and
Margaery realized the girl was quite clever and intelligent, but also honest. Her straightforward ways
were strange for a place like Highgarden, but Margaery had found them more interesting and original
than anything else. She spent more time with the newly arrived lady this day and saw she was well-
educated. Her embroidery works competed and sometimes outmatched Margaery’s own works, she
rode very well on horse and had more knowledge in her head than any of Margaery’s kin. If she had
been a man, Margaery thought she could have ended a maester. At the end of this day, Margaery had
gone to her parents and asked for Mira to be placed among her personal handmaidens.

After two months, Mira managed to find a very good place at Margaery’s side. Of all her
handmaidens, the two Margaery loved the most were Mira Forrester and Sera Durwell, but Margaery
appreciated Mira more and more every day. It was refreshing to see someone say what she really
thought among all the liars in the Reach, but without the sharpness of her grandmother. Mira was
always sincere, as much with Margaery than with everyone else, which put her at odds with some
people in Highgarden. She was reserved, probably because she felt like a stranger here. Mira would
reply to anyone who would imply something about her in a direct way, though the way she replied
was also well-mannered, without crude language and without insult, but always turning someone’s
words against himself. Margaery liked it in the northern girl, but it didn’t help her to make friends
here. The fact she just arrived didn’t help either and she spent more time reading and contemplating
the wonders of Highgarden and its surroundings than talking with other people. Her lack of interest
for gossiping didn’t make things easier to integrate the society of Highgarden. But for Margaery it
didn’t matter. She appreciated Mira and her honesty.

And now this girl, who was only two years younger than her mistress, sat before her, waiting silently
for Margaery to say something. Mira now wore appropriate garments for the Reach, having traded
her woolen robes for lighter gown and dresses made of silk. Her clothes were quite simple, but
Margaery remembered Mira once told her they were more costly and luxurious than anything else
she wore during her whole life. They left her arms uncovered and there were designs of flowers and
branches on her jerkin. She also began recently to arrange her hair in a southern way like the other
girls here at Highgarden. At thirteen, Mira was already quite beautiful. Margaery wondered if a boy
had his eyes set upon her.

“How are you, Mira?” Margaery finally asked after a moment.
"I’m fine, my lady." Margaery knew by now that her handmaiden was used to go straight to the point. She didn’t lose time in compliments and only performed the essential courtesies. She probably thought Margaery had something important to tell her and waited for her mistress to tell it.

"Did you enjoy your day?"

"Yes, my lady. It was a beautiful day."

"Yes, it was." Margaery let a moment pass. "You’ve been here for many weeks now. Do you like Highgarden?"

"Of course, my lady." She said it as if it was an evidence. "I like it very much. It’s a beautiful place."

"Despite Megga’s comments on sweets and flowers?"

Mira shrugged. "It doesn’t matter. Nothing can be perfect." A silence followed. "To be honest, my lady, I like Highgarden very much, but there are things that bother me. Many people seem to find me strange. I know I look out of place."

"Well, I must admit your tendency to be direct is unsettling for many people, including my parents. But my grandmother likes you very much. You’re among the few people who can suffer her without losing their composure or looking confused. And you seem in rather good terms with Sera."

"Yes, Sera is very kind. We spend some time together every day. But I miss my home. Ethan playing music. Talia singing. Rodrik and Asher sparring with Ser Royland. Ryon crying while my mother tries to make him sleep. Or Gared tending a horse in the stables. Or Maester Ortengryn, talking about Essos, Oldtown, the Citadel, the Vale…"

Margaery’s handmaiden looked lost in her memories. Margaery saw that she missed her family and the place where she grew up. She wondered how she would feel in Mira’s place. She didn’t know how she would feel the day she would have to leave Highgarden and her family, though she knew that day would come. "I know it must have been difficult to leave the people you love behind you, Mira. But you have friends here. Remember. And your mother wanted you to learn the southern ways. There is no better place for that than Highgarden." Mira returned the smile Margaery gave her. Margaery sighed. "I wish I had a sister, and more brothers. I love my little brother, but sometimes Loras can be exasperating, just like my father. I wish I had another brother. At least I have my cousins, but they can’t entirely replace brothers."

"I had no cousin at Ironrath, but Gared was almost like one. My mother always treated him as if he was her own son. There were people who looked down at him because his father was a farmer, but he was no different from us. If he had been the son of a lord, no one would have spoken against him, and yet he would have been the same boy."

Margaery nodded in approval. "The lowest among us are no different from the highest if you give them a chance and approach them with an open heart. We could have been born peasants. My father could have been a crofter, or a miner, or a craftsman. We were both lucky to grow in a castle, Mira."

"Yes, we are."

Another silence followed and Margaery enjoyed the feeling of the water on her skin. Mira was staring at the floor, obviously lost in her thoughts, or only expecting Margaery to say something else. In the end, Margaery did. "I’ll talk with Megga tomorrow. With some hope, she will forget everything. It would be a shame that she remains hostile to you only for flowers and pastries. Though I admit you replied very well to her. My grandmother would have liked to be there. I should invite
Both girls laughed, Margaery more than Mira who laughed more lightly. Mira helped Margaery to
dry herself and to don her gown for the dinner after she left the tub. She also combed and braided her
hair before they left for the dining room. When they reached the doors, Margaery gave her leave to
Mira who left after a curtsy to go back to her chambers. Margaery thought she had a good idea what
Mira might do. She would certainly read some book Maester Lomys suggested her a few days ago.
Mira read more than all of Margaery’s cousins put together, though her cousins didn’t read much.

The dining room was large with round marble columns along the walls, stems with flowers covering
them all while tapestries on all the walls showed fountains, lakes, flowers, fruits and splendid views,
some real and some out of imagination. A small round table had been placed for the evening since
they would be very few. Margaery’s parents were already there, whispering to each other with
animosity. Her father’s face was hidden to her, but she could see her mother’s. Lady Alerie Tyrell
looked angry, but as soon as she saw her daughter coming in their direction, she smiled and came to
hug her.

“My little girl, have you spent a good day?”

“I have, mother. But I’m not really a little girl. I’m fifteen, remember.”

Her mother put a hand on her left cheek. “You’ll always be my little girl, Margaery, no matter how
old you are.”

Margaery found her mother’s behaviour quite strange. She was much more affectionate than usually,
and Margaery could see her smiles were forced. Her father came to put a kiss on her forehead. He
looked nervous, and Margaery noticed her mother glaring angrily at him. Something was going on.
The three of them took their places at the table. There were still two empty chairs.

“Where are Loras and grandmother?” Margaery asked.

“Your brother is certainly still training with the master-at-arms if he thinks he can display his prowess
before someone. If not, then I have no idea where he could be since there is no other reason why he
would be late.” Lady Olenna Tyrell, Lord Mace’s mother, entered the room with her sharp tongue
like always. “I may be old and slow, but unlike your brother I know how to arrive in time for dinner.
I’m glad to see you my dear.” Her grandmother kissed her on the cheek.

“Loras surely has good reasons to be late.”

“Loras always has a good reason. That doesn’t mean he should be late.” The Queen of Thorns took
place at Margaery’s left, on her father’s right. “Did you enjoy your excursion this afternoon?”

“Yes, grandmother. Very. One of my handmaidens shut up Megga.”


“Her name is Mira.”

“Oh, yes, that’s it. No matter. I should ask her to break her fast with me, or to take some meals with
me from time to time. That would make them less boring.”

Margaery could only smile and laugh at her grandmother’s comments. In the meantime, her parents
had remained at their place, Lady Olenna barely acknowledging their presence as she gave all her
attention to her granddaughter. Margaery knew that Olenna Tyrell had a poor opinion of her son and
his wife, even if he was still her son. She had a poor opinion of Loras as well, though Margaery
thought Loras didn’t deserve this. He was still young at thirteen, and still had time to change. Margaery talked with her grandmother while her mother and her father started again to whisper loudly. Margaery understood a few words they exchanged, like *How can you do that? She is your daughter. My daughter. You should refuse.* These were her mother’s words. Her father, on the other side, spoke differently. *I can’t just tell no. I’m only considering. Nothing is decided. That could be good for us.*

After almost fifteen minutes of waiting, her brother finally came in. Loras was already very handsome and half the girls of the Reach wanted him in their bed, though most of them would probably be disappointed after the first night. Margaery knew very well, just like all her family (though her father tried to ignore it and her mother tried more than once to reason Loras about it), that her brother loved one man and only man, and that his bed was for him and only for him. Margaery welcomed Loras warmly, just like their parents, but her grandmother said what she thought like always.

“*You should spend less time fighting with swords to amaze the crowd and more time to arrive in time where you’re supposed to be.*”

“*Mother, please, don’t be so hard on him,*” Margaery’s father said.

“*Why not? You’re not hard on him at all. You let him do as he pleases. I don’t intend my grandson to turn like an oaf. Should I remind you started to turn an oaf when your father allowed you to do everything you wanted, Mace?*”

“*Mother!*” Lady Alerie almost shouted.

“*Hush, Alerie. No need to cry. And don’t call me Mother. If I’d given birth to you, I’m sure I’d remember. I’m only to blame for your husband, the lord oaf of Highgarden.*” Both Margaery and Loras couldn’t repress their laughs. Their grandmother turned to them. “*You, Margaery, you can laugh. Loras, stop it immediately. Next time, you arrive in time, or else you won’t be allowed to enter at all and you’ll practice in the courtyard with an empty stomach the following morning. Now bring us this food so we can eat like a family.*”

The last order was addressed to the servants who quickly brought dinner. The Queen of Thorns was feared and obeyed more than the Fat Flower in Highgarden, and all over the Reach as well. Lady Olenna Tyrell was the true leader of House Tyrell. Margaery hoped to be like her someday, though perhaps less sharp.

Discussions went about that thing and the other, from songs to harvest, from tapestries to politics, from wine to tourneys. When they arrived at the latter subject, her father seized the opportunity to talk to Loras.

“My son, I hope you will participate to the squire’s tourney I’m organizing in two months. That would be a good occasion for you to be knighted.”

“Nonsense, Mace,” his mother interrupted him immediately. “Loras is your son and heir. He doesn’t need a tourney to be knighted.”

Loras stood in the conversation at this moment. “I will win this tourney. I will show everyone that I am the best jouster in the Reach. No. The best jouster in all the Seven Kingdoms.”

“I’m sure you will be,” Margaery said, putting a hand on her brother’s arm on her right. “You will win this tourney, but don’t imagine you already won before you did.”
“Who could best me?” Loras asked in a mocking tone. He was really sure to win the tourney. Margaery had to admit he was probably not wrong.

“Someone you would never think about.” Lady Olenna stepped into the conversation once more. “Don’t be so sure you’ll win. And this is only a squire’s tourney. That’s not as if you would defeat the greatest knights in the Seven Kingdoms. There will be no knights in this tourney, only squires. That’s why we call it a squire’s tourney. Though this one may prove quite important. We will have an important guest for this occasion.”

“An important guest? Who?” There was hope in Loras’s voice. Margaery thought she had a good idea who her brother hoped to see at the tourney.

“Well, Lord Renly already told us he would come.” Margaery’s father fulfilled his son’s wishes. Margaery hoped everything wouldn’t be too obvious, though many already knew about her brother and Renly.

“Oh, Mace. It doesn’t matter that Renly Baratheon comes. It’s the other guest that matters. You know that as much as I do. You invited him yourself when you sent the reply this afternoon. Can you tell me why it took you a month to answer?” Lord Mace looked lost at his mother’s words. “I know what’s going on in this damn castle, Mace. We’ll talk about this later. Let us try to enjoy our dinner for the time being.”

Margaery found her parent’s behaviour very strange for the rest of the evening. They didn’t talk much, which was very unusual for her father, and often looked at each other, her father with a pleading expression, her mother with eyes that threw daggers in her husband’s direction. She talked with Loras and their grandmother, but kept an eye on her parents. What was going on? They acted even more strangely after her grandmother’s words, but why? Who was this important guest if this wasn’t Renly Baratheon? Who did he have to send a reply to, and about what matter? Only to invite him at a squire’s tourney? Margaery tried to silently question her grandmother with her eyes, but Lady Olenna refused to answer, only glancing at her son and her daughter-in-law every time Margaery tried to get some answers.

When the dinner was over, Margaery was about to leave with her brother when her father stopped her. “Margaery, please stay. Your mother and I have something to tell you.”

Margaery sat again while Loras looked questioningly at their parents for a moment, then shrugged and left. Lord Mace Tyrell turned to his mother who remained at her seat, looking at one of the walls.

“Mother, you don’t have to stay. You may leave.” Lady Olenna’s eyes didn’t leave the wall. “Mother?”

The Queen of Thorns finally looked at her son. “You were saying?”

“We have something important to tell to our daughter, Alerie and I. Would you leave?”

“Why should I leave? After all, that’s not as if I didn’t know. Did you listen when I spoke during this boring dinner? You’re deaf, just like your father. I’m staying here.”

Margaery started to be exasperated. “Can you tell me what’s going on? What do you need to tell me?”

Her father hesitated. “Well, you see… It’s delicate. I haven’t taken a decision yet, but… I think we must consider this. But you don’t have to fear anything, Margaery. Nothing is decided. I only…”

“Oh, Mace, are you going to tell her, or do I have to tell her myself,” Lord Mace’s mother
interrupted.

Another moment followed before Margaery’s father spoke. He crossed his fingers and smiled under his mustache. “We received a proposal.”

Margaery raised an eyebrow. “A proposal. About what?”

Before her father could answer, her grandmother answered. “Oh, shut up, Mace. When you speak you make things ten times slower than they should be. We received a marriage proposition. For you, my dear.”

So, that was the secret. Margaery didn’t find it worth of so much mystery. “Well, that’s nothing new. If I remember, there are already many houses who asked for my hand these past years. Including your own house, grandmother, and yours as well mother.”

“Only this time, it’s different, and your father thinks seriously about accepting the offer.”

“But, this is no small offer, my lady,” Lord Tyrell complained. “Ser Kevan’s proposal is very serious and… We never received such a proposition.”

“Ser Kevan? Who is it?” Margaery asked.

“Ser Kevan Lannister,” Lady Olenna answered again instead of her son. “He is the brother of Tywin Lannister, the old man who died a month ago when the mast of a ship fell on him.”

Margaery was quite surprised. “Ser Kevan Lannister? Well, I didn’t expect being proposed a marriage with him. How old is he?” Lord Tywin had to be in his sixties, so how younger could his brother be?

“Hmm…” Her father hesitated again. “Ser Kevan didn’t propose a marriage between you and him. He’s already married. He proposed a marriage with another member of his family.”

“What your oaf of a father has been trying to tell for almost ten minutes now, it’s that he received a raven three weeks ago from House Lannister who proposed to unite our two houses by marrying you to their new lord. That is, to arrange a marriage between you and Tyrion Lannister.”

Her grandmother was sharp as always. Margaery remained there dumbfounded for a moment. Tyrion Lannister? After a moment while she assimilated the new, she burst in laughter. “Tyrion Lannister? The dwarf? The one they call the Imp?” Her grandmother nodded with a smile at the corners of her lips. Margaery only laughed more. Once she managed to regain a little of her composure, she managed to articulate a few words. “Well, we receive all kinds of wedding proposals for me.”

“That’s not funny, Margaery. Your father wants to accept,” her mother almost exploded.

“It’s untrue. I’m only considering all the options,” her father replied.

“You already answered them.”

“Only to invite them to send someone I could speak with more about the proposal. The tourney will be an excellent occasion for this.”

“Are you a fool, Mace? You consider to marry our only daughter to a dwarf? Do you know what people say about him? Haven’t you heard the rumors?”
“These are only rumors.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this!”

Three knockings were heard on the table. For a woman about to reach the seventies, Olenna Tyrell could bang quite strongly. She had risen from her seat. “Can you tell me what I did to have such a son and such a daughter-in-law? Arguing like two little children before my granddaughter. Get out. I’ll discuss with her. Anyway I’m better suited for this task than any of you, the oaf and the oaf’s wife. Go.”

The Lord and the Lady of Highgarden left after a moment. Before the Queen of Thorns, they were nothing. Margaery was glad her grandmother stood up. She didn’t like to see her parents bickering, and her grandmother made this end on some humorous note. Lady Olenna Tyrell sat back, a sad smile on her face.

“These two ones! I wonder how our house will survive when I’ll be gone.” Lady Olenna took a more serious expression. “You surely have a lot of questions to ask me.”

“Well, is that true first?”

“It is. The Lannisters sent us a raven proposing an alliance between our houses through marriage. And your father sent them an answer this morning, asking them to send an emissary he could discuss with. He will come for the squire’s tourney in two months. For once, your father may not be taking the wrong decision.”

Margaery was surprised by her grandmother’s thoughts. “So you believe this could be a good idea? That I marry Tyrion Lannister?”

“Perhaps. But we cannot just say no like that. The proposal concerns one of the greatest lords in the Seven Kingdoms. We must at least show we are not rejecting their offer immediately. But the marriage may be interesting for us, and for you.”

“I thought we were trying to get me married with the king, or the future king. Isn’t it why we refused all the marriage proposals we received up to now?”

“Yes, it is. But in fact we refused them because we thought we could find better options for House Tyrell if we waited. However, there aren’t many chances for you to become the queen one day. Robert is already married.”

“But he could put Queen Cersei aside. He wouldn’t be the first king to do so. Or we could arrange for me to marry Prince Joffrey, Robert’s heir. We have Renly working with us.”

“Renly can do nothing.” Olenna Tyrell dismissed the idea. “Robert Baratheon doesn’t listen to any of his brothers. He listens to Jon Arryn, and even then… Robert is not fond of Cersei as far as we know, it’s true. He could be tempted to put her aside, but he looks more interested by whores than by marrying someone else. Lyanna Stark seemed to be the only woman he really loved, and she’s dead. Renly won’t succeed to convince the king to repudiate Cersei. Only Jon Arryn could convince him to do so, and he will never do it. That would be too dangerous, and could start a war, even if Tywin Lannister is dead. As for Joffrey, the king shows no inclination to have a Tyrell married to his eldest son. And the queen neither does. Furthermore, if we were to refuse the offer to marry you to their lord, I doubt the Lannisters would be well disposed to marry you to the queen’s son. Our chances are quite low to have you Queen of Westeros one day.” Her grandmother had her hand on her mouth, a finger rubbing her temple. “A marriage with the Lord of Casterly Rock wouldn’t be that bad for our house. We have no links with the other kingdoms, and the Lannisters are the only ones who can
compete with us in terms of power. An alliance with them would allow us to leave our isolation from
the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. We could even compete the alliance between the Tullys, the Starks,
the Arryns and the Baratheons. And this marriage would make you the richest woman in Westeros
too.”

Margaery could see her grandmother’s logic, though she always wanted to be the queen. But if her
chances of being queen were so low, then it would be better to become a great lady. However, there
were still problems. “Do you think it would be wise, grandmother? I mean, we’re talking about
Tyrian Lannister. The Imp. A man people say who drinks for sundown to sunup, visit ten brothels
per night and is the ugliest man in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“I know all that. I’m not stupid. We must consider this as well. That’s why we must speak with
anyone the Lannisters will send and get the truth out of him. And if we have no sufficient proof that
this Imp is a somewhat decent man, or half man, then we will decline the proposal after thinking
seriously about it.”

Margaery saw that her grandmother didn’t take the matter lightly. Perhaps her father did, but not her
mother and Lady Olenna. All the same, Margaery was worried. “Grandmother, you realize that if we
accept this offer, if I marry the Lord of Casterly Rock, then I will have to give up any hope to
become queen.”

Lady Olenna Tyrell smiled fondly at her. “My dear, there are crowns without a queen. And there are
queens without a crown.” Her grandmother left her chair and came to kiss her on the forehead.
“Don’t trouble yourself too much about that. Let’s wait for the tourney to learn more about this Lord
Tyrion, then we’ll decide. Have a good night, my dear.”

Lady Olenna left and Margaery found herself alone in the dining room. She stayed there with her
thoughts for a long moment. Margaery had always wanted to become queen. Loras was trying to use
his privileged access to Renly Baratheon to bring Robert Baratheon to take an interest in her. So far,
there were no results. The Lords of Storm’s End never had good relationships with the Lords of
Highgarden because of their common frontiers and the disputes that ensued from them. Furthermore,
Robert Baratheon had fought against the Reach during the rebellion. Indeed, Margaery’s chances to
get married with Robert were very low, and her chances to marry the heir of the Iron Throne, Prince
Joffrey, were probably no better.

However, this marriage proposal could prove a great opportunity. House Lannister was the richest
house in the Seven Kingdoms. They were even richer than Margaery’s family. If she married the
Imp, she would become the Lady of the Westerlands. There are queens without a crown. What did
her grandmother mean? Did she mean Margaery would have a better position as Lady of Casterly
Rock than as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms? Margaery wasn’t sure about it. What could be better
than to be queen?

Margaery wondered what it would be to be married to the Imp. There were horrible rumors about
him. There were people who said he ate children. Others said he was uglier than a gargoyle. On the
other hand, Margaery had been ready to marry King Robert if she had the opportunity, even though
he was reputed for being fat, whoring and drinking all day and all night. On that point, he was no
different from the Imp. Surely some rumors about Tyrian Lannister weren’t true, or at least not
entirely true. After all, rumors always bore exaggeration with them. It was very likely he wasn’t as
bad as people are saying. And if he was a pervert like many claimed… Margaery wondered what it
would be like to make love to a dwarf. If he visited so many brothels, he was probably quite
experienced. On the other hand, rumors always had some truth in them too.

Her grandmother was probably right. It was better to wait for the tourney and learn more about the
whoremonger of Casterly Rock at this moment. For the time being, it was of no use to ask questions they couldn’t get answers to. Margaery left the room and went back to her chambers.

 Later in the night, Margaery was trying to imagine how Casterly Rock looked like. She could become the lady of this castle one day. She would ask questions to Maester Lomys about the seat of House Lannister in the following days. What would it be like to be the Lady of House Lannister? Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands. The richest woman in all the Seven Kingdoms. Margaery liked that name. It sounded well. A smile formed on her lips. She didn’t have any doubt about the titles, but she had some about the husband who came with them. She had many doubts about him.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Jaime
Jaime I

Jaime glimpsed the ringfort at the top of the Rock with its towers and walls a long way before he reached the Lion’s Mouth. He pressed his horse to ride more quickly. Almost two months since they received the news, and yet they couldn’t make it in shorter time. Two weeks ago, Jaime had had enough and left the royal party to ride forward. Without the carriage and the army of servants and guards following Cersei, they would have arrived long before. Now he rode madly his horse to Casterly Rock, unable to wait any longer.

It had been a shock when he received Tyrion’s letter. Well, in fact this was only a raven, but the short message hit hard nonetheless.

*Father is dead. In an accident. Crushed under the mast of a ship in Lannisport. His funerals will take place next month. Come back home, Jaime.*

*I’m sorry for your loss.*

*Tyrion*

Jaime hadn’t been able to react or think about anything for a few minutes after he read the message Pycelle just gave him. When he managed to come back from his confusion, he hadn’t been able to articulate any word, only to read the message again and to walk away to his chamber of kingsguard. His father was dead. Tywin Lannister was dead. Once he had overcome the surprise the news caused, Jaime had gone immediately to tell Cersei.

The discussion he had with Cersei wasn’t exactly what he had expected. First, her sister already knew their father was dead. Genna had sent her a raven as well. While Jaime was paralyzed after learning their father was dead, Cersei was very quiet, though not the type of quiet that could reassure him. It was a terrible and fearful calm. After Jaime told her their father was dead, Cersei simply replied that she knew, and that it was time for him to become who he was meant to be. She said it was time for him to become the Lord of Casterly Rock, to lead their family on the path to greatness their father started.

Jaime thought he was more struck by Cersei’s words than by Tyrion’s message. Their father was dead, and the first thing Cersei thought about was that he had to be Lord of the Rock. After a moment of hesitation while Jaime hadn’t known how to react, he had burst into laughter. He couldn’t become Lord of Casterly Rock. He was a kingsguard, bound to serve the king to the death, forbidden to marry and to inherit. Anyway, he didn’t want to be Lord of the Rock. He never wanted to. That would mean to leave King’s Landing, to leave the woman he loved. Cersei hadn’t reacted well to his laughs. She had accused him of abandoning their family to the ruin. Jaime had tried to tell
her Father still had Tyrion to inherit the Rock, and that he would make a much better lord than him, but that had only infuriated her even more. She had begun a great speech against their brother, accusing him of all the atrocities she could imagine, from the murder of their mother to the death of their father. She said she wouldn’t be surprised to discover he was the one to kill their father so he could have Casterly Rock. Only Jaime could stop him. They had to fight for what was rightfully theirs. Jaime had dismissed Cersei’s theories. Tyrion would never kill their father. Tywin Lannister had hated Tyrion, but their little brother would never have dared to do anything against their father. That wasn’t his style, nor was it the style of any child of Tywin Lannister.

Cersei had been furious at him. They had left King’s Landing a week later with a large retinue. Jaime had criticized Cersei for bringing so many people and for travelling in carriage. This slowed them down a lot. Robert gave them their leave to pay their respects to their deceased father without hesitation. Surely he was happy the Old Lion was dead, and happy to get rid of his queen for a few months. Honestly, Jaime was glad to be freed from Robert Baratheon for some time. The way he disgraced Cersei, the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms, exasperated him. Very often when Jaime was on duty, the king would bring a dozen whores in his bedchamber and fuck them all at the same time. Jaime hated it less than to see him bed Cersei, but it infuriated him all the same. Cersei should be married with him. Targaryens wed brothers with sisters for centuries, so why couldn’t they marry as well?

The trip to the Westerlands had been a true living hell. First, Jaime had hoped the long trip would allow him to spend more time with Cersei, but she was always with her children, especially with Joffrey, which made it very difficult for Jaime to have any intimate moment with his lover. Furthermore, Cersei kept complaining about the fact he still refused to be their father’s heir the few times they were alone, and the rest of the time she succeeded in being colder than their dead father. In the end, Jaime couldn’t support it anymore and rode forward, leaving the retinue behind to arrive at Casterly Rock. Jaime wasn’t displeased to leave Prince Joffrey either. His seed competed with his mother for being insufferable.

Jaime passed through the Lion’s Mouth whose gates were wide open for him. A stable boy came immediately to take care of his horse while Jaime dismounted more quickly than any living man could. He walked directly to the entrance of the Rock.

“Hey, Jaime.” He turned his head to see his childhood’s friend, Addam Marbrand, walking towards him. “I’m happy to see you. I was told you would only arrive next week.”

“I decided to ride faster. What are you doing here?” Jaime found it odd that Ser Addam was there. He would think he was at Ashemark.

“I’ve been here for a few weeks now. I came with my father for the coronation ceremony, but I stayed longer when I learned you would come.”

“The coronation?”

“Yes. For your brother. He was declared Lord of Casterly Rock. It took place almost three weeks ago. You knew it, didn’t you?”

“Where is my father’s grave?” asked Jaime. Addam’s expression turned gloomy.

“We buried him not long after the coronation. He’s in the Hall of Heroes.” Jaime walked away immediately to see his father. He barely heard his friend’s last words. “Jaime, I’m sorry.”

The Hall of Heroes was a little below the ringfort. This is where Jaime found his father’s tomb. A statue had already been erected for him, with the same icy stare he had in real life. Before it had only
been words, but now the truth was right before Jaime. It stood there, staring disapprovingly at him. His father was dead. His statue was staring at him just like he had stared at him for all his life, expecting things from him that Jaime couldn’t give or didn’t want to give.

Jaime remained there, unmoving, looking back at his father who kept looking at him with his lifeless eyes that looked so alive. He heard footsteps from behind. They stopped when Tyrion stopped as well beside him. For a long time, both brothers stood straight before their father’s image, not saying a word.

“I’m glad you arrived sooner,” Tyrion finally said before returning to a complete silence for another long time.

“How did he die? What happened?” Jaime asked.

“He was inspecting a ship in Lannisport. A beam on the mast fell on him. It crushed his chest, his lungs, his ribs, his bowels. There was nothing Creylen could do. He was dead within hours.”

“Did you talk to him before he died?”

“Yes. He asked for me. He told me he never wanted me for a son, and even less as an heir. He commanded me to stop being the shame of our family, and to start behaving like a Lannister should behave.”

Tyrion’s voice was bitter. Jaime understood, though he wasn’t surprised their father made Tyrion come on his dying bed only to lecture one last time on his duties as a Lannister. They stood there, not saying a word. Jaime didn’t know for how long they remained in the Hall of Heroes in the company of their father’s bones and the bones of all the other Lords of Casterly Rock and Kings of the Rock who preceded him, but in the end they left. They went separate ways, Tyrion saying he had duties to attend. Jaime went to greet his uncle Kevan and his aunt Genna. He found Kevan working. The last living brother of the great Tywin Lannister gave him the condolences that were in order. His aunt Genna welcomed him more warmly. She had always pinched his ears as far as he could remember, but this time she planted soft and sloppy kisses on his cheeks. Kevan’s wife, his aunt Dorna, was also very kind and kissed him on the cheeks as well, though in a more dutiful and restrained way.

Jaime dined alone this evening, but after he was done he sook for Tyrion. He found his former chambers empty. A passing servant informed him Lord Tyrion’s belongings had been moved to the rooms of the Lord of Casterly Rock, and that Tyrion lived there now. Jaime walked to the top of the ringfort to see his little brother. He was relieved to not wear his armor anymore for one time. He found Tyrion working in what had been their father’s solar not long ago.

Jaime noticed many changes in the apartments. First, the relics of the houses Tywin Lannister destroyed were no longer to be seen. Instead, Tyrion had put personal objects he held dearly. There was a dragon’s teeth Tyrion had taken a long time ago from the dungeons of the Red Keep, where the bones of the Targaryen dragons were kept. There was an exemplary of a work from a certain Septon Barth whose name Jaime thought he heard once before. Another book put in evidence was titled The Lion and the Rose by a certain Lady Rhodes. Another book bore inscriptions unknown to Jaime. Perhaps it was Valyrian. There were also little toys Jaime remembered to have given to Tyrion when he was still a boy. Things had indeed changed a lot in Jaime’s absence. And of course there was a lot of wine.

Tyrion lifted his eyes from whatever he was reading. From the aspect, it was something boring, but Tyrion was good at reading boring things and finding them interesting. A smile appeared on his brother’s face.
“Big brother.” He raised from his seat to welcome Jaime.

“Have a lot of work?” Jaime asked.

“A lot, but I still have all the time I wish for my brother.”

Jaime smiled. They shook hands. “Glad to be back, Tyrion.”

“Glad to see you again, Jaime. Care for some wine?”

Jaime didn’t oppose, and with pleasure. They walked to a nearby table where three jugs were waiting for them. He poured a generous goblet for both of them. Jaime raised his own.

“To the new Lord of Casterly Rock.”

Tyrion rose his own. “To the greatest sword in the Seven Kingdoms.”

They emptied their cup in a single gulp. Tyrion filled them again.

“I didn’t expect you to be declared lord so quickly,” said Jaime. “I thought you would probably wait for me and Cersei to arrive.”

Tyrion had a strange expression, something between regret and laugh. It was an uncertain expression. “It wasn’t my doing. Kevan, Genna and Creylen decided to recognize me as the lord very quickly. You know, Father wanted you to be his heir. He told me so before he died, and it was written in his will.”

Jaime was surprised, though he shouldn’t be. He sighed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, I’m not. But since you are a kingsguard, our aunt and our uncle decided to acknowledge me immediately. Especially our aunt. I didn’t expect it myself.”

Jaime was relieved. “They did well. I wouldn’t have supported the possibility to occupy Father’s place.”

“So, you’re not going to challenge my place? Because that’s what our sweet sister surely wants. She would be so happy.” Tyrion’s tone was more amused than worried.

“That’s what she wants,” confirmed Jaime. “But that’s not what I want. I leave the title and the Rock to you, little brother. And with great joy.”

“Then in this case,” said Tyrion with a smile while raising his cup, “a toast. To Tywin Lannister’s succession. A succession without problems.”

Jaime raised his cup and drank just like his brother. “Beware of Cersei, Tyrion. She will be fuming when she will arrive. She complained all the way from King’s Landing about the fact she and I should have Casterly Rock and not you. She won’t be happy that you bypassed Father’s will.”

“I suppose then we should hide her the content of the will. And you should acknowledge me officially as your liege lord before as many people as possible,” his little brother suggested.

“I agree. Everything to prevent me from being attached to the lord’s chair. Though it would be more of my size than yours.” They both laughed.

Time went on. They were telling stories old and new, stories from the capital, from the Rock, Lannisport, the Westerlands, the Reach, Dorne, the Riverlands. Stories about great men and lower
men, about knights and morons, about ladies and whores. Jaime was soon drunk. He noticed a serving girl with red hair brought them wine again and again. He couldn’t hold against Tyrion in drinking. His little brother had managed to defeat the Hound in a drinking contest a long time ago, and this was no small feat. Jaime had no chance against the Lord of Casterly Rock.

“Have you ever seen Father cry, Jaime?” Tyrion asked from nowhere all of a sudden.


“He told he did once. When his own father died.” Jaime’s laughter died on his lips. Tyrion looked entirely serious. “He said that despite the flaws our grandfather had, he was still his father, and that he mourned him. Did you ever see him mourn someone?”

“No.” That wasn’t entirely true. Jaime knew their father had mourned someone else when she died, but Jaime never actually saw him mourn their mother. Tywin Lannister only turned colder than before as far as Jaime could remember.

“Well, it seems he did. Unless he was raving. But he didn’t seem to rave. Or else he wouldn’t have told me he didn’t want me for his son and heir, and that I was only because you refused to be the heir.” Their father hadn’t been raving. “He said that he loved his father despite all his flaws,” repeated Tyrion. “Do we?”

Jaime wasn’t sure about it. He shrugged and drank again. In his drunken state, that was all he could say about it. Did he love his father? Did Cersei love him? Did Tyrion love him? If someone had all rights to hate their father, it was Tyrion.

“I don’t know,” resumed Tyrion, looking lost in his thoughts while Jaime felt lost in the wine. “He barely saw me as a son. He said he wanted to carry me into the sea and let me drown when I was born. He only let me live because I was a Lannister. And because that was the last thing our mother asked him before she died. That was the last thing he told me before he died.”

Jaime hadn’t known about this. He and Cersei had been kept away from their mother’s chambers when she had been taken to bed by the pregnancy more than twenty years ago. He still remembered how she looked like when he and his sister last saw her. She was about to enter labour and looked paler than they ever saw her. They were only ten at the time. She told them that soon they would have a little brother, or a little sister, or perhaps both. Lady Joanna Lannister made them promise to take care of their future little brother, and to protect him. Jaime wished he and Cersei had kept their promise. They saw her again two weeks later, in a coffin. Cersei had prayed to the gods to bring back their mother, until Father told her the gods wouldn’t listen to her. Jaime didn’t know the last words of his mother had been for Tyrion. He was glad they had been. Tyrion was kept alive thanks to it, and Jaime had a little brother. Tyrion couldn’t replace their mother, but Jaime couldn’t imagine how his life would have been if Tyrion had died this day like their mother. He would only have Cersei left. He wondered if Lady Joanna had said anything about him and Cersei before she left this world. Surely she thought about them, but did she say anything about them?

“And so here we sit.” Tyrion started to speak again. “The sons of Tywin Lannister. The firstborn son he wanted for his heir and who never wanted to be it, and the second one who he never wanted to be his heir and who became the Lord of Casterly Rock.” Tyrion laughed dryly. “The gods have a good sense of humor. It seems not everyone everywhere always had to do what Tywin Lannister wanted.”

“Not anymore,” said Jaime. “Father is dead. We are free to do as we wish. And I don’t want Casterly Rock. I don’t want a wife. I don’t want children.”
Tyrion looked at him queerly. “Well, it seems I’ll have to do the duties you refused. I’m even supposed to get married very soon.”

That brought Jaime’s attention. “Married? Really?”

“Yes, brother. Father’s body was barely cold that Kevan was already trying to arrange me a good match. We even already received proposals.”

“Proposals?” Jaime could scarcely believe it. People had proposed their daughters to marry Tyrion.

“Yes. Proposals to marry the Lord of Casterly Rock, of course. Not to marry the Imp.” Tyrion emptied his cup and filled it again. “Why else a girl would marry me but to become rich and the Lady of the Rock?”

Tyrion drank again. Despite his drunken state, Jaime could only look pitifully at his brother. He remembered how Tyrion had loved his first wife. For two weeks he had been happier than he ever was in his whole life. Until their father found out about Tyrion’s marriage and had it ended in the most horrible way Jaime had ever seen a marriage end. The worst was that Jaime played a crucial role in the destruction of this marriage, and Tyrion loved him despite all this. He loved him for a lie.

“What proposals did you receive?” Jaime asked, trying to not bring the conversation to six years ago.

“House Westerling. And House Doggett. For now, they are the only ones, but some more may appear in time. Mostly impoverished houses who hope to get an innocent girl as Lady of the Rock. These lords must be desperate to think about marrying their daughters to me. As if I could make a woman happy.”

Jaime wanted to refute his brother’s statement. Tyrion was capable to make a woman happy. His first wife had been happy with him. He didn’t know how it was possible, but she had been. If a common girl had been happy with Tyrion, had even loved him, why not a highborn lady whose parents were abandoning to a dwarf like Tyrion said? Jaime knew his brother wanted a wife who would love him.

“I’m sure that no matter who you are wed to, little brother, you’ll be able to make her happy,” Jaime tried to reassure him, though he wasn’t as certain as he tried to sound. Wine didn’t help to make him look sure of himself.

Tyrion grinned. “It’s very kind to you, dear brother, but I know who I am. I am a dwarf, and the greatest source of profits for all the brothels in the Westerlands and King’s Landing. Perhaps I should have sent you to Highgarden instead of Daven.”

“Highgarden? What the hell is Daven doing in Highgarden?”

“Trying to convince a family to give their rose to a devilish imp,” Tyrion said on a dark tone.

Highgarden was the seat of House Tyrell, the Wardens of the South. Convince a family to give their rose… Jaime could barely believe it. “Margaery Tyrell! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“If someone is kidding, it’s Kevan, but he’s not good at making japes. He wrote to Mace Tyrell as soon as Father was dead. He’s trying to convince him to give the hand of his precious rose to me. Daven went to Highgarden for a tourney in order to discuss it.” Jaime was still astonished, even drunk as he was. Tyrion, married to the Rose of Highgarden? He burst into laughs. That was too much. He couldn’t hold it back. Tyrion joined him. “Imagine it, Jaime. The Imp of Casterly Rock and the Rose of Highgarden. We will be the strangest couple there ever was.”

Jaime was in no place to argue with Tyrion on that. Perhaps there had been a more awkward
marriage in history, but Tyrion knew far more about it than him. Jaime had never been interested in the history lessons Maester Creylen once gave him, no more than Cersei had been. That had helped a lot when they exchanged places in their childhood. No matter who attended Creylen’s lessons and the identity he or she took, they were both bored to death by history.

Jaime laughed for a very long time. He didn’t know for how long, but he thought a servant brought more jugs. When he finally managed to control his laughter in some small way, he couldn’t say anything intelligent. “Well, little brother. You’ll send me an invitation for your marriage with your rose.”

“She’s not my rose, Jaime,” Tyrion said seriously. “We’re not even betrothed. And if she and her family were to refuse the proposal, I would understand them. I won’t marry an unwilling bride. If she doesn’t want to marry me, then no matter what Kevan does, I will not allow the marriage to take place, even if this must start a war.”

Jaime was paralyzed by Tyrion’s firmness. His eyes were not lying. He wouldn’t marry a girl who didn’t want to marry him. That would make things quite difficult. “Then who will you marry, if the Tyrell girl refuses?”

Tyrion sighed. “I’ve been thinking about Alysanne Lefford, the heir of the Golden Tooth. I met her a few years ago, and she didn’t seem to hate me. Perhaps there’s some hope on that ground. Kevan doesn’t see her as a bad match.”

Jaime had to agree. He remembered the Leffords were second after the Lannisters for the wealth in the Westerlands. A marriage with a Lefford would be very good, and if she didn’t hate Tyrion, that was all for the better. As long as Lord Lefford agreed to the match.

They kept talking and drinking a little while longer and Jaime soon didn’t know what he was doing or saying. He remembered a girl with red hair coming into the rooms. She seemed surprised to see Jaime, but Tyrion told her to stay, then said to Jaime it was probably time to leave. His little brother was right. He was drunk, and tired, and it was late in the night. He left and stumbled all the way to his own chambers, requiring the help of a page to find his way back to them. He fell on his bed, half-conscious, without changing his clothes or washing himself, and fell asleep not long later.

Jaime dreamed that night. He remembered an alley, all dirty and filled with shit and trash. And a girl, a very young girl. She couldn’t be older than fifteen. Her black hair was falling in tangles all around her face, her eyes filled with tears that streamed all over her face, falling on her thighs barely covered by her ripped clothes. She was sitting in a corner of the alley, among all the refuse. There was a puddle of blood under her legs. Jaime knew what it meant. During his campaign against the Kingswood Brotherhood, and shortly during Robert’s Rebellion, he had seen things just like this. He knew the girl would die soon. She had been raped by almost forty men, and that was Jaime’s doing. He had managed to find her after many hours of research and it was almost night now. The girl looked up at him, only to hide her face in her arms immediately. Her legs were tightened against her tummy. Jaime had saved her no more than two weeks ago, only to give her to a worse fate a few hours ago.

Jaime didn’t know what to do. What could he do? She didn’t have very long to live. She remained there, crying, and Jaime could only look, see what he had done. How would he ever be able to tell Tyrion? Could he tell him? No, he couldn’t. Tyrion would hate him forever if he did. And anyway, that would only break Tyrion even more. It was still better to keep Father’s story. It would hurt, but far less than the truth. Perhaps Lord Tywin Lannister was right. She may be only an opportunist who wanted to enhance her station by marrying the son of a great lord, perhaps the future lord of Casterly Rock. But this… Jaime couldn’t see that in the girl right now. She was his sister-in-law, and Jaime
had lied to her husband.

“I’m sorry,” Jaime finally said.

The girl finally looked at him. There was anger on her face, an anger there wasn’t when he had told her in real life. “You lied to him. You lied to your brother. You dare to call him your brother. You had me raped. His wife.”

In real life, she had said nothing, but Jaime had said the same things he told her in his dream. He told her he wasn’t the one to organize this, that it was all his father’s fault, and that he had no idea he would give her to his men. He apologized many times, more than he could count. The girl hadn’t looked back at him, only sobbed even more. He did no good by telling her this, but he had to tell someone. In the dream, she only looked even more scornful at him.

“You are a knight. You swore to protect the innocent. To defend the weak.” I also promised to obey my father. What am I to do if my father has innocents raped and flogged. “You feel you did the right thing by killing the Mad King. You feel you acted like a knight should. But you are no true knight. You’re a man without honor.” Then she took a knife she hid behind her back. “You’ll bear my death on your soul for the rest of your life, Kingslayer.” The blade sank into her throat, and Tysha Lannister’s body fell on the floor, drowning in her own blood.

Jaime awakened all sweating, his mouth dry. His heart was pounding wildly. That wasn’t how it had happened. She had plunged the knife in her throat, but she had never said anything. Jaime wondered where she got it. Probably it was among all the abandoned things in this alley. But the Tysha of his dream was right. He stood against the Mad King when it came to save King’s Landing, but when it came to save his brother’s wife, he let his father do. He was responsible for the death of the girl. He could have done something. He could have defeated his father’s guards before they took her right in front of Tyrion. But he didn’t. He deserved to be despised by everyone, but not for killing his king. He saved half a million people that day. He did the right thing. He knew it. However, he deserved to be hated for what he had done to the wheelwright’s orphan. But no one cared for what he had done to her. No one would remember Tysha Lannister, the girl his father ordered his men to rape to the death. But everyone would remember Aerys Targaryen.

On the morning, Jaime bent the knee before Tyrion to acknowledge him as Lord of the Rock. Jaime was free from a great burden by doing this and very happy to kneel before his little brother. No one would be able to contest Tyrion’s rightful place as Lord of Casterly Rock now. Not even Cersei. Jaime would make sure of that. He owed this to Tyrion, and a Lannister always pays his debts.

Chapter End Notes

One of the books in Tyrion's solar, The Lion and the Rose, is a real book written by author Hilary Rhodes, also known as qqueenofhades on fanfiction sites. This book is in the same style than Game of Thrones, but it is a historical fiction.

By the way, everyone who ships Tyrion/Sansa, I invite you to read the last chapter I uploaded in my other fic, "A Shadow and a Wolf". (Chapter 73, Sansa XIX)

Please review

Next chapter: Cersei
Cersei I

Chapter Notes

Before you read this chapter everyone, I want you to remember that yes, Cersei loves her children (her one redeeming quality, that and her cheekbones), but she mostly cared about Joffrey since he was the heir to the Iron Throne and never really concerned herself with Tommen and Myrcella, except when they were about to be taken away from her. Honestly, I think that was probably for the better or else Tommen and Myrcella may have ended monsters like their brother.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI I

“I don’t understand why we have to visit Casterly Rock.”

“Because your grandfather is dead, my sweet boy. We must go there to pay him our respect.”

“I am a prince,” replied Joffrey. “The heir to the Iron Throne. My vassals should visit me, not the opposite.”

“You are right,” confirmed Cersei. “But some of your vassals need to be visited from time to time. They feel honored when you do.”

“Anyway, how could grandfather visit us if he’s dead?” asked Myrcella.

“You, shut up. You’re just a silly little girl,” said Joffrey.

Myrcella resumed her embroidery work in silence while Tommen kept playing with a new cat he received a week before they left. Cersei was also occupied with an embroidery, though with neglect. She preferred to marvel at her son and to advise him how to be a king. At thirteen, Joffrey already looked very much like Jaime with his green eyes and shining golden hair. Cersei was proud of him. He already displayed very well the pride, the courage and the will that would be necessary when he would become king. Cersei had shaped him ever since he was born to make him a great ruler when the time would come for him to sit on the Iron Throne.

Joffrey had many admirable qualities that would make of him the greatest monarch in history, as long as she would be close to advise him. First, he was strong. No one could insult him without being rebuked or punished. Joffrey didn’t allow it more than she did. He even allowed it less than her. She taught him well on that. Second, he was very handsome. All the young girls of the Seven Kingdoms would soon swoon before him, lowborn and hightborn alike. He was getting more handsome every day, and Cersei didn’t doubt he would keep getting handsomer until he was at least forty. Third, he feared nothing. Nothing and no one could threaten Joffrey. He had no tie to hold him back, and was ready to do everything that was necessary. The respect and the fear he inspired to his younger brother and sister were only proofs of that. Fourth, he was far wiser than anyone at his age. He had ideas to make his rule better and stronger than any other king before him, like the idea to create a permanent royal army or to give the lands and seats to people he trusted instead of letting them pass
inside families whose loyalties were doubtful at best. However, Cersei had to make him see things under a different light quite often. Joffrey was very eager to make these reforms, not considering the resistance that could come from some of their enemies. But this was only one of the few minor flaws her beautiful son had, and she was there to prevent them from bringing him to make serious mistakes. She would always be there for her son.

Vylarr came to tell them they would be at Casterly Rock in two hours. It was about time. They had left King’s Landing two months ago, not long after the news reached them. Jaime had first accompanied them along with Ser Boros, but he had left their retinue three weeks ago, pretending he wanted to pay his respects to their father more quickly. Cersei had not been able to retain him, and truth be told she hadn’t really wanted to. Jaime had been more stupid than ever since they learned their father had died. He didn’t see the urgency of the situation. Their father was dead. They had to act quickly to get what belonged to them. It was time Jaime became the man Tywin Lannister had always wanted him to be, the Lord of Casterly Rock. But instead of following their father’s will and taking the position he was meant for, he hid behind his vows of kingsguard, proclaimed his love for her and said Tyrion was there to rule the Westerlands.

Cersei couldn’t believe that her father died and that the little monster who killed their mother now owned Casterly Rock. That wasn’t what their father had wanted. He never wanted that. Jaime was supposed to be Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West while Cersei would be queen and Joffrey the future king. Instead Jaime served as a dignified bodyguard and their wretched brother now bore the title that was theirs. Casterly Rock belonged to her and Jaime, and she would make sure it would be theirs.

She wished the journey had been quicker. Jaime wasn’t entirely wrong when he said their pace was too slow, but they had no choice. Cersei wouldn’t go to Casterly Rock in full speed. She wouldn’t arrive at her home only on a horse, with tangled hair and all sweating from a race on horse, just like Jaime had wanted. She would come like a queen should come. She had taken her children with her. She wouldn’t let them in the hands of Robert and Jon Arryn for all the gold in the world. She also brought with her a retinue of a hundred red cloaks, leaving the other hundred behind her in the capital so they would remind their enemies that the Lannisters were the real power in the Seven Kingdoms, about twenty servants and two kingsguards, both loyal to her.

The two hours that followed passed very quickly. Cersei spent her time telling Joffrey and her two other children about how Casterly Rock was beautiful and mighty, and how they should behave with the people there. She forbade them to spend time with their dwarf uncle unless their mother was present, something Tommen and Myrcella didn’t seem to approve in the first place, but she repeated the interdict and they didn’t question her furthermore. Joffrey agreed with her. He was the only one of her children wise enough to understand the threat Tyrion could represent. Her children only had to listen to her and everything would be alright. She wouldn’t let the monster approach them, especially not Joffrey.

They rode under the Lion’s Mouth and emerged in the first courtyard. Cersei left the wheelhouse, followed by Joffrey, then by Myrcella, and finally by Tommen. She was home. A smile came to her lips, but it faded almost immediately when she saw who was there to welcome them. Tyrion strode in their direction, a smirk on his ugly face. All the other Lannisters remained behind, including Jaime clad in his usual clothes, without cloak, either red or white.

“What a surprise, big sister,” said the Imp. “We were afraid you would arrive later. It’s been so long since the Rock saw you for the last time. I think we don’t need to perform any formality. After all, we’re between family. As Lord of Casterly Rock, and as a brother, I welcome you, sister.”

The ugly smile didn’t leave his face a single second as he spoke. He didn’t even kneel before her to
the opposite of the others in the courtyard. Perhaps he felt taller when the others were kneeling and he was standing tall, if we could call it standing tall. It was more appropriate to call it standing short. He walked toward Joffrey. Cersei eyed him suspiciously, ready for anything. If he was to try anything on her son, she would immediately order Vylarr to cut him in half.

“Hello, my prince and nephew. Taller than the last time. I do hope that your behavior improved as much as your appearance.”

“We cannot say the same about you,” Joffrey replied. Cersei smiled at the comment. Joffrey always knew what to say to mock his uncle. The smile didn’t leave Tyrion’s face however.

“No, indeed. You’re right, dear nephew. I’m done growing up. But being short has its advantages.” He raised his hand and for a second Cersei feared the worse, but in the end he only patted Joffrey’s cheek a few times. “And anyway, as long as I can reach your cheeks, I don’t see any problem in being small.”

It was a chance the Hound was behind them, or else he would probably have slapped Joffrey, or worse, but the pats were obviously a threat. The little dwarf went to Myrcella, still with this horrible wide smile crossing his face.

“Look at you. More beautiful than ever.” He kissed her daughter on the cheek and turned his attention to Tommen. “And you! You… You’re going to be bigger than the Hound. But much better looking.”

Tyrion, Tommen and Myrcella all laughed. Even Joffrey let a few giggles escape his mouth. Only Cersei and Sandor Clegane didn’t share their enthusiasm. The Hound wouldn’t like her brother. She could use it against him eventually. Cersei didn’t like to see Tyrion close to her children. They were her children, and Tyrion had no right to interfere in her way to educate them.

“Will you show me the watery caverns?” asked Tommen.

“Well, you look old enough now. You’re getting taller than me already. I’ll show them to you.” A wicked smile was on Tyrion’s face.

“No. Tommen won’t see them,” Cersei intervened. “He has better things to do of his days than to visit dark places.”

“But, Mother. I want to see the caverns,” pleaded Tommen. “Uncle Tyrion showed me the dungeons below the Red Keep with all the dragon skulls one day. I want to see the caverns. My cats love them.”

“No cave,” Cersei stated, not leaving place to discussion. Tommen dropped his head, accepting the decision. Cersei wouldn’t allow her wretched brother to have any influence on her children, and the less they spent time near him the better. She didn’t know about the visit of the dungeons. Where else did he bring them?

Tyrion turned to Vylarr after looking at her with something like disapproval. He talked with the captain of the red cloaks while Cersei talked to her other brother, the one she loved, her other half, and to all the other members of House Lannister. They had all bent the knee before her and showed her the respect she deserved. These ones knew who she was at least. She would use it to bring down Tyrion. She would start this very night. She received the appropriate condolences from Genna, Kevan, Damion and all the others, but took her leave quickly with her three children. They were given roomy apartments worthy of their position. It took a lot of time for the servants to unpack everything they brought with them. They weren’t done yet when dinner time arrived. Cersei went to
see her father’s grave in the meantime. She would be the daughter that would continue his legacy to
the very end. In a thousand years, they would only talk about Tywin Lannister as the father of Cersei
Lannister. She would be the one the history books would remember. This would begin at dinner.

All the members of House Lannister, from Cersei to Joy Hill, the bastard daughter of her uncle
Gerion, were present. This was a family dinner. She wore black, like half of them, and Genna
hugged her. She had tried to take the place Cersei’s mother once occupied after her death, but she
had failed miserably. All the same, Cersei had her compassion, which could be useful when the time
would come. They only started the dinner late. Tyrion took all his time to come, and Kevan said they
couldn’t start it as long as the Lord of Casterly Rock wasn’t present. Cersei couldn’t manage to get
them to start without Tyrion, but she began all the same to prepare the field by subtly remembering
Tyrion’s flaws to everyone, from his small size to his taste for whores. She would bring them all
against him.

Tyrion finally waddled inside the dining room. “Forgive me for being late, everyone, but I had
several important duties to attend. I’m afraid the work as lord is much longer and demanding than I
thought.” He sat at the head of the table and everyone followed his example. He wore a black
doublet, as if he was grieved by their father’s death. Cersei found herself at the other end of the table,
facing the little monster, with her children and Jaime close to her. Genna and Kevan sat at Tyrion’s
left and right. Cersei decided to launch a first assault as the first course was served.

“I suppose the work as Lord of the Rock must be exhausting for you, little brother. Surely it is too
much demanding for someone like you.” She displayed a satisfied smile as she said that.

“Well, I work no more than our father did when he was still alive,” replied Tyrion.

“Tyrion is right, your Grace,” added Kevan. “Lord Tywin used to work from dawn to sunset. He did
it until the very end. Tyrion does nothing less.”

“It must be very tiresome for you all the same,” insisted Cersei.

“It is,” confirmed Tyrion. “Much more than if Father was still alive and I could ask him to rescue me
each time I demand something to the person I’m married with.”

_How dares he?_ Tyrion turned his attention to Kevan. He talked with him about some matter
concerning the Iron Islands, though Cersei couldn’t make out entirely what it was about since the
others started their own conversations at the same time. Cerenna and Myrielle Lannister were
giggling together while their father, Ser Stafford Lannister, talked with Kevan’s wife, Dorna. Genna
joined Tyrion and Kevan in their discussion, ignoring her husband and her children. Jaime spoke
with Tommen while Myrcella discussed with Joy Hill. Joffrey was amiable with everyone, like
always, except when they behaved incorrectly towards him. At one moment, Cerenna asked Joffrey
if he would walk with her next morning in the gardens, which he accepted with all the grace a prince
should have.

“Princess Myrcella,” asked Tyrion from nowhere all of a sudden, “is there some young man who
invited you to spend some time with him yet? You’re more than beautiful enough for that. This must
be the main feature you inherited from your parents. I’m sure a few knights have already turned their
eyes when you passed before them.”

Myrcella got redder than a tomato. “I… I… I don’t know, Uncle.” Tyrion was smiling at her
daughter. Cersei wanted to kill him. Couldn’t he let her little daughter quiet?

“Of course, she doesn’t know,” said Joffrey. “She’s just a child. No knight would care to look at
her.” It was directly said, but it was the truth. Myrcella was still too young for young men to take an
interest in her, and Cersei wouldn’t let any of them approach her daughter.

“I think they would look more at her than to you, nephew,” countered Tyrion. “Unless the knight in question is Loras Tyrell, though he’s not a knight yet.”

Genna chuckled and Jaime too. Everyone knew the heir to Highgarden was very close to Renly Baratheon and about the nature of this proximity. At least, most of the people. Cerenna whispered something in Myrielle’s ear, and they both giggled. Some however, like Joy or Genna’s grandsons, didn’t seem to notice the significance of these words. Joffrey got red from anger and humiliation, and Cersei as well.

“At least, Joffrey stays away from places of dubious reputation,” said Cersei with a smirk.

“I wish the same could be said of his father, or his dog,” replied Tyrion. “I like your husband, Cersei. Our king is one of the very few people who can compete with me at drinking. Just like your son’s dog. But since I’m half their size and that I can drink more than half what they can before I pass out, I guess I’m better at drinking than them. I also make better jokes than them. Wouldn’t you agree Tommen?”

“I agree,” said Tommen immediately. “Uncle Tyrion, could I visit the water caverns tomorrow?”

“I already said you won’t,” Cersei cut sharply.

“Your Grace,” began Tyrion, “Prince Tommen will probably not come back to Casterly Rock before a very long time. And I am sure that inside the Rock, among his family, he is safe anywhere at any time. I am sure no mother would be able to refuse a request very kindly made by her youngest son.” He was saying that on a patronizing tone.

“I’ll accompany Tommen,” said Myrcella. “He won’t risk anything with me.”

“Mother, please,” asked Tommen, his big eyes pleading. Cersei couldn’t hate Tyrion more than in this moment, and her daughter didn’t make it any better. Cersei forced a fond smile on her face.

“Alright. You may go. But Captain Vylarr will come with you.”

Cersei didn’t speak much for the rest of the dinner. But she looked at Tyrion with all the fury she could muster for turning her youngest children against her and for mocking her eldest son, her tall and handsome Joffrey. Cersei was tired when she returned to her chambers with her children. She ordered the septas to make sure her three children were put to bed before she went into her own chambers. Later in the night, Jaime joined her and, for the first time in more than two months, Cersei spent a passionate night with her twin brother. She almost forgave him his refusal to become Lord of Casterly Rock. Anyway, she would convince him to become the lord in the following days.

The next morning, after they broke their fast, Tommen and Myrcella prepared to visit the watery caverns in the depths of the Rock. Cersei realized that Captain Vylarr wasn’t among the guards who came to accompany them, and that she didn’t remember seeing these men in King’s Landing among the red cloaks. However, they assured her it was Vylarr who sent them, so she let her two youngest children go. Joffrey went to the sparring ground with Sandor Clegane and Cersei went with Ser Boros to see Tyrion. She had a good discussion to have with her brother. She didn’t remember where his personal rooms were. She never cared where Tyrion lived back when she was still at Casterly Rock, as long as it was far from her own chambers. When she asked a passing servant where she could find Tyrion, she was answered she would find the Lord of Casterly Rock in his solar at the top of the ringfort. With hope, the dwarf wouldn’t be called a lord for a very long time.
Cersei was horrified when she entered his brother’s rooms. In fact, these weren’t his rooms. They were her father’s rooms, the personal chambers of the Lord of Casterly Rock. Tyrion had lost no time in claiming these rooms for himself, and he had changed everything in it. Her father’s solar had been arranged to inspire fear and respect to anyone who would penetrate it, with objects that had belonged to the lords he had defeated in the past and great banners displaying the golden lion of House Lannister on crimson field. Her wretched brother had turned it into something that looked more like a library, with books, ledgers, scrolls and insignificant things everywhere. There was only one banner of their house, far away on a wall, and you had to know it was there to see it.

The Imp sat behind her father’s desk, all made of gold with table legs in the form of lion legs. He was writing something and raised his eyes only for a second when she entered, before focusing again on the piece of paper right before him. His squire, a young boy Cersei thought was one of Genna’s son or grandson, announced her and left after Tyrion thanked him, still not leaving the parchment with his eyes. Ser Boros came in with her. She would make clear who had the real power here. Cersei went to him, towering the little man with all her height, stopping only a few inches from the desk. Tyrion kept writing. When he was done writing the first letter, he sealed and stamped it with the seal on a ring at his right hand. Cersei realized this was the same ring her father once used to stamp his own messages. Her greatest wish right now was to snatch it from Tyrion, but before she could he spoke.

“Your Grace,” as he took another piece of parchment and started to write again. That was all. He barely acknowledged her presence, not caring to look at her while he said her title. She was the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Who did he think he was?

“I was hoping we could talk,” she said, trying to sound amiable though not entirely hiding her scorn.

“Go on then. I’m listening.” He kept writing, still not looking at her. “You can sit if you wish, your Grace. Unless you want to remain standing there like a handmaiden or a servant.”

That was too much. Cersei snatched the letter from Tyrion and tore in a thousand pieces. “I am the Queen! You will look at me when I speak.”

“That’s not a very queenly reaction.” She slapped him. “That wasn’t very queenly either.” She slapped him again. “Alright, what is it you want to say, your Grace? I don’t have much time. I’m not the queen who can do whatever she wants of her time. I am the lord paramount. I have a castle, mines, lands and bannermen under my responsibility. I have duties, and work to do.”

“No longer. Leave this place immediately. These rooms don’t belong to you.”

Tyrion looked all around himself, as if he tried to see where he was. “As far as I can remember, these rooms belong to the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

“Jaime is the Lord of Casterly Rock,” Cersei said with a poisonous voice.

“You’re wrong, big sister. I’m afraid he’s not.”

“He is. Don’t contradict me. I am the queen.”

“Yes, you are the queen. Because you are married to the king. Hence, you are a queen consort, and your duties are mostly to sit next to the king and to give him babies.” Again, Cersei slapped him. “You’re perfecting the art of slapping people. Anyway Cersei, your husband already acknowledged me Warden of the West. I don’t think he will come back on his decision. Father is no longer alive, so you can’t threaten Robert with him like you always did. As for Jaime, the matter is settled.”
Tyrion produced a document from under the desk and handed it to Cersei. She snatched it from his hands, to show how she hated him and how she gave him no consideration. She unrolled the scroll and read it. She recognized Jaime’s writing, but couldn’t believe what he wrote.

*I, Ser Jaime Lannister, son of Tywin Lannister and Joanna Lannister, hereby confirm the vows I took in 279 AC when I was raised to the Kingsguard by its Lord Commander, Ser Gerold Hightower.*

*I give up all claims I could have on all lands, castles, keeps, titles and territories, including and not limited, on Casterly Rock and its lands, on the Westerlands, and on all the titles attached to these lands and castles. I renew my vow to never hold lands or castles, to never marry, and to never father children. I repeat my vow to serve my king, to keep his secrets and to protect him with my own life, from this day until my last day.*

*Ser Jaime Lannister,*

*Knight of the Kingsguard*

This was Jaime’s signature. How could he do something like that? Cersei tore the paper in rage. “Is this meant to be your shield? A piece of paper?”

“These are Jaime’s words,” said Tyrion.

“These were. His words will change. Leave this place. I won’t repeat it again.”

Ser Boros made a step forward. Tyrion rose from his seat and walked to the door. He knocked on it. She thought he muttered something on the other side, then closed the door and looked back at her. “I will give you the same advice, sweet sister. Leave this place. You are in my rooms, behaving quite unsuitably with one of your husband’s bannermen. I’m ready to forget about this and to attribute it to some weariness or illness, and to Father’s death that affected you deeply.”

“You will leave these rooms immediately and leave them to me,” Cersei shouted.

“To you? I thought Jaime was the Lord of Casterly Rock, or at least that it was what you believed. Or said. There is often a great difference between what people say and what they actually believe.”

Cersei smirked. “Jaime never thinks. He laughs at everything and everyone and says whatever comes into his head. Jaime is a handsome fool.”

“And you want a handsome fool to lead House Lannister?”

“I will lead House Lannister. Casterly Rock is mine. Jaime will be lord, and I will rule. You have no right over Casterly Rock. I have every right over it. I am the queen!”

“I heard enough!” Cersei heard a voice behind her and froze immediately. That was the same voice that whispered in her ear this night. She turned to face her twin. Rage marked his face, and he was shaking. He didn’t wear an armor, but had a sword at his belt. “A handsome fool. Is that really what you think of me?” He spoke between his teeth, anger plain in his eyes. “It seems you were right, Tyrion. She wants Casterly Rock for herself. You won’t have it, your Grace. The Rock belongs to Tyrion. I bent the knee before him not long after I arrived. There were knights, lords, all our family and most of the household to witness it. The coronation ceremony already took place. All the lords and landed knights of the Westerlands recognized Tyrion as their liege lord. He is our lord, from this day to his last day.”

Again, Cersei couldn’t believe what Jaime was just saying, and that he was actually here. How
couldn’t she see him? There were curtains. Perhaps he hid behind one of them. That meant he heard everything, all their conversation. Cersei took back her composure. “Casterly Rock is ours, Jaime. He killed our mother. He can’t have it.”

There were knocks on the door. “Yes, sister. I can have it, and I have it. Come in,” shouted Tyrion. The doors opened and about ten guards came in. Cersei recognized the man leading them. It was Vylarr, the commander of the red cloaks in King’s Landing. There was her chance.

“Captain Vylarr, arrest this man. Put him in the dungeons where he can rot and think about where his true place is. Ser Boros, carry him.”

Ser Boros walked to Tyrion but was stopped immediately by Jaime’s sword on his neck. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Blount.”

The kingsguard didn’t move. Vylarr didn’t move either. He looked at the situation with utter confusion. Tyrion spoke next. “Captain, Vylarr, you swore fealty to House Lannister when my father was Lord of Casterly Rock. Now you owe your allegiance to me, his son and heir. Escort the queen back to her chambers and keep her in to make sure nothing happens to her.”

There was a little hesitation, but Vylarr moved toward her with his men. “Your Grace, please follow us.”

Cersei fumed. “Captain, I gave you an order.”

“Your Grace, I beg you. Follow us.”

Cersei understood then. The red cloaks were betraying her. They swore allegiance to her father, and they believed Tyrion was his rightful heir. She turned to Jaime, but his eyes were hard on her. Ser Boros didn’t dare to move, her brother’s sword still on his neck. Cersei knew he had no chance against Jaime alone. Jaime was the best sword in Westeros, and Ser Boros faced not only Jaime but also ten red cloaks. Conceding the defeat, Cersei followed the men to her rooms. She was raging inside, but once she was back in her personal chambers, she devised a new plan. She lost a battle, but not the war.

Jaime came to see her during the night. Cersei had been confined to these rooms all day. She hadn’t even gone to see her children when they came back from the cave. She was happy to see him, even if he turned against her. Jaime didn’t come to kiss her or to pull her into an embrace like he usually did.

“That’s how you see me? A handsome fool? Someone who doesn’t think? A cock between your legs because you couldn’t have Robert or Rhaegar? Is that all I am?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Jaime,” said Cersei. “I didn’t know what I was saying. I was angry. He took what was us by right.”

“The way you talked about it, the Rock was yours, and I was only there so you could use me to have it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I was furious. He’s… I hate him. He killed our mother. You remember the day she died. Now our father is dead as well. And he’s here, in his solar, ruling House Lannister. How do you want me to react to this?” She let tears run on her cheeks. *Tears are a woman’s best weapon,* her mother once told her. Jaime seemed to be smoothed by it.

He came to sit by her side on the bed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Tyrion didn’t kill our mother on purpose. He was only a baby when this happened. He didn’t want to murder her. I
don’t want to be a lord. If I was to become one, I would have to give up my vows. I would have to marry and to have children with another woman. And I would have to leave King’s Landing, to leave you. That’s not what I want. I want to be with you. That’s all I want.” He went to sit behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, while bringing his hands slowly up. “Let Tyrion stay at Casterly Rock. Let him have it. Let’s return to the capital where we’ll be alone. Just you and me. Tyrion rules well, and he has Kevan and Genna to keep an eye on him. If he ever tries something against you, they will stop him. And if they don’t, I will. I promise.”

What came next was only an explosion of pleasure. The last night hadn’t been enough for Cersei. She could never have enough of her other half. The next morning, Tyrion paid her a visit not long after Jaime was gone. He didn’t expect her to bend the knee to him before everyone since she was the queen and would certainly never accept to do it, but he expected her to behave adequately around him and to not threaten him again. She was at Casterly Rock, and the Rock was now his seat, so she had to respect him under his roof. She would be escorted by ten red cloaks all the time to ensure her safety.

Cersei had to accept this little monster’s rule. Jaime wouldn’t help her, the red cloaks had turned on her and Boros Blount was useless. Her imbecile of a brother made it quite clear. Everyone considered Tyrion as the Lord of Casterly Rock, and Cersei realized it quite quickly during the two weeks she spent there. She spoke with many people during this time, trying to see what were the feelings about Tyrion. Most of the Lannisters didn’t object his place as lord, and many even supported her. Those who really mattered were Kevan and Genna. Cersei had managed to obtain from Creylen her father’s will. It confirmed her certainty that Tywin Lannister had never wanted Tyrion as his heir. He clearly named Jaime Lord of Casterly Rock. However, Jaime had acknowledged Tyrion as his lord, and there was obviously nothing Cersei could do to change her brother’s mind. Kevan was Tyrion’s main advisor like he had been her father’s before, and he only had good comments to say about Tyrion’s rule up to now. As for Genna, Cersei had tried to convince her that Tyrion shouldn’t be lord, only to discover that her aunt had been the one to pressure everyone to acknowledge Tyrion as quickly as possible, and that she supported him even more than Kevan. She didn’t hide her true feelings to Cersei.

“Jaime smiles like Gerion, fights like Tygett, and he serves like Kevan in some small way too. But he has nothing of your father in him. As for you Cersei, you have your mother’s beauty, and you have the ruthlessness, the ambition and the cunning of your father. But none of you are Tywin’s children, or your mother’s children. But Tyrion is the son of Tywin and Joanna. He has the intelligence of his father, his instinct for politics and affairs, his cunning as well, and he can be ruthless when he needs to be. He also has your mother’s heart, and her compassion. You don’t know it Cersei, but your mother wanted a second son. When she realized Jaime was no fit to become Lord of Casterly Rock one day, she decided they needed a new son, she and Tywin. And she got him. Tyrion is the son she hoped for, and the heir Tywin dreamed of, even he was too stubborn to admit it.”

Cersei was furious and wanted to tear out her aunt’s head from her neck each time she thought about her words. How could she say Tyrion looked like their father, and even worse like their mother? Tyrion was a twisted little monster who carved his way out of Cersei’s mother to live, and let her die. He was nothing like her mother. He wasn’t even human, except when it came to his manly needs.

Cersei had secretly tried to convince some people that Tyrion was unworthy to be Lord of Casterly Rock, but to her surprise it didn’t work out very well. The people, the household, the family, the bannermen had recognized him officially. There was some grumbling among the guards of Casterly Rock about something he made to prevent the men from enjoying the company of some servants, and Cersei could use that eventually, but it was not enough to set them against him immediately. With Jaime who had knelt before Tyrion and more than a hundred people who saw him do so, there was no alternative for people. If Cersei had been a man, they might have considered her to take
Tyrion’s place, but she was a woman, something that enraged her even more.

All the same, Cersei gathered some information she could use against the usurper of the Rock when the time would come. She wouldn’t allow him to stay Lord of the Westerlands for long. She planted seeds for a coup. When she left, she was confident in the future. She had even let Tommen and Myrcella spend time with their little uncle to let him believe she didn’t care anymore about his position. Anyway, she would bring back her children in the right direction once they would be on the Goldroad on their way back to King’s Landing. Tyrion wouldn’t see her next strike come. She did all she could to look amiable to him, though it pained her to do so, but that was necessary.

Two weeks later, she left the Rock. Tyrion had decided to keep the red cloaks who came with her from the capital and gave her new men from the guardsmen of Casterly Rock. Even Vylarr was replaced and remained in the Westerlands. Cersei decided in the end to not worry about it. The other red cloaks in the capital right now were still loyal to her, to the opposite of Vylarr and his men who betrayed her. She would bind the new red cloaks to her like she did for the previous ones.

Two days after leaving the Rock, Cersei was lying in bed along with Jaime. He had left with them, and Cersei had managed to make sure her children would be in another carriage when she would spend her nights with their father. They were done with one their dances and Jaime went to pour himself a cup of wine.

“It’s good to be gone. I didn’t think I would hate to visit our home,” said Cersei.

Jaime came back at her side and gave her his cup of wine that Cersei drank with a seductive look. “We’re far away now. Don’t bother about Tyrion anymore.” Jaime kissed her and came on her again, resuming their lovemaking. “Anyway, he will be too much occupied in the following months with his marriage. He won’t think about you and how you hate each other.”

Cersei looked at Jaime as if he just slapped her. “His marriage?”

“Yes, our little brother will marry soon. Kevan is arranging a marriage for him.”

Cersei ignored this up to now. Why did no one tell her? Why did Jaime only tell her now? As Jaime lost himself in their joining once again, Cersei’s mind remained set on this new information. If Tyrion got married, then he might produce an heir. And if he produced an heir... Cersei would have to stop it, by all means necessary, as soon as they arrived in King’s Landing. This thought didn’t leave her mind for the rest of the night. Not even Jaime could make her forget about it, though he didn’t notice she wasn’t with him as they made love.

Chapter End Notes

I hate Cersei (in case that's not obvious enough). As always, her plans don't go as well as she thought, but that doesn't make her less dangerous. The future Lady Lannister should be careful with her sister-in-law.

Please review.

Next chapter: Margaery
Margaery II

Chapter Notes

A chapter I put a lot of work in, and a very important one for the future of the fic. I hope you'll like it.

The characters of Willas and Garlan Tyrell, who are Margaery's brothers in the books, will appear in this story even though it is mostly based on the show. Since Loras is Margaery's only brother in the show, I decided to make of Willas and Garlan her cousins.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY II

The lords and the knights had started to arrive two weeks ago. It could be only a squire’s tourney, but it was a tourney all the same. Many lords and landed knights of the Reach, and a few from the Stormlands and the Westerlands as well, had brought their sons in the hope they would gain their knighthood. However, Margaery was quite certain who would be the winner of the joust. Her brother Loras already displayed higher qualities on horse and at sword than everyone else in Highgarden. He would surely be the one to win. However, Margaery was a little afraid for her brother.

Six years ago, her cousin Willas Tyrell had ridden in a tourney against Prince Oberyn Martell. That had been his first tourney. He had displayed great talents with sword and horse in his childhood, but when he participated to an actual joust, the Prince of Dorne knocked him from his horse. By a very bad luck, his foot had caught in his stirrup and his horse had fallen on his right leg, crushing it and leaving him a cripple. He could never fight again.

Margaery could still remember. She was only nine at the time, and she had wept for her cousin. He was almost like a big brother for her, just like her other cousin Garlan. Willas had remained unconscious for many days after his fall and Margaery had stayed at his side all the time, sleeping in the same room than him. He lived in the end, but he was crippled for life. Willas had managed to get along quite well with his injury, turning to studies, books, breeding horses, hounds and horses, but Margaery doubted Loras would be able to do the same. Loras lived to ride and fight. If anything happened to him like Willas, Margaery wondered how he would be able to live.

Now the tourney had begun. There were thousands of people to assist it and more than a hundred squires had come to compete in the joust. They were late in the morning and Loras was facing his second opponent. He had defeated the first one easily, a boy coming from the Westerlands. The second one didn’t prove much more difficult to unhorse. Margaery cheered for her brother, just like her cousins, when he won. She noticed Renly Baratheon, the only great lord present aside her father, politely applauding when her brother won, but with a great smile on his face. She sat on a platform along with her father, her mother, her grandmother, her great-uncle Garth Tyrell and a few of her cousins. Mira and Sera were also present to attend her if need be, standing behind.

A young and comely man walked towards them. Margaery would say he was in the beginning of his
twenties like Willas. He wore a blue doublet with black breeches, but from the way he walked, Margaery thought an armor and a helmet would suit him far better. He had hazel eyes, a pug nose, a big chin, a clean-shaven face and strong muscles and yellow hair. He bowed to Margaery’s father and mother.

“Lord Tyrell, Lady Tyrell, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Ser Daven Lannister.”

That caught Margaery’s attention. “Ser Daven, this is a pleasure to welcome you in Highgarden. This is a great surprise to see you here,” replied her father. Margaery doubted the knight was there by luck or even for the tourney, and her father didn’t seem surprised at all.

“I have a squire, and I thought it would be good for him to participate to a first tourney. Sadly he was already defeated. By your son, my lord.”

The knight said it with a smile that showed he fount it more amusing than anything else. “I’m really sorry, Ser Daven. Loras will be the greatest sword on the Seven Kingdoms one day.”

“I can’t argue with you about that, my lord.”

“How fares Lord Tyrion, ser?” Lord Mace Tyrell had never been one for subtleties.

“He’s alright, Lord Tyrell. My cousin is rather occupied right now. He became Lord of Casterly Rock only a few months ago and has many matters to attend, but he fares well. I suppose all your family fares well too.”

“Yes, ser. Where are my manners? I present you my wife, Lady Alerie, my mother, Lady Olenna, my uncle Garth. You saw my son Loras fight right away. And this is my daughter, Lady Margaery.”

Ser Daven’s eyes had gone in her direction a few times since he began to talk with her father, but now his eyes lingered on her for a long time. He was observing her. He finally turned to everyone. “This is a pleasure to meet you all, my lords and ladies.”

“Alright now,” intervened her grandmother. “The introductions have been made, so perhaps we could go back to watching the damn joust.”

Ser Daven Lannister looked taken aback by her grandmother’s sharp language. “If that is your wish, Lady Olenna, I won’t bother you any longer. I wouldn’t want to deprive you from the joys of watching the tourney.”

“Then go, Ser Daven, and let us watch,” replied Lady Alerie, a little too harshly. The knight bowed one last time and left. Margaery looked at him as he went back to the seats reserved to the noble people.

In the afternoon, it was time for the sparring contest and Loras fought well. He didn’t win, but was among the five last competitors. His main weakness was his refusal to ally with anyone in the melee. He was defeated by two young men who had allied temporarily against him. Anyway, that didn’t really matter. It was the joust that mattered and that would decide which squire would be knighted.

A feast was thrown in the evening. All the noble people who came for the tourney were attending. Lord Renly outshined everyone with his presence. Margaery heard many people marvel about how he looked like his brother the king when he was young. Margaery doubted he had the same tastes for whores than his brother however. Loras was Renly’s squire, so it was Loras who proposed Renly to dance with his sister when the music started.

Lord Renly Baratheon was a very handsome young man, brown of eyes, brown of hair and with a
beard cut short. He had very good manners and was very friendly, and Margaery enjoyed dancing with him. He was very good at it.

“You are beautiful this evening, my lady,” he told her as they danced.

“Thank you, Lord Renly,” she answered.

“You dance very well.”

“You too.”

Margaery knew this was no attempt of seducing her. These were only compliments for the sake of being kind. Renly Baratheon had no interest in women. That didn’t make him a bad dancer or an ugly man. Margaery saw that more than one woman was looking at her in envy. They didn’t have to be envious. They would have their turn to dance with the Lord of Storm’s End, but only to dance with him. That wouldn’t go any further. If someone would share Renly’s bed tonight, the person was already chosen.

“Your brother fought very well today,” he resumed.

“Yes. A shame he lost in the melee, but I feel he’ll be luckier in the joust.”

“I hope so. He’s my squire after all. Maybe not for long.”

“Let’s wait for the end of the tourney to know it. But I’m sure you won’t lack opportunities to see him again.”

“I don’t intend to never see your brother again once he’s knighted. I want to keep good relations between House Tyrell and House Baratheon. I wish my brothers saw things the way I do.”

Margaery frowned. “Your brothers don’t like our family?”

Renly laughed. “Stannis doesn’t love much people. I fear there are more people who love him than people he loves, and he is lucky if one or two people love him. As for Robert, I’m afraid he never forgot that the Tyrells fought against him. He doesn’t hate you, but he won’t love you either.”

“And you, Lord Renly, do you love our house?”

“I do, my lady.”

They broke apart as the piece of music ended. Margaery spent the following dances with many other men, young and old. At one moment however, Ser Daven Lannister came to ask her the honor to be his partner. Margaery accepted with the grace a knight could expect from a lady. Ser Daven wasn’t a bad dancer, but it was obvious it wasn’t the thing he did best. Margaery could see he was a man for battle. He looked in some way like her cousin Garlan. He escorted her out of the dance floor when the music stopped and they went together to take a glass of wine.

“I’m sorry if I don’t dance well, my lady,” he said. “I’m not the best dancer in the Westerlands, not even in Casterly Rock.”

“Who is the best dancer in Casterly Rock?”

The knight thought about it for a moment. “I don’t know. Perhaps my cousin Damion. Or Cleos. I’m afraid we’re not very good at dancing in my family. We don’t have many balls or feasts.”

“I thought you would have answered that it was your lord.”
Ser Daven burst into laughter. “My cousin must be the worst dancer of us all. He doesn’t really have the height for it. And it would be useless to me to flatter him. He hates sycophants. He shares that with his father.” He took a gulp of wine. “Lady Margaery, I would like to visit your maze, but I’m afraid I don’t know it enough and I could get lost.”

Margaery laughed shortly. “That’s alright, Ser Daven. I’ll accompany you. It wouldn’t do well for a Lannister to get lost inside Highgarden.”

They walked away from the Great Hall arm in arm. Margaery was quite conscious more than one man was looking at them. Margaery led the knight to the briar maze, a very vast and complicated labyrinth where anyone who didn’t know it would get lost very easily. But when you knew it, it was a beautiful place where to wander at all time of the day. Ser Daven seemed impressed by it.

“I hope you won’t abandon me at a turn and let me try to find my way out on my own,” he jested.

She returned it. “Don’t worry, ser. I have no intention of letting you out of my sight.”

“Your home is a beautiful place, my lady.”

“Thank you, but you should tell this to my father. He would feel prouder than ever if you told him so.”

“Your father likes compliments,” he observed with a laughing smile.

“Yes, he does.”

They walked together for a moment without saying a word. Margaery enjoyed her time with the knight. He was well-mannered and had a good sense of humor, and she thought he wasn’t completely insensible to her. Too bad it wasn’t Lord Tyrion she had before her.

“This maze is huge. We could lose ourselves more easily than in the caves of Casterly Rock,” he said.

“We can lose ourselves in Casterly Rock?” Margaery asked. She wanted to know more about the castle if she may live there one day.

“Yes, my lady. We can. If we don’t know the place well enough. I grew up there, so I have no problem to find my way inside.”

“It must be a great castle.”

“It is, my lady. Probably the biggest castle in the Seven Kingdoms. It is carved in a mountain, that’s the reason why. Highgarden has nothing to envy it however.”

“You have a family, Ser Daven, don’t you?”

He laughed. “Of course, I have. We Lannisters are not born out of gold.” Margaery laughed at the jest.

“If you were, then this means I was born from a flower.” He joined her laughs.

“I have two sisters. They are twins. They mustn’t be far from your age. How old are you, my lady, if I may?”

“Fifteen.”
“My sisters are fourteen. Cerenna is the more talkative of the two. I think you would like her. Myrielle is more reserved, but you would like her as well.”

“If they are able to make me laugh as much as you, I’m sure I would love them.”

“My mother is Myranda Lefford. My father is Ser Stafford Lannister. He was the brother of Lady Joanna Lannister, Lord Tywin’s wife. That makes me a first cousin to our actual lord.”

“Tyrion Lannister,” she said. The knight nodded.

“Yes, my lady. The Dwarf. The Imp. The Halfman.” He said it with a smile.

“I suppose he doesn’t like to be called that way.”

“It depends, I would say. I call him that way sometimes, but he knows I only mean it as a jest, so he doesn’t care. He doesn’t like to be called that way when it’s meant as an insult however. Not long before I left, there was a minor lord who dared to call him that way in public. He paid the high price for that.”

“The high price?” Only for calling him Imp?

Ser Daven had a wicked smile on his face. “My cousin sent him to sleep in a dusty little chamber next to the kitchens and he spent the night hearing unbearable noises, unable to sleep, away from his wife who had a comfortable chamber in the upper levels of the Rock. When the lord complained about that on the morning, he did it while Tyrion was holding court. My cousin told him he was sure his wife wouldn’t want to spend the night with a man who used inappropriate language in public.”

Margaery giggled. That was the high price? “And? How did the lord react?”

“How the people present reacted you mean. They laughed very hard at him. He didn’t dare to call my cousin dwarf or anything like that after. The other lords who were present either.”

The Lannisters seemed to have a good sense of humor if Ser Daven and Lord Tyrion were a good indication. That was the sort of punishment her grandmother could devise. “Lord Tyrion is good at keeping his bannermen in line,” she commented.

“Yes, he is. As much as my uncle. Though in a much funnier way.” They both laughed again. “My uncle could be cruel when House Lannister was at stake. His son has better ways to make the people respect his rule. I was never really close to Tyrion. He’s quite solitary and lonely, but he’s very intelligent and kind when we know him. He’s very funny as well.”

“Did you get your sense of humor from him?”

He seemed to think about it for a moment. “He may have had an influence on it.”

“I never met him, when I think about it.” Margaery was intrigued. She wanted to know more about the Lord of Casterly Rock.

“He’s a dwarf, but except that he’s normal. Though he drinks a lot. I had a few drinking contests with him. He’s the one who initiated me at getting drunk.” He seemed to hesitate. “Sorry, my lady. This is not proper to speak about such things.”

Margaery put a hand on his arm while displaying a sweet smile. “Don’t worry, ser. I’m used to drunken people here. My own father included.”
Ser Daven looked relieved. He would keep talking about Lord Tyrion this way. “He’s very intelligent. I never saw someone read so much and know so much. He used to repeat long passages of Lomas Lonstrider’s books by memory during feasts with one of his uncles. He can also recite whole chapters of the Seven-Pointed Star only with his memory.” Margaery was impressed. Whole passages of the Seven-Pointed Star? Willas would like to meet him. “He’s a good fellow when we know him. We shared good japes together.”

“If he tells jokes like you, I regret I couldn’t be there to hear them.”

He returned the smile she shot at him. They reached a fountain with benches disposed in circle around it, with a statue of Garth Greenhand, water coming out from his ears. There was a full moon and the place was well illuminated.

“Highgarden is a very beautiful place. I heard about it, but now I realize the tales didn’t exaggerate. Everyone who lives here must love it.”

“Yes, they do,” she answered. She sat on a bench, looking at the water-shoots dripping in the pool. Ser Daven came to sit at her size.

“You love your home, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, I love it.”

Ser Daven took a more serious expression. “My lady, do you know why I’m here? Why I’m really here?”

Margaery looked back, still displaying a smile. “Perhaps you could tell me.”

He remained silent for a moment, then stood up. “We should go back to the feast. From what I saw in the last days, rumors and gossips spread quickly here. I don’t want some to run about me, or you. Or both of us.”

She took the hand he offered and followed him. They walked silently. When they were close to the end of the maze, Ser Daven stopped. They were walking arm in arm again and he prevented her from going forward. He released her arm and looked at her with the expression of someone who seemed careful about what he said.

“Lady Margaery, I don’t know if your parents told you why I’m here. This is not my place to tell you if they haven’t, but I received an order and I must carry it out.” He took something from inside his doublet and handed it to Margaery. That was a letter. She took it. “I would like you to tell no one that I gave it to you, my lady. Hide it. Read it only when you’re sure no one is looking at you. Give me an answer before I leave.”

He bowed and walked away toward the Great Hall, but Margaery stopped him. “Ser Daven, we should come back together, or else people will start to talk for real.” She joined him while hiding the letter in the folds of her gown and smiled as they resumed to walk arm in arm. “I’ll read it. Don’t worry.”

Back to the feast, Margaery danced, talked, drank, ate and gossiped, but questions were trotting in the back of her mind. She felt the letter against her stomach. What could it be? Ser Daven Lannister said he received an order. So the letter had to come from someone else. If the knight received an order, it probably came from the one person who could give him an order. His liege lord.

Late in the night, when Margaery was back into her chambers, she sent away her handmaidens as soon as she could. She seized the letter hidden in her gown and unfolded it. It was quite a long letter,
with a neat and careful writing that reminded Margaery of the way their maester wrote. There was
the stamp of House Lannister at the bottom with the signature of the Lord of Casterly Rock. She
began to read, impatient as she was to discover the content.

To Lady Margaery Tyrell,

Please forgive me, my lady, if I take the liberty to write to you, and to the ignorance of your parents.
You may reveal to them the content of this letter if you want, though I wish you wouldn’t. This letter
is for you and for you alone.

I hope your parents have told you of the discussions that are taking place right now between your
family and mine. If you don’t, then I am informing you. My cousin, Ser Daven Lannister, didn’t
come here for the tourney. That was only a pretext. He came at Highgarden on the demand of your
father to discuss a betrothal between you and me. I hope you’re not crying in despair before the
possibility of marrying a dwarf, though I would understand if you did.

The reason why I’m writing to you is because I do not wish to marry you if this is not your wish. I
wasn’t the one to suggest this marriage to your father. My uncle, Ser Kevan Lannister, wrote to him
almost immediately after my father died a few months ago. He thought it was time for me to marry
and that it would be better if I married as soon as possible.

I want you to know, my lady, that it would be an honor for me to have you as my wife. I have heard
tales about you, and nothing that was said could make me wish for a better wife. However, this letter
is not about what I want. It is about what you want. As I said, I do not want to marry you if you
don’t want to become my wife, and I think you deserve to know the truth about me in order to make
a good decision.

You probably heard horrible rumors about me. I will start by telling you which are true, and which
are not. First, it is true that I am often drunken and that I spend most of my nights, and days,
drinking. Second, I effectively visit on a regular basis many brothels, and it wouldn’t be
exaggerating to tell you that I am not only the best client for some of them, but also the one who
makes them live. Third, I gamble in tourneys whenever I assist one. Fourth, I am a dwarf, and those
who pretend I am one of the ugliest men in the Seven Kingdoms are right. Fifth, I have a crude
language and make jokes of bad taste quite often.

I must tell you, however, that some rumors about me are outright lies. I am not a monster, at least
not in the sense that I beat people, mistreat them, or even eat children according to some words
circulating. I am not cruel like my father. I have flaws, and big ones just like I admitted. I am
malformed, ill-made, and small, but in the dark, I am no worse than other men. I am generous. I am
loyal to those who are loyal to me. I am dutiful to my family and those I am sworn to. I am no
craven, or at least I hope I’m not. I am cleverer than most, surely wits count for something. I can
even be kind. Kindness is not a habit with us Lannisters, I fear. You surely know the song The Rains
of Castamere. But I know I have some kindness somewhere. I could be good to you. And ever since I
became Lord of Casterly Rock, I’ve done my best to relent my flaws. I stopped gambling, which was
the easiest thing to do. I also stopped to visit brothels, which has been more difficult. As for drinking,
I do it less than before. Work helps me a lot in that, though I keep drinking all the same. I can stop
myself from being crude when it is necessary and in the presence of people who don’t like it when I
care about them. As for being a dwarf, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can change about it.

Now you know more about me. I hope I didn’t offend you. If I did, then you just have to tell my
cousin, Ser Daven Lannister, that you don’t wish to marry me. I don’t want you to be forced into a
marriage with me because this is what your family or your parents want. Only a single word to my
cousin and when he will come back to Casterly Rock, I will end the discussions between our two
families and free you from this possible future with the Imp. The choice is yours, my lady.

However, if you wish to marry me despite everything I just revealed and confessed, though I would hardly understand you, then I promise you one thing, my lady. I won’t ever hurt you. I will cherish you as my wife, protect you, care for you, and make sure you have everything you could wish for. I will do everything I can to make you happy, and I hope you will be. I hope I will come to love you one day, even if you never love me. I would understand you could never love a dwarf.

I will never tell your parents you refused to marry me if that is your answer. The decision is yours, and only yours.

Yours sincerely,

Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West

Margaery was dumbstruck as she read the letter. She read a second and a third time to be sure of what was written. When Ser Daven gave it to her, she suspected it came from the Lord of Casterly Rock. Who else could give an order to a knight of House Lannister to give her a letter? However, the words were not at all what she expected. She thought it would be a letter about a lord expressing his love for her and pleading her to accept to marry him, or something like that. She received some letters of this style before. It wasn’t what she read on this paper.

Should she tell her parents? She wasn’t sure. He asked to not tell them, and assured her he would reveal nothing of this if she answered him. Margaery didn’t know what to think about it. That was completely unexpected. The choice is yours, my lady. Men never asked their betrothed if she really wanted to marry them, and even less did they reveal their flaws and tell her they wouldn’t be surprised and would understand if she chose to refuse them. Margaery folded the letter and hid it under her bed.

Margaery slept with Megga this night. She always shared her bed with one of her cousins and they would whisper secrets in each other’s ears. They did it as well tonight, and Megga was very curious about her stroll outside the Great Hall with Ser Daven, insinuating he may be infatuated with her. She also spoke about Renly who she found so handsome, and about Loras for the same reason. If only Megga knew they were a lost cause. Margaery wondered if Renly and Loras were together while Megga dreamed about them.

The next day was the second day of the tourney and Loras unhorsed two more opponents in the morning. In the afternoon took place the archery competition. There was a feast in the evening as well. Margaery feigned attention to the tourney. She only watched intently when it was her brother’s turn. She was still afraid he might get hurt for his first tourney. He was her little brother. The rest of the time, her mind was set on the letter. She had read it again in the morning after Megga had left, and she kept it in the folds of her gown all the day. She didn’t want someone to discover it, not even Mira or Sera while they were cleaning her chamber. She remembered full passages of it and they kept running in her mind. What was the meaning of this? Why would he give her a choice? Could it be a trap?

Margaery didn’t talk about it to her family. Not to her father, not to her mother, not to her brother, not even to her grandmother. Lady Olenna seemed to notice she was more silent than usual, but said nothing. There was a feast again this evening and Margaery played her role at the perfection. She danced with Ser Daven again, but they didn’t discuss about the letter. Later, she saw her father leave the feast with the young knight. With some wine, Margaery almost managed to forget about this matter for a time, but when she was back in her chamber, she couldn’t get the letter out of her head. Elinor slept with her tonight. When she was asleep, Margaery thought about the letter again.
Should she refuse? He recognized he had flaws, and major ones. To be married with him could be dangerous. On the other side, there was something, a sincerity in his words she seldom witnessed. He didn’t look like an idiot. A marriage with Lord Tyrion would make her the Lady of the Westerlands. She had come to consider it a very good option since her chances to become queen were very low. Now, however, she didn’t know what to think anymore. He was giving her the choice to not marry him. Perhaps she should take it and hope they could make her queen someday. Margaery had known what she wanted for a very long time, and her family had tried to give it to her, but becoming queen being quite unlikely, they tried to give her the best alternative. However, she had a choice to make now. What choice to make?

On the third day, Loras defeated his last three opponents and won the lists. He was knighted by his cousin, Ser Garlan Tyrell, before everyone. Her parents couldn’t hold their joy to see their son and heir knighted, and Margaery couldn’t either. She hugged her brother tightly. She managed to enjoy the feast that followed, but she was tired before everyone else and retired to her room. She hadn’t slept enough last night. When she entered, Mira was waiting, reading at the light of the candles.

“Mira? What are you doing here?” Sera was supposed to prepare her for the night this evening.

“Sorry, my lady. Sera was a little indisposed. She didn’t feel very well. I told her I could replace her for tonight. I hope it doesn’t bother you.”

Margaery couldn’t help but smile and discreetly laugh. She had a good idea why Sera didn’t feel well. She remembered seeing her take more than a few cups of wine at the feast. “You didn’t drink?”

“Only one cup, my lady. I don’t like wine very much to be true,” the northern girl answered.

“You’re probably the only one here.” Margaery went to sit before the Myrish glass and Mira began to unbraid her hair.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my lady?” she asked when she was done.

“No, that’s alright, Mira. But stay with me for a moment. I won’t go to bed immediately.” Mira went to sit face to face with her mistress. “What were you reading?” Margaery asked, pointing with a movement of head the book Mira left on a nearby table.

“The World of Ice and Fire” by Maester Yendel. It was finished recently. Maester Lomys suggested it to me. It’s a chronicle of the history of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Interesting. Which part of the history were you at?”

“I was just done reading the description of Casterly Rock.”

Margaery became suddenly much more interested by the book. “What does it tell about Casterly Rock?”

“Many things. I never saw it, but it looks wonderful from what the maester wrote. It’s not only a castle. It’s a mountain. Thrice the height of the Wall or the Hightower, two leagues long. Apparently it looks like a lion resting when the sun sets on it. There are towers, turrets, watchtowers, stone walls, gates and portcullises at the peak of it, but most of the castle is inside. There are hundreds of mineshafts with veins of gold in it, and those that are abandoned are turned into rooms for the castle. There are tunnels, dungeons, storerooms, barracks, halls, stable, stairways, courtyards, balconies, gardens, even a port with wharves and docks and shipyards. And there’s a godswood too. It has a weirwood that is so twisted that its roots almost fill all the cave where it is. The entrance, the Lion’s Mouth, is so large that twenty horsemen can ride abreast. The maester says it was never taken by
storm or siege, and that there is no castle larger, richer or better defended. It is said that the Targaryens were relieved when they saw it that the Lannisters surrendered after the Field of Fire. They doubted dragonflame would have been enough to take it. My father saw it one day. I wish I had been there.”

Margaery was surprised. “Your father visited Casterly Rock?”

“It was many years ago. I was only six or seven at the time. It was during the tourney at Lannisport. He said it was gigantic. He never saw something huge like that. Even Winterfell looked like some small keep when compared to it. But he didn’t like the inside. He said there were so much gold and silver everywhere that only with the riches in one chamber they could feed the entire North for twenty years.”

Margaery was stunned by Mira’s story. She knew House Lannister was rich, but not to that point. Her own family looked like beggars in comparison. Why didn’t she think about looking for information about the castle in books before?

“While I think about it, he also met Tyrion Lannister at the tourney,” Mira added. “The man they call the Imp.”

Margaery wasn’t short of surprises for this evening it seemed. “Really?”

“It was before he became Lord of Casterly Rock, of course,” Mira explained.

“Did your father tell you anything about him? About the Imp, I mean.”

Mira seemed to search her memories for some time. “He didn’t tell me much about him. Only that he met him and talked to him shortly. He only mentioned it.”

Margaery sighed in silence. If only Mira’s father had told her more. She knew nothing more about the Imp. “Mira, have your parents ever try to betroth you to someone?”

If Mira was taken aback by this question, she didn’t show it. “No, my lady. Not that I know. I’m only thirteen anyway. I still have a lot of time to get married, and I think my mother wants me to marry someone from the south. She didn’t send me here only to learn the southern ways. I think she wants me to live in the south.”

“That would be logical. Was any of your brothers and sisters betrothed or married with someone?”

“Well, my brother Rodrik was about to be betrothed to Elena Glenmore when I left, and my brother Asher… Well, you know what happened.” Margaery nodded. Mira told her about the affair between Gwyn Whitehill and her brother, and the exile that followed. “Talia and Ethan had nothing arranged for them and Ryon was only a baby when I saw him the last time. I wonder how he looks like now. He must have grown up.”

Margaery was envious of Mira in some way. She wished she had more than one brother. She would like to have a sister like Mira had. “And you, Mira? Do you have someone who interests you here?”

Mira seemed surprised by Margaery’s words this time. She smiled shyly. “No, my lady. That wouldn’t be proper. I must wait for my mother to find me a husband.”

Margaery smiled sadly. That was always the same thing. Women had to wait for their family to choose their husband. “Maybe I could help you to find one. Perhaps not right now, but when the time comes, I could help your mother to find you a suitable husband.”
Mira smiled. “That would be very kind of you, my lady. But make sure to inform my mother before you choose. She won’t like it if I marry without her consent.”

“No, of course. I would never let your mother out of it.” They remained silent for a moment. “Mira, you have been a very good handmaiden ever since you arrived here, and even a friend to me. I know it’s not been easy for you to adapt to the life in Highgarden, and despite this you do your duty better than everyone else. I want to thank you. I was very lucky to meet you.”

Mira blushed a little. “I’m only doing what’s expected of me, my lady. It’s my duty as your handmaiden.”

Again, Margaery wished she had more northern servants. She had to beware of many people here in Highgarden, even some members of her distant family, but Mira was close to loyalty made flesh. She would never betray the person she served. She would never betray her.

Never betray her. That gave an idea to Margaery. She crossed her fingers on her legs and looked at Mira with a very serious expression.

“Mira, there is something I have to tell you.” She was tired to keep it for herself. If there was someone she may confide in without any risk, it was Mira. “You must swear that everything that we’re about to talk about will never leave this room. Never. Do you understand?”

“Of course, my lady. If that’s what you want.”

“No one must know about this, Mira. Not your friends, not Sera, not your family, not even my own family, not my own father or my mother, not my grandmother. Even if the king himself asked you about this, you mustn’t talk. Is that clear?”

Mira looked uncertain for a moment, even afraid, but she agreed nonetheless. “Yes, my lady. I swear it.”

“Good.” Margaery raised from her seat and began to perambulate around her chamber. “Mira, my parents are actually discussing the possibility of a marriage for me. It’s not the first time that it happens. You know we received several propositions from other families, don’t you?”

“Yes, my lady. I think there has been House Hightower, House Redwyne and House Tarly among many. You even received a proposition from Lord Royce and Lord Manderly, I believe.”

“You have a good memory, Mira,” acknowledged Margaery. “Only this time the proposal is very serious. It comes from House Lannister.”

There was no reaction with Mira for some time, but she opened her mouth a little while her eyes widened after a time as she spoke. “My lady, do you mean they… They asked you to marry… Lord Tyrion Lannister.”

Margaery sighed and nodded. “Yes. It was a few months ago. Ser Daven Lannister came to the tourney to discuss about it with my parents and my grandmother.”

Mira still had her mouth opened and looked aside Margaery, then brought her gaze back to her. “And your father? Lord Tyrell? He’s willing… to accept it?”

Margaery rolled her eyes. “He says he’s only thinking about it, but I think he is very seriously thinking about it. Surely he already dreams of seeing me Lady of Casterly Rock. My grandmother is thinking about it seriously as well, but more carefully. She says it would probably be the best marriage I could hope for.”
“She’s not wrong,” Mira conceded. “Tyrion Lannister is the richest man in the Seven Kingdoms, and one of the most powerful probably. What does Lady Alerie think about it? And Ser Loras?"

“My brother ignores everything about it. I would like it to stay the same. Remember what I told you.” Mira nodded to show she remembered. “As for my mother, she is entirely opposed to this.”

“Is that why she was so hard with Ser Daven two days ago?”

Margaery smiled. “You’re very observant, Mira. Yes, I suppose that was the reason. For now, as far as I know, nothing is decided. They are probably discussing about it at this very moment if my father is not still at the feast.”

A silence took place between them. Margaery felt some weigh leave her shoulders. If was good to finally say everything to someone. Keeping secrets could be hard sometimes.

“My lady, why are you telling me this?” Mira asked.

“Because I trust you, Mira. And because of this.” She took the letter from her gown. “Ser Daven gave me this. It comes from Lord Tyrion. He wrote this to me. I would like you to read it and to tell me your opinion.”

Mira eyed the letter. “My lady, do you really think I should? That I should read a letter addressed to you?”

“I don’t trust anyone else with that. Anyway Mira, you are my handmaiden. You are at my service. I order you to read this letter.”

She handed the letter and Mira finally took it, slowly and carefully. She unfolded it, very slowly as well, as if she was afraid of the content, and began to read. Margaery looked at her very closely. Mira’s eyes widened and her mouth opened a few times, but she kept her focus on the letter all the time as she read it. Mostly, she looked more and more intrigued as she read, the frown on her face growing, and seemed surprised from time to time. Finally, her eyes left the letter and she looked aside, as if she was lost in her thoughts or searching for her words.

“So,” asked her mistress, “what do you think about it?”

It took some time before Mira answered and her answer didn’t help much. “I… I don’t know.”

Margaery sighed in silence. “I fear that may be a trap.”

Mira looked surprised. “How could that be a trap?”

“I don’t know. I know nothing of this man. Why did he write to me? That makes no sense.”

“Except if he is sincere.”

Margaery looked back at her handmaiden, intrigued. “Sincere?”

“Perhaps he simply wrote to you for the reasons he mentions. He wants you to know him better and to decide whether you want to marry him or not.”

That was possible, but Margaery couldn’t get out the feeling that there was something else. “Why would he give me the choice? He says himself that he would be more than happy to marry me. That he would do everything to make me happy and that he would treasure me as his wife. Why give me the choice then if he wants to marry me?”
Mira shrugged. “Maybe because he doesn’t want to marry an unwilling bride.”

That was too easy for an answer. That was the reason the Imp gave. Margaery walked around, thoughts running through her mind. Mira went back to read the letter. What personal goal could that man be looking for with this? He had the opportunity to marry her, the Rose of Highgarden, a young lady many people saw like the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms. Margaery knew what was said about her. She was the only daughter of the Lord of Highgarden. Why take the risk to have this marriage taken out from his hands? That made no sense.

“What is his interest with this letter?” Margaery asked loudly.

“To not marry a woman who doesn’t love him.”

Margaery stopped and looked at the northern girl. “What do you mean?”

“My lady, his writing style is not that of an imbecile. Judging by his signature, he’s the one who wrote it himself. That’s not the work of a maester. His style shows an intelligent man and a clever mind behind it, but he doesn’t talk of politics anywhere. He’s mocking himself, talks freely of his flaws, but tries to justify himself at the same time and to show he’s not an evil man. I think… I think he only wants you to know who he is before you marry. And to give you the choice to refuse. Perhaps he simply wants a happy marriage, nothing more. That would explain why he’s ready to stop all the discussions if you don’t want to wed him. If there was more, he would have talked about political matters, but he doesn’t. He only talks about his feelings, and yours.”

Margaery shook her head. “What would you do in my stead?”

“I don’t know, my lady. It’s your choice, not mine. You’re the one who’s best placed to decide.”

Margaery thought about the words. “Thank you, Mira. You may leave. Remember, no one must know.”

Mira rose and gave the letter back to her mistress without being asked. Then she left after a curtsy and Margaery found herself alone with her thoughts. Most of the lords and knights stayed at Highgarden for a few days once the festivities were over, and Ser Daven stayed a little while longer than the others. He only left two weeks after the tourney was over. Margaery spent a lot of time with him, asking questions about the Westerlands, Casterly Rock and its lord. Mira was with them from time to time and Ser Daven was surprised that her handmaiden knew many things about Casterly Rock while she never saw it. He was quite surprised when Mira told him her father met Lord Tyrion years ago. The young knight became popular in some way among a few ladies of Highgarden. He was sparring with Loras and Garlan in the training grounds, though he seemed to prefer practicing with Garlan. They shared the idea that they should train for battle, not for tourney.

When Ser Daven left, he offered Mira to come with him to Casterly Rock since she seemed so interested by it. Mira declined politely, saying it was her duty to stay at Highgarden and to serve Lady Margaery. Ser Daven hoped then that Lady Margaery would have the chance to visit the Rock soon. They were alone, he, Margaery and Mira when he said that. Since Mira knew about the letter, Margaery seized the chance and gave Ser Daven a note on a scroll of paper.

“This is my answer,” she told him.

Ser Daven bowed and left. He left Highgarden two hours later. When he was gone, Margaery went to see her grandmother who sat with many other girls in one of the many gardens of the castle. Lady Olenna chased them all when she noticed the eyes Margaery made. Her grandmother knew what that meant. They had to talk. To talk alone.
“Grandmother, I took a decision.”

Chapter End Notes

To clarify Margaery's reaction, she is not really touched by the letter Tyrion wrote. What Margaery see in a marriage are possibilities for wealth, power and influence. She's not looking for love, and maybe she even doesn't care about love with her husband. What bothers her is that Tyrion is allowing her to refuse the marriage, which almost never happens in medieval societies among the nobility. She doesn't understand Tyrion's letter since it seems to be against his own interests to give her a choice, and furthermore she doesn't know him at all at this point. It takes Mira to tell her maybe Tyrion is only being sincere and is looking for love in his marriage. Mira is a Northerner, there are not so many intrigues where she grew up, so she is more willing to consider Tyrion can be honest.

Through history, there are many cases of powerful women who became very close to one of their ladies in waiting or handmaidens. The servant could sometimes become a confident, even an advisor. Mira is taking that role here as Margaery's handmaiden. Just like in "A Shadow and a Wolf", Mira will play an important role, and even have her own storyline at some point, though not immediately.

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Tyrion II

Chapter Notes

Tyrion sent a letter, now he receives a letter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION II

Tyrion needed some time to recover. He was breathing heavily and quickly, sweating. When he could breathe more easily, he turned his face to his left. She was looking at him, her red hair falling on her back that was covered up to the breast by the covers. She was lying on her belly and looking at him, an uncertain smile on her lips. Her blue eyes remembered him of Tysha.

“Did you like it?” she asked him.

Tyrion laughed. “I should be the one asking you this. You didn’t do much.” He sat and caressed her cheek, removing a strand of hair from it. “Did you like it?”

Her smile grew a little. “Yes.”

Tyrion looked at her eyes. They remembered him of Tysha. He supposed she was telling the truth. Alla was a scullion, not a whore. He kept passing her hair between his fingers and caressing her cheek for some time, but he remembered in the end.

“You should leave. You know you cannot stay here for the whole night.”

“Yes, of course. Sorry.” The smile disappeared immediately from her face and she left the bed, taking her clothes on the floor and putting them on again. It didn’t matter that her clothes had been on the floor. They were always dirty. That was inevitable when you worked in the kitchens.

Tyrion looked at the girl. Despite being unwashed, she was quite pretty. She had no more bruises on her skin. Tyrion had the impression she was cleaner than usually these last times. Perhaps she tried to wash herself with some water in the kitchens or from some random basin before she came here. After weeks where she came twice or thrice a week to visit him at night, he still didn’t know who Alla was for him. A whore? A woman he was bedding? A lover? Some of the three he guessed. He paid her. He shared his bed with her. He liked her. He felt pity for her.

“Alla, you know you’re not obliged to visit me at all,” he told her. She was done dressing.

“That’s alright. It doesn’t bother me. Not at all.” She came more regularly to him for the two last weeks.

“Show me your hands,” commanded Tyrion. She approached and showed them to him. They were all red with scratches from the cleaning she did all day. He pressed one a little with his thumb and she wailed. “Sorry. It hurts you?”

“It’s alright. I’m used to it.”
“You shouldn’t have to hurt yourself that way.”

“It doesn’t matter. Things have been much better in the kitchens for the last few weeks. Thanks to you.”

She was smiling at him, recognition in her eyes. Tyrion didn’t feel he deserved it. “You could have even better. You could marry, have children, live with someone. Have a good man in your life who would take care of you.”

“There aren’t many men I met who were good. Except you,” she said.

Tyrion averted his eyes from hers. “I’m not a good man, Alla.”

“Yes, you are.” He hated to be contradicted.

“Go, Alla. Try to not make yourself seen by anybody.” She nodded, bowed awkwardly and walked away, but before she was at the door, Tyrion stopped her. “Wait.” He came out of bed and took two silver stags than he handed her.

“I don’t want money,” she said gloomily.

“You need it more than me. Come on, take it.”

She took it and left, still gloomy. Maybe he shouldn’t have given her money, but Tyrion felt he had to. He went to the table, poured himself a drink and emptied it. Then he went back to bed and brought with him some ledgers of the Rock’s accounts. If he tried to fall asleep right now, he wouldn’t succeed. He would only roll in the bed for hours, missing Alla and her red locks. With a few hours of reading, he could hope to forget about her, and then he would be able to sleep for a few hours. That’s what happened this night after he closed the ledgers.

On the morning, Tyrion worked on the accounts of all the taxes that were perceived in the Westerlands. They were fluctuating a lot, even the agricultural taxes that should bring the most constant revenues. Most of House Lannister’s revenues came from their mines inside the Rock, but that was no reason to pay no attention to the minor taxes. Tyrion would have to inquire about the irregularities in the revenues generated by the land taxes.

In the afternoon, he held court in the Great Hall of Casterly Rock. The most important affair of the day happened when Ser Lorent Lorch came asking for financial aid because his house was bankrupt. Tyrion knew very well why the Lorchs were bankrupt.

“Ser Lorch, I think if you melted the gigantic statue you ordered for your father, you would have more than enough to escape bankruptcy.”

“But, my lord, this statue is made at the image of my father. In his honor,” the knight complained.

“Did you have to make a statue thirty feet tall in gold?” Laughter broke into the Hall. “Even the statue of my father is made of stone, and it’s not thirty feet tall.”

“My lord,” pleaded Ser Lorch, “you have to help us.”

“I helped you. I gave you an advice. You have to choose between the statue and your keep. If you choose the statue, I’m afraid the rains will weep over your hall before long when your creditors will come demanding their due. Thank you for coming, ser. You may leave now.” The knight was stunned and didn’t move. “Do you want me to fetch a bard so he can sing you a song of farewell?” Tyrion asked, irritated.
The lord left with a tail between his legs. People in the Hall were barely keeping their laughs. Tyrion looked at Kevan. His eyes were uncertain. He wasn’t used to Tyrion’s way to deal with his bannermen when it was time to make his authority felt. Lord Tywin Lannister had never used humor to keep his men loyal. Tyrion had decided to change that. Better to keep your men in line while laughing and making the others laugh. That made the task more enjoyable.

The herald announced the next petitioners. “Lord Gawen Westerling and Lady Sybell Westerling.”

The couple moved forwards. There was a third person behind them, a very young girl with brown curls. The Lord of the Crag knelt as his wife and the one Tyrion thought was their daughter curtsied. He moved his hand to order them to stand up.

“My lord, we have come to Casterly Rock for tonight’s feast,” the father said.

“We thank you for your presence, Lord Westerling,” answered Kevan. He and Tyrion exchanged a glance. They both knew why they came.

“My lord,” said Lady Sybell, “we have brought our daughter with us. We wished to introduce her before all the Westerlands.” They hadn’t chosen the right feast for that. Most of the lords wouldn’t be there, and they knew it. The girl stepped forward and curtsied. “My lord, let me present you and to you all our eldest daughter, Lady Jeyne Westerling.”

“You may rise, my lady,” Tyrion told her. She stood up. She wasn’t ugly, and quite pretty in some way, though not a great beauty. According to Kevan, she was only twelve and recently flowered. She was looking at Tyrion with frightened eyes. He suspected he knew why. “Welcome to Casterly Rock, my lady. It is a pleasure to meet you. Lord Westerling, the hospitality of the Rock is yours and to your family as well.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said the Lord of the Crag. Then he left with his wife and his daughter. Tyrion reflected that it was the wife who led in this family.

The rest of the audience was without anything extraordinary. Some merchants and smallfolk came to ask for some thing or another and Tyrion did his best to give justice and maintain what good image House Lannister had. He held court for a shorter time than usual since a feast would take place in the Great Hall afterwards.

At the feast tonight, Lady Jeyne Westerling came to curtsy before him. She was shy, and still looked frightened. Tyrion didn’t think she came of her own volition. He saw her mother looking at her from afar. He was courteous enough with her, but told her subtly she wasn’t obliged to stay longer than she wished. She left as soon as she could. Like Tyrion expected, the girl didn’t want to marry him. Her parents, and especially her mother it seems, wanted it to enhance their station. Tyrion wouldn’t give them satisfaction.

“Be careful, Tyrion,” said Kevan at his right after the girl was gone.

“Don’t worry, Uncle. The Westerlings will need more than a beautiful girl to convince me of marrying their daughter. I know she’s a poor match. Anyway, she seemed more eager to marry a real lion than me, so the matter is closed.”

“It is.”, confirmed Kevan. He rose from his seat on the dais. “If you’ll excuse me, my lord, I will dance with my wife.”

“No need to apologize, Kevan. You have a wife, and you can dance. The first I don’t have yet, and the second I can’t do. Hence you have no reason to not dance with her.”
Kevan left and Tyrion found himself alone on the high table. Dancing with his height would look ridiculous, and it would be ridiculous as well. He drank wine and looked at the others dancing. When he would marry, he would never be able to dance with his wife. He pitied the poor girl who would be sentenced to sit by his side for the rest of her life. Unless he made her the pleasure to die quickly, but that was a pleasure Tyrion would like to avert. He wondered who the poor girl would be.

He saw a group of three drunken men laughing loudly. In fact, he heard them laughing loudly before he saw them. They seemed to be knights, and they had cornered Jeyne Westerling between two tables. They were quite close to him but didn’t seem to notice his presence.

“Look at it!” one of them said. “The little lady of the Crag. She’s young. And pretty. I heard she just had her first blood. That means she can be taken now. Do you want me to show what a woman does at night, little lady?”

“No, I’ll do it. I’m much better than him,” said one of his friends.

“Yeah, he’s right,” said the third. The girl was looking all around, searching for help.

“I don’t want any trouble, sers,” she told them.

“Come on, girl,” said one. “Your great-grandfather was a merchant. You’re barely noble born. No man will take you for his wife. No need to worry about losing a maidenhead. No husband will ever ask you about it.”

Tyrion had enough of that. That was happening in his hall, in his castle, and the girl was only twelve. He went to the four of them. He recognized the one who spoke the most. Ser Lymond Vikary, a landed knight, the head of House Vikary.

“Ser Lymond,” said Tyrion. The three men turned to him, surprised to see their liege lord. “I hope you’re not bothering the lady.”

He seemed to hesitate. “Not at all, my lord. We were only discussing.”

“Then in this case, I would leave if I were you. I would like to speak with the lady myself. And since your family originated from a bastard and that your own brother married a whore two years ago, I’m afraid you’re too low to speak to a lady who descends from one of the oldest houses in the Westerlands.”

The knight was agape. His two friends laughed at him. He stammered something unintelligible and staggered as he walked away, his friends still laughing at him as they followed. Tyrion looked at the girl.

“Are you alright, my lady?”

“Yes. Thank you, my lord,” she said, still shy and trying to not look at him. She was still frightened.

“Lady Jeyne, would you care to accompany me? I need some time outside the hall, and I think you need some too.”

She hesitated, but finally agreed. They walked out. He saw the young girl shooting a glance behind her as they left the Great Hall, probably at her mother or her father. She followed Tyrion without a word.

“You’re alright? They did nothing to you?” he asked her after a moment.
“No, my lord. They only mocked me because my great-grandfather was a merchant and his wife a witch according to some people. She came from Essos.”

“An interesting place, Essos,” said Tyrion. “I wanted to visit the Free Cities when I was sixteen, but my father forbade me. Where did she come from?”

“Braavos,” she answered. She said nothing else.

“I want to show you something, Lady Jeyne,” Tyrion said after a moment. “Do you have a godswood at the Crag?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I’ll show you our own. It is called the Stone Garden.”

A few minutes later, they arrived at the Stone Garden. The girl seemed surprised by the place. It was a cave with a very twisted weirwood with tangled roots that filled half the cave. The roots climbed on the walls up to the ceiling, and there was only a narrow path to the weirwood itself.

“I suppose it doesn’t look like that at your home,” Tyrion suggested.

“No, it doesn’t,” she said. She was looking all over the cave. Tyrion walked to the heart of the tree and sat on a root.

“Come, my lady. Sit,” he invited her. She didn’t come. “I’m not going to eat you.” That was meant as a jest, but she looked terrified all of a sudden. Tyrion sighed at himself. “Lady Jeyne, a lord shouldn’t sit while a lady is standing before him. But I have no wish to stand up. So sit. I command you as your liege lord.”

He indicated a place next to him. Slowly, she came to sit. There were a few feet separating them. He looked more closely at her. She was quite a lovely girl. Too bad she was born in a family that made her a poor choice for a wife. “Do people mock you often?”

She was startled by his question. “My lord?”

“Do people mock you often? Because your family is poor? Because your ancestors were merchants, foreigners and witches?”

“Sometimes, my lord,” she recognized after a moment.

“You don’t like it, do you?” She shook her head. “I know what you feel. I’ve been through this.”

“You have?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I am a dwarf. Do you really think I was never mocked in all my life? Of course no one would laugh of me in the presence of my father. They would have regretted it. But when my father wasn’t present, what could stop them? I’m quite sure your own parents laughed about me more than once.”

She protested. “No, my lord. They never… They would never…”

“No need, my lady,” he interrupted her. “No need to deny it. Or to know it, in fact. If we were to behead everyone who ever mocked his king or his lord, there wouldn’t be many people left alive in Westeros. Better to laugh than to rebel. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She nodded after a moment. She always took a short time before she answered. Tyrion cleared his
throat. “Let me give you some advice, my lady. About everything the others mock you for. Never forget about it. Never forget that your house is an impoverished one. Never forget who were your great-grandparents. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor and it can never be used to hurt you. You understand?” She nodded to show she did. “You’ll be much happier this way. Can I accompany you back to the feast?” He was now standing and offering her his hand. She took it after another hesitation.

As they walked back to the Great Hall, Tyrion told her something else. “I think I know why your parents brought you with them, my lady. You don’t have to worry. They will not get what they want. You won’t get married too soon.” He shot a smile at her. She seemed to understand and smiled back. “So enjoy the feast. You have nothing to worry about.”

They came back into the Great Hall. Tyrion stayed a little while longer, but left soon. Before he left, he saw Lady Jeyne Westerling dancing with some young knight, one who wasn’t among the drunken idiots of course. Tyrion didn’t have much interest in the feast truth be told. He went back to his personal chambers. As always, he drank and read. Alla didn’t come tonight. She certainly had too much work in the kitchens with the feast.

The next day, as the morning reached his end, Ty informed Tyrion that Ser Daven Lannister had come back. His cousin came in an hour later for the midday meal.

“My lord,” said Daven as he bowed right after entering.

“Hello, cousin.” Tyrion went to him to shake hands. “You had a safe travel?”

“No trouble on the road,” the cousin replied.

“Care if we eat?”

“Not at all. I’m starving. Though after the refined plates of Highgarden, I wonder if even your cook will be able to satisfy me.”

They took place at the table where Ty had brought everything. “So the food is excellent at Highgarden? How was it overall?”

“A very beautiful place. Some would say it comes out from fairy tales. Fountains, gardens, pools, jugglers, singers, bards, statues, flowers. Not rich like the Rock, but maybe more beautiful, I have to admit it.”

“And your squire? Did he fight well?”

“Not at all,” said Daven. “He lost in the first row of the joust, and was eliminated quite quickly in the melee, and also at the archery competition. His only consolation is that he will be remembered as the first man Ser Loras Tyrell defeated in the joust where he was knighted.”

“Oh. So the heir to Highgarden is a knight now.”

“Yes, he is. Some already call him the Knight of Flowers.”

“And what about the Rose of Highgarden? Lady Margaery?” Tyrion asked. He had to admit he was terrified before the answer Daven could give him.

Daven took a sip of wine before he spoke. “Well, she is something. She deserves her name, that’s the least we can say. Brown hair with braids, brown of eyes, a lovely round face, slender, not too tall or too short. And she’s not an idiot. We can see it only after a single conversation with her, and I had
Tyrion sighed. “She looks like a perfect wife. Too bad I’m the one we’re trying to marry her to. I would have more chance with an ugly girl who would be desperate to marry,” Tyrion said bitterly. “And the discussions with Lord Tyrell?”

“Lord Tyrell is no problem at all. I didn’t reach a decision with him, but he seemed very eager and enthusiastic at the idea to see his daughter as Lady of Casterly Rock.”

“Of course,” Tyrion scoffed. “He wants her as Lady of the Westerlands, not as the Imp’s wife.”

Daven seemed sympathetic. “I think Lord Tyrell is not the real deal. It is his mother, Lady Olenna Tyrell. She is also called the Queen of Thorns. Very sharp, and very old. Probably older than your father was. I think she’s the one who’ll decide. The mother of Lady Margaery was entirely opposed to the marriage.”

“Who could blame her?” asked Tyrion to himself.

“I think it’s the grandmother we must focus on. She wasn’t against the idea, but she asked a lot of questions about you and Casterly Rock and what the marriage involved. Each time Lord Tyrell was about to say he accepted to marry his daughter to you, she was the one to stop him. She’s the one we will have to convince. I think we will need to send someone else to negotiate.”

“I will probably send Kevan then. No one would be better for the task than him,” said Tyrion. “So nothing has changed. The betrothal wasn’t refused, but it wasn’t accepted either.”

“No,” confirmed Daven. That wasn’t to make Tyrion happy. “But I think the odds are in your favor, cousin. Mace Tyrell is still the Lord of Highgarden. His wife will have to obey him if he decides to marry his daughter. As for Lady Olenna, she told me she would consider very seriously our offer.”

“That doesn’t make the outcome more certain,” complained Tyrion. Couldn’t they simply answer by yes or no? Then they could move on. If they refused right now, he would be free to ask Lord Lefford to give him the hand of his daughter.

They both talked about their last months. Tyrion mentioned the feast of yesterday and the problems he met with some outlaws. Daven told him he would happily go back to fighting them. His cousin told him about everything he saw in Highgarden. He also talked about a handmaiden of Lady Margaery who seemed to know a lot about Casterly Rock and who he surprised with a book more than once.

“I think I would like this one. Perhaps I should ask the Tyrells for the hand of the handmaiden instead of their daughter’s.”

They both burst into laughs at Tyrion’s suggestion. He knew that was stupid and he wasn’t serious about it. He was the Lord of Casterly Rock. He couldn’t marry a simple handmaiden who certainly came from a minor house and could be a second or third born daughter. Furthermore, the Tyrells wouldn’t like it if after asking for the hand of their daughter, the Rose of Highgarden, he suddenly changed his mind and asked for the hand of her servant. What a scandal that would cause. It would be funny. They spent the rest of the meal telling jokes. At the end, Tyrion proposed a drinking contest.

“No, cousin, not right now. We’re too soon in the day,” Daven offered as an excuse. “But I’ll come back in the evening and we’ll get drunk. I could train a little in Highgarden with Lord Tyrell.”

“Good. It’s been two weeks since the last time I got drunk,” replied Tyrion.
“Anyway, with your capacity, I’m afraid I’ll be dead-drunk before you start to get drunk yourself.” They both laughed again.

Daven was about to leave when he turned to Tyrion. “Oh, cousin, by the way, I gave her your letter.”

That was a topic Tyrion hadn’t dared to discuss. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to know about the rest. “So?” he asked.

Daven took a scroll from his doublet. He let it drop on the table. “That’s her answer.” He bowed and left.

Tyrion remained still, sitting before the unfolded scroll. It had no seal on it. Daven didn’t know the content of the letter that Tyrion wrote to Lady Margaery. No one knew except him. He had Daven swear by the Old Golds and the New, and on his honor as a knight, that he would talk about this letter to no one but to Lady Margaery Tyrell. Now the answer of the Rose of Highgarden was right before him, and Tyrion hesitated to open it.

What was he waiting for? He wrote the letter in the hope that being honest, he would spare the young Rose the fear to find herself married to a misshapen little creature by giving her the choice to end the discussions. He knew very well what would be her answer. That was the only possible answer she could give, and Tyrion couldn’t blame her. All the same, with everything Daven told him, Tyrion regretted more than ever he wasn’t tall and handsome like his brother. The Rose of Highgarden looked so perfect from what Daven said. Beautiful and intelligent. What could Tyrion ask more from a woman?

There was one more thing he could ask from a woman. Love. That was something he had no chance to get. Once he thought he had the love of a woman. That proved to be the greatest mistake of his life. He could never expect a woman to love him, the Imp of Casterly Rock. Sighing in resignation, he took the scroll. Soon, he would have to write to Lord Tyrell and explain him a marriage between him and his daughter was no longer possible. The girl would be free. Tyrion would have done that thing right at least. He unrolled the scroll and read the short message on it.

Lord Tyrion, that would be my pleasure to become your wife and to spend my life by your side. I will try to convince my father and my mother to accept the proposal. I look forward to meet you.

Margaery Tyrell

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Megga and Alla were giggling far away, at the head of the boat. They were floating along the Mander, the breeze of the afternoon caressing their faces on the river. Leonette, who would marry Garlan next week, was discussing with Elinor and Sera. Margaery had done everything she could to make Leonette realize that her cousin was a very good man, though in fact she didn’t really need it. Willas hadn’t nicknamed his brother Garlan the Gallant for nothing. Soon Margaery would have a new sister. Well, technically Lady Leonette Fossoway wouldn’t be her sister-in-law since she would marry her cousin, but Garlan was so much like a big brother to Margaery that she couldn’t help but see his future wife as a soon-to-be sister.

The preparations for the wedding had begun last week and were not yet over. Margaery was excited about the wedding, but most of all she was happy for Garlan. He would get married, and to a very good wife. He would have nothing to complain about. Margaery could only wonder in excitement how her own wedding would look next to Garlan’s.

“It’s decided now.” Margaery was at the stern of the boat, away from all the others and whispered to her favourite handmaiden.

“My lady?” Mira asked, looking away from her embroidery.

“The marriage,” Margaery simply said, only whispering again.

“For real?” asked Mira, whispering now.

“Yes. I put enough pressure on my father, let my mother whine and convinced my grandmother enough. Everything is arranged.”

“When?”

“We leave next month. My father will soon make it official. You won’t have to keep your tongue much longer, Mira. I have to admit you impress me. You really talked about this to no one.”

“I swore to keep it secret, my lady.”

Mira’s answer was plain and simple like always. She talked about it as if that was the most natural thing in the world. It had taken almost five months after Ser Daven visited them for Margaery’s father to accept the proposal of the Lannisters, and another month had passed since that time. So much for a betrothal. But now it was sealed, and in a few months she would become the Lady of Casterly Rock. The boat wasn’t far on his way back to Highgarden.
“I will miss this place,” said Margaery. She had another month to spend in her home, but still. She already missed it.

“Me too, my lady. It had almost become a second home for me,” said Mira. The northern girl really looked sad about this. Margaery smiled empathically.

“I would like you to make some more research about Casterly Rock in the evening, Mira. I want to know as much as I can about it before we leave. Perhaps I’ll ask Willas to join you. My father is planning to tell the family at dinner.”

“I would like that.” Willas was the member of Margaery’s family Mira got along with the better, except Margaery herself. Willas’s love for studies made them meet regularly. Willas even suggested some works to Mira from time to time.

“You like Willas, don’t you?” Margaery asked to her handmaiden.

“Yes, my lady. He’s very kind. I don’t wish to be rude, but I like him much more than your brother.”

Margaery laughed a little. “That’s alright. I understand. Loras can be insufferable to some people when he wants.”

“Well, to be honest, my lady… Forgive me, but he’s arrogant. Only a tourney and a knighthood, and he already believes to be better than everyone. It’s a chance he never crossed the path of my brother Asher.”

Margaery laughed shortly again. She liked Mira’s straightforward ways. Sadly, what she said about Loras was true. The Knight of Flowers was arrogant. Margaery looked closely at the northern handmaiden. She may not be the most beautiful girl there was, but she was quite attractive. She would reach her fourteenth name day soon and her body began to show forms. Margaery knew there had been more than one knight to show interest in Mira since she arrived. Her northern origins made her more interesting for some of them since they saw her as someone exotic. An idea crossed Margaery’s mind all of a sudden.

“Perhaps you don’t have to leave Highgarden, Mira.”

Her friends lifted her eyes from her work again to look at her mistress, some confusion appearing on her face. “What do you mean, my lady? You don’t intend to bring me with you when you’ll leave?”

“If you were married, you couldn’t follow me,” Margaery stated. More confusion was on Mira’s face. “Would you like to marry Willas?”

Probably for the first time, Margaery saw Mira’s eyes widen. “My lady… I… I’m not sure…”

“You like him,” Margaery interrupted her. “And he likes you as well. He told me. I know that he is a cripple, but…”

“No, my lady. It doesn’t bother me. Not at all. But Willas is a Tyrell. I’m only the daughter of a minor lord in the North. I don’t think your family would accept. That wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Margaery had to admit Mira was right. The idea had come to her mind all of a sudden, but she realized that would be difficult to convince her uncle to marry his eldest son to a handmaiden. “Furthermore, I admit that I’m not very eager to leave your service. Not right now, at least.”

That touched Margaery a lot. “Thank you, Mira. You are right. Maybe I’ll find someone more suitable for you in the Westerlands.”
Margaery had to admit she wasn’t displeased about the outcome of her idea. She had come to appreciate Mira very much, and she didn’t want to send her away to a husband too quickly. Mira was too useful as her handmaiden. She couldn’t let her go right now. Margaery thought that after Mira was gone, she may ask her mother to send her sister, Talia, to act as her handmaiden in Mira’s stead, but that would wait. Mira would surely spend at least two more years with her.

They arrived at the docks of Highgarden and left the pleasure boat. Margaery spoke with Leonette as they walked away, but they had to go separate ways at some point and Margaery was only escorted by her two handmaidens who walked in silent behind her. When they reached her chamber, Margaery gave Mira her leave for the rest of the day. They were already at the end of the afternoon. Mira would know what she had to do. The northern girl curtsied and left. Sera would help to prepare Margaery for dinner alone.

Sera prepared her mistress, braiding her hair, helping her into a new gown and perfuming her. Margaery was somewhat excited about the dinner. Her father would tell most of the family about her betrothal. Soon I will be Lady Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands. She saw a satisfied and wicked smile appear on her face in the glass.

“Is there something, my lady?” asked Sera.

“No, it’s nothing Sera. I’m only happy to dine with my family.” The smile remained on her face all the same.

“I suppose that if it was Mira who asked, you would tell her the truth.” Sera twitched one of her locks. Margaery let a wail escape her throat. “Sorry, my lady. I didn’t mean to… I’m sorry.” Sera really looked like she was regretful in the glass.

“I know that I’ve been closer to Mira than to you lately,” Margaery apologized, trying to comfort her. “But you’re still my friend, Sera.”

“Sorry, my lady. I shouldn’t be harsh on you. Only… I’ve been your handmaiden for almost two years. Mira arrived here less than a year ago, and you seem to like her and to trust her more than everyone else.”

It was true. Margaery knew the others had certainly noticed she spent more time with Mira alone than most ladies spent with one of their handmaidens, especially since she received Lord Tyrion’s letter. Sera was also right when she said Margaery trusted Mira more than her cousins and her other handmaidens. Her grandmother was the only one Margaery trusted more than Mira in Highgarden. The thing was that Mira deserved her trust. She never revealed a single secret Margaery confided her, she performed all her duties almost without questions, never complained about anything and was loyal to the end. Even Lady Olenna recognized that Mira was a rare thing to find and that Margaery should keep her close as long as she could. Sera, on the other side, and all of Margaery’s female cousins, liked to gossip, talk and reveal secrets about everyone else. She couldn’t confide in them like she did with Mira or her grandmother or her mother at some extent. It was sad, but if Margaery was to choose someone to keep a secret, Mira came to her mind far before Sera.

“I know that I have spent more time with Mira these last times,” said Margaery. “Believe me, Sera, it’s not because I consider her a better friend than you. I just needed to spend more time with her.”

“Why?” Sera asked on an irritated tone.

“You must trust me, Sera. I just needed more time with Mira recently. I didn’t forget you or anyone else, and I will never forget you. You’ve been my friend for two years now. It’s not about to end.”
Sera looked more calm afterwards. Margaery was ready soon, though not as quickly if Mira had helped them. She wore a resplendent green and blue gown she had ordered last week. It was light enough to not feel the high temperature of summer and also loose so that wind would have the bottom part swirl when it caught in the tissue.

This evening they would dine in one of the many gardens. It had been reserved to the Tyrell family and only to the Tyrell family for the dinner. Well, in fact, only a part of the Tyrell family would be present, but Margaery’s two favourite male cousins, Willas and Garlan, would be here. Margaery wandered through an alley of the garden, looking absentmindedly at the flowers all around. She wondered how the gardens in Casterly Rock would look like in comparison. The seat of House Lannister was more in the north. Maybe they would have different varieties of flowers. She didn’t ask Mira to look about this. She remembered what Mira told her about the godswood with the twisted weirwood tree. She hoped the gardens were not in caves as well.

The sun was far from setting, but its color already took a taint more orange and less yellow. Margaery and Sera arrived close to the square where the dinner would take place. Garlan was waiting for his cousin there.

“Margaery, you look resplendent this evening,” he told her.

“Thank you, Garlan.” Margaery kissed him on both cheeks. She then turned to her handmaiden behind. “You may leave, Sera. Go and have your own dinner.”

Sera curtsied and left. Garlan accompanied Margaery to the square, arm under arm. Her parents, her grandmother and Willas were already there. She welcomed them all with kisses on the cheeks. Willas was last and stood with difficulty on his cane to kiss her on the cheek.

“Where is Loras?” asked Margaery.

“Late, as always,” answered Lady Olenna. “Unable to arrive in time. Servants, bring us the food.”

“Mother, we must wait for my son,” said Margaery’s father.

“We waited, and he didn’t come. Fetch the food. Are you waiting for the Others to come back?” Margaery saw with some pleasure the servants running on the orders of the Queen of Thorns. “Anyway, Loras doesn’t bring much to family’s dinners. He’s only good with a stick in a tourney. You should have brought your friend, Margaery. The northern girl. I can never remember her name.”

“Her name is Mira, grandmother,” said Willas.

“As you wish. At least, when she’s present conversations are interesting. The same cannot be said about our Knight of Flowers. Where did you go to get all of this? To Volantis?”

The servants had just brought the food and their grandmother started immediately. Margaery decided to start as well, just like Garlan and Willas. Her parents waited for some time, but before Lady Olenna’s complaints, they finally began as well, her mother after her father. Margaery noticed Lady Alerie Tyrell didn’t eat much. Margaery knew her mother disapproved what was about to be announced. Finally, Loras arrived.

“You’re late,” her grandmother commented as he sat down. “The next time you arrive late, your sister’s northern friend takes your place and you’ll have to eat with the other handmaidens.”

“What?” Loras was surprised and shocked by this. “You wouldn’t do this, grandmother.”

“You want to make a wager?” she replied.
Before the serious look of the Queen of Thorns, the Knight of Flowers didn’t push the matter any further. Margaery had to admit she would have liked to see the results of such a wager.

“I wouldn’t mind if Lady Mira was to join us,” said Willas. “After all, she’s someone good to discuss with. I almost eat in her company in the library sometimes. Have you removed her from your service, Margaery? For the last few months, she spent more time looking into books than anything else. She asks Lomys about new books on the Westerlands each week.”

It seemed Mira had been a little overzealous in the search Margaery commanded her to lead. Willas had noticed her interest in the Westerlands. That wasn’t the time yet to reveal it however, and Margaery preferred for her parents to not know the role Mira played in their daughter’s decision.

“She met Ser Daven Lannister at the tourney a few months ago,” she explained. “Her father had visited Casterly Rock and Lannisport a few years ago and she wanted to know more about it.”

“Well, all the same, she spends a lot of time looking about the Westerlands,” Willas commented. “Not that I complain about it. It makes someone to give me some company while I’m hidden among books.”

“Lord Renly says that books are for maesters,” declared Loras. “Forgive me, cousin, but I find the books you’re reading boring. I prefer books with more illuminations. Lord Renly owns a few with drawings that would turn a septon blind.”

Everyone laughed at this, even Margaery’s grandmother. Only Lady Alerie seemed to disapprove in some way. Margaery thought that their mother knew what was going on between Loras and Renly, and Lady Alerie disapproved of course, though she didn’t dare to do anything restrictive about it. As for Margaery, as long as her brother would be able to marry and have children, everything was alright. After all, Margaery wasn’t very well placed to give morale lessons to her brother, and her future husband wasn’t either.

Margaery looked at Willas pensively. Her cousin was a firstborn son, and quite handsome, though not as much as Loras, but he had nothing to envy to the youngest men of the Reach. The only reason of his celibacy was his crippling, but that didn’t make him less kind, or less intelligent, or less worthy. Prejudices were strong in the Reach. Willas would be a better husband than many other men without physical limitations, and he was able to make children without problem, but everyone saw his crippling as something making him undesirable. That was so unfair.

Margaery thought about someone else who had physical limits, and who was judged just like her cousin. I am a dwarf, and those who pretend I am one of the ugliest men in the Seven Kingdoms are probably right. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can change about it. I am malformed, ill-made, and small. Willas could change nothing about his crippling as well. She remembered a rumor that Lord Tyrion didn’t only drink all night, but also read all night. The way he wrote remembered her a little of Willas. If Lord Tyrion really was who he pretended to be in his letter, and Margaery had to admit it was very likely that her betrothed said the truth, her cousin and her future husband may get along quite well. A cripple and a dwarf. What a shame Mira wasn’t born in a higher house. She would have made a good wife to Willas.

They went through the main service without much of interest happening. Margaery spoke about his marriage with Garlan. Her cousin only had good comments about Leonette, and Margaery as well. Willas didn’t participate a lot to their discussion. He hid it well, but she knew her cousin was bitter in some small way because his little brother was getting married before him. She knew he didn’t hate Garlan at all for that, but still, it made things seem so unfair for him. They ate the dessert, and as they ate, Margaery decided it was probably time.
“Willas.” She turned to her eldest cousin. “I know that your leg causes you some problems for travelling, but do you think you could accompany me on a trip?”

“Yes, of course, Margaery. I would be very glad to see a few things outside Highgarden. Where would you like to go?”

“I’m not sure. Somewhere in the west, I suppose.” She turned her eyes to her father. From the corner of her eyes, Margaery noticed her grandmother smiling. “Don’t you think it’s time to tell them, Father?” she asked.

“To tell us what?” asked Loras.

All looks were pointed on the Lord of Highgarden who didn’t seem to know what to say. His wife was shooting him angry glares. After a very long moment where nothing was said, the lord’s mother decided to intervene.

“Oh, shut up, Mace. Each time you must speak, you don’t. And each time you mustn’t speak, you do. Let your daughter tell everyone the new.”

Now all eyes were turned to Margaery, and to the opposite of her father, she wasn’t shy about telling the truth. She turned to Willas. “I have a very long trip ahead of me, next month. I would like you all to come with me when I’ll leave.”

“Very well, Margaery,” accepted Willas, but he seemed quite uncertain. “But where are you going?”

“Yes, where?” asked Loras as well.

Margaery intently took her time to answer, a wide smile on her face. “Let’s say this will be a very long journey. I may not be able to come back to Highgarden before a few years.”

Her brother and cousins looked very surprised. Garlan asked the next question. “What are you talking about? Where are you going?”

“To Casterly Rock,” she finally revealed.

“Casterly Rock,” Loras scoffed. “There is nothing to see there. Why are you going in such a boring place?”

“I have to disagree, Loras,” said Willas. “Casterly Rock is a very interesting place to visit. Apparently the castle is thrice the height of the Hightower and a few leagues long. But to visit it won’t take years, Margaery. The castle is not so far.”

“Well, the visit won’t require years. However, the marriage is another story,” Margaery said.

All around the table, everyone was silent. “The marriage?” asked Willas, unbelieving.

“Yes,” confirmed Margaery. “Father has organized everything. The wedding will take place in three months. We will leave for Casterly Rock next month. And when we’ll arrive, I will wed.”

“Wed?” That was Loras’s turn to sound unbelieving.

“To who?” asked Willas.

“Who do you think I could marry at Casterly Rock, Willas?” she asked to her cousin.

Willas’s eyes widened after a moment when he realized who was Margaery’s betrothed. She saw
Garlan’s reaction that told he understood as well. Loras still seemed clueless.

“Cousin,” began Willas. “I… I’m not sure. Am I really thinking about who you’re thinking about?”

“Oh, that’s enough, Margaery. You tortured them long enough. End this.” Her grandmother’s voice wasn’t angry. Margaery knew she had enjoyed this.

Finally, Margaery revealed the truth. “I’m going to become the Lady of the Westerlands.”

Another very long silence followed. Loras finally broke it. “Wait a minute. The Lady of the Westerlands? But the Lord of the Westerlands is…” Her little brother finally realized the truth all of a sudden. He turned to their father and their mother. “You can’t be serious. You can’t mean… You arranged a marriage between Margaery and the Imp!”

Loras’s voice was accusing, questioning and unbelieving at the same time. Their grandmother was the one to answer. “His name is Tyrion Lannister, in case you don’t know, which is probably the case. He is the Lord of Casterly Rock, the Shield of Lannisport, the Lord of the Westerlands and the Warden of the West. He is also the richest man in the Seven Kingdoms and one of the most powerful lords in Westeros. His sister is married to the king. I know that it makes a lot of titles and that some among them mean nothing, but who can blame him when your father himself boasts as many titles if not more.”

Loras stared in horror, then in anger at their parents and their grandmother. “How can you do this? You… You can’t think seriously about this.” He turned to Margaery. “Why are you smiling?”

Margaery closed her eyes a moment, laughing silently at her brother’s words. If only he knew what role she played in their father’s final decision. “Loras, I will be the richest woman in all Westeros, and one of the most powerful.”

“But Margaery… He’s a dwarf!”

Margaery shrugged. “Willas is a cripple.” She turned to her cousin. “That doesn’t make him an evil man as far as I know.”

“But you heard the rumors about him,” resumed her brother. “How can you be… How can you wish to marry him?”

“Loras, they are only rumors,” said Margaery, not without a little laugh in her voice. “We don’t know if they are true. And considering we’ve been thinking about marrying me to drunkards and whoremongers before, I don’t see the problem.”

Loras still looked at her as if he couldn’t believe what he just heard. He looked all around him. Their father had a decided expression, their grandmother a little smile that said everything was serious, their mother a resigned look that showed she disagreed all the same. As for Garlan and Willas, they didn’t seem to know what to think of all this. Loras jumped on his feet.

“I can’t believe you did this. That you accept this.” He left with an angry pace, fists closed.

“Your brother may have some balls finally,” Margaery’s grandmother told her, still smiling. Margaery’s smile remained as well, but it had taken a sadder turn.

“I’ll go and see Loras. I’ll try to calm him down,” declared Garlan. He rose from his seat and came to kiss Margaery on the forehead. “Congratulations, Margaery.” He left with a reassuring smile.

“He can try,” declared Lady Olenna. “I think that we are done with dinner now. I’ll take my leave.”
“Me too,” said Willas. “Margaery, could you accompany me? My leg.”

“Of course, Willas. I’ll help you.” Margaery stood up to help her cousin.

She walked away from the gardens with Willas. Sun was beginning to set on the horizon now. Dinner hadn’t gone like Margaery would have wanted, but at least Willas and Garlan didn’t seem to take her betrothal unwell like Loras. Willas walked slower because of his leg, so Margaery adjusted her pace to stay at his level.

“I suppose congratulations are in order,” finally said Willas after a long moment of silence.

“They’ll be even more in order when I’ll get married,” Margaery pointed out. “You’ll come. I won’t let your leg stand as an excuse for not coming in the Westerlands.”

“I’ll come, don’t worry,” said Willas. “I wouldn’t want to miss your wedding for anything in the world. Now I suppose that I know why Lady Mira spent so much time looking for information about Casterly Rock, House Lannister, the Westerlands and all the western families.”

“I asked her to look for information about it. It will be better if I know the lands I will rule before I arrive at Casterly Rock. Since you know everything, do you think you could help her? Search with her?”

“I was already helping her, truth be told. Don’t worry, I will keep helping her on this.” There was a short silence that followed before Willas spoke again. “Margaery, tell me. Are you sure about this? Are you sure you want to marry the Imp?”

“He is the Lord of Casterly Rock, Willas,” Margaery explained.

“I know, but still. With everything people are saying, Loras may not be entirely wrong.”

“You will all come to my wedding,” Margaery said, putting a reassuring hand on her cousin’s arm as they stepped into the keep. “All we know of Lord Tyrion Lannister come from rumors. We cannot rely on them. We’ll see once we will arrive how he is and what kind of man he really is. If he is really a monster, then we’ll call off the betrothal.” Margaery didn’t think that would be necessary however. If Tyrion Lannister was a monster, she was confident she could control him. “And if he is not, if he is simply a dwarf who happens to visit brothels and to drink too much from time to time, then I have nothing to fear. How many men, married or not, visit brothels and drink? That wouldn’t be as if he was worse than the others. This is the best marriage I can hope for.”

“There is still Prince Joffrey,” said Willas. “He is the heir to the Iron Throne. I thought it was your dream to become queen.”

“It was, and I wish it was possible. But you see, my father wasn’t the one to start discussions for my marriage with Lord Tyrion. The Lannisters were the ones to approach us. If we were to refuse, especially now, I don’t believe Cersei Lannister would let me marry her son.”

Willas nodded. “This is a problem. You’re right.” Willas had always been the one with the keenest political instincts in the family, except herself and their grandmother. “I know what you want through this marriage, cousin. I don’t blame you. You’re like our grandmother, the Queen of Thorns. Less sharp, but very much like her all the same. I know you’re not looking for love in marriage. All the same, I would like you to be married to a good man. You’ll have to live with him after all. I would prefer you to have a marriage where you and your husband could at least respect and appreciate each other, perhaps even trust each other. Do you think that will be possible with Tyrion Lannister?”

Margaery could remember some things the lord said in his letter. *I want you to know, my lady, that it*
would be an honor for me to have you as my wife. I am not a monster, at least not in the sense that I beat people, mistreat them, or even eat children according to some words circulating. I am not cruel like my father. I have flaws, and big ones. I am malformed, ill-made, and small, but in the dark, I am no worse than other men. I am generous. I am loyal to those who are loyal to me. I am dutiful to my family and those I am sworn to. I am cleverer than most, surely wits count for something. I can even be kind. Kindness is not a habit with us Lannisters I fear. But I know I have some kindness somewhere. I could be good to you. I promise you one thing, my lady. I won’t ever hurt you. I will cherish you as my wife, protect you, care for you, and make sure you have everything you could wish for. I will do everything I can to make you happy, and I hope you will be. I hope I will come to love you one day, even if you never love me. I would understand you could never love a dwarf. The more Margaery read the letter, and the more she thought Mira was probably right and Lord Tyrion was sincere when he wrote it. She didn’t think she was going to marry a monster. The Imp wouldn’t be so difficult to live with, or to maneuver.

They had arrived before Willas’s rooms. His personal rooms were on the first floor so he may not have to climb stairs. “Willas, I am sure Lord Tyrion is not the monster people are picturing. You just have to look at what people say about his birth. That he had a head twice the size of his body, claws, a red eye, a tail between his legs, the privates of both a boy and a girl… I’m sorry, but this looks like the description of a dragon, not a baby. I think he was simply disfigured by rumors because he happened to be a dwarf. You know what it is. Yourself, you had to suffer some of this after your injury.”

Willas nodded in a sad way. “Yes, I know what it is. Do you remember Oberyn Martell? The Prince of Dorne?”

“Yes, I remember him,” answered Margaery, not without scorn. “He’s the one who crippled you.”

“He didn’t do it on purpose. He came to see me after I was injured. During our conversation, he told me something about Lord Tyrion. I think I remember now. He had met him.”

Margaery was surprised. “Prince Oberyn Martell met Lord Tyrion Lannister?” Margaery was intrigued, and surprised as well. The Martells and the Lannisters tried to avoid each other when they didn’t want to kill each other.

“Yes, but it wasn’t long after the Imp was born. He was only a baby at the time. Oberyn visited Casterly Rock with his sister Elia. She wasn’t married to Prince Rhaegar back then, and his brother and his sister, Ser Jaime and Cersei Lannister, they showed him to Oberyn. He said there was nothing unusual about him. Cersei Lannister said her brother was a monster, and when she showed him to Oberyn, he was really expecting some monster with claws and red eyes, but all he saw was a baby, with a head a bit large and arms and legs a bit short, but nothing unnatural except that. That was only a baby. And his sister, she…”

Willas seemed to hesitate. “What about his sister? What is it with the queen?” asked Margaery.

“Oberyn said she tried to hurt him at that moment. It was only Jaime Lannister who stopped her. She said he had killed her mother, and that she hoped he would die soon.” A silence followed as the tale weighed on the air. Willas finally shook his head. “That’s your decision, Margaery. But please, promise me that if you ever find yourself into trouble, don’t hesitate to ask for our help. I, Garlan, Loras, grandmother, your parents, my parents.”

Margaery smiled fondly at Willas. “I promise, Willas. If I ever need your help, I will ask immediately. But don’t worry too much. I’m not without defense. Our grandmother is not the only one with thorns. Good night.” She kissed her cousin on the right cheek and left.
Margaery walked back to her chambers. She kept thinking about what Willas just told about Prince Oberyn’s visit to Casterly Rock. That wasn’t something Ser Daven had told her, but that was probably no surprise at all. It wasn’t the type of tale someone would recount about the queen, except if he was the Red Viper of Dorne, and the knight probably didn’t know about this. The queen didn’t seem to have loved her brother in her childhood. Was is still the case? She would have to discover it.

When she arrived before her chamber’s door, she found her other cousin, Garlan, standing before it. “Margaery, I hope I’m not bothering you. Could I talk with you?”

“Of course, Garlan,” she answered. They entered into he rooms and sat face to face. “How is Loras?”

“Still fuming. I couldn’t really calm him. He says you should marry Lord Renly instead.”

Margaery had to laugh on this. “Renly Baratheon would not be very interested in me. Well, perhaps he would be interested in marrying me, but not in bedding me. We both know which Tyrell he loves to bed.” Garlan laughed timidly with Margaery on this. “Furthermore, I would rather be Lady of Casterly Rock than Lady of Storm’s End.”

“Yes, you’re right about Renly. Are you really alright with this marriage? With Tyrion Lannister?”

“I am, Garlan,” she answered. “And if he ever does something to me, I already promised to Willas that I would ask for your help immediately.”

“Then in this case, I suppose I don’t have to worry too much. You’ll always be able to count on me, Margaery. No matter what happens. As for me, it depends who this Lord Tyrion is. I never met him. We’ll see when we’ll arrive at Casterly Rock. Loras will come, but I will keep him in line. He could be ready to do something unwise during your wedding. Good night, cousin.”

Garlan rose and kissed her on the forehead like he did after dinner, then he left. Half an hour later, Sera came to prepare her for the night and Margaery went to bed afterwards. As she laid alone in her bed, she reflected about her marriage. Loras was obviously and completely against it, and Willas and Garlan had reserves about it as well. She thought her cousins were right to be cautious, but she didn’t think Loras’s reaction was justified. Between the letter, what Ser Daven told her and the tale from Oberyn Martell, she was very skeptical about the supposed monster that Tyrion Lannister was supposed to be. Margaery had seen nothing to let her believe that he was a horrible person. At most, he drank and visited brothels, though even that seemed to be relative, but Margaery didn’t really care about that. Most marriages ended at best with husband and wife capable of living with each other, but they didn’t love each other. Many had mistresses or lovers, or visited brothels. Margaery was fine with that and it didn’t bother her. Marriages were not made for love, no matter what the septons said. Marriages were about alliances, positions, influence, power, money, but never about love, or at least that was the case among highborn families. Perhaps lowborn people could choose to marry for love, but Margaery didn’t have that option, and she accepted to live with that a long time ago.

Margaery had a good idea about how her future would be. She would marry Tyrion Lannister at Casterly Rock in a few months, they would perform their duty as husband and wife, have a few children together, she would be the Lady of the Westerlands, and everything would be alright. As for her relationship with her husband, maybe he would really care about her like he declared in his letter. Maybe he would not, or maybe he would only care for her at the beginning, but that didn’t matter. If he did fall in love with her, all the better. In fact, Margaery would make everything necessary so he would love her. That would give her more influence on him. Marital life could be exciting with him, especially in bed, if he was experienced like she thought he was, but if Lord Tyrion didn’t fall in love with her, or only fell in love for a time, Margaery would find a way to live happily all the same.

Women were supposed to be devoted to their husband and to follow their orders, but that wasn’t
something Margaery would follow.

On these thoughts, Margaery slowly fell asleep, free of any worry about her future marriage. She was more curious than anything else about her future husband. At the same time, if Tyrion Lannister had a bad relationship with his sister, she could use the antipathy between the queen and her brother to her own benefit. Margaery mused happily that she would soon be one of the most powerful women in all the Seven Kingdoms, if not the most powerful. Who could prevent that from happening? She fell asleep on this thought.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for those who wanted Genna to meet Olenna, they didn't meet yet. The fight of Titans will happen, don't worry.

Please review

Next chapter: Cersei
Chapter Notes

Sorry I kept you waiting for two weeks for this new chapter. I had a lot of chapters to write for "A Shadow and a Wolf" and I decided to focus on it.

Over 35 comments, more than 15 bookmarks, almost 100 kudos, over 70 subscriptions and about 3000 hits. Thank you everyone who subscribed, liked, read, commented or bookmarked this fic.

Cersei learns Tyrion is getting married. Let's see what she does of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI II

“Are you sure about that?” asked Cersei, unbelieving.

“Yes, your Grace,” answered Pycelle, his voice shivering. “The… The raven sent to Lord Renly Baratheon by Ser Loras Tyrell was very clear about it. I came here immediately to tell you. Lord Mace Tyrell agreed to give his only daughter in marriage to your brother, Lord Tyrion Lannister.”

Disgust was plain in the old man’s voice. “I already told you to never call him by that title when we are alone. My brother has no right over Casterly Rock.”

“Of course, your Grace. How… however, I didn’t call him that way as a reference to the fact he is considered the Lord of Casterly Rock. He is the son of Lord Tywin, hence he has the right to be called…”

“I don’t want you to call him by any title when you are only in my presence. Call it the way you want the rest of the time, to lick everyone’s boots, but when we’re alone, you will not give him any title.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“Good. So, Ser Loras asked his lover to stop the marriage between his sister and my wretched brother?”

“Yes, your Grace. That’s exactly what Ser Loras asked.”

“What about Lord Renly? How did he react to this?”

“He… he didn’t say anything after I gave him the message. But I think he went to see the king afterwards.”

Then Robert would know very soon. Renly Baratheon was certainly going to argue with Cersei’s husband about this. He would try to stop this marriage. That was only too good. “Thank you, Grand Maester. You are dismissed.”
"If I may, your Grace, Lord Tywin always put a great trust in me and I was among his most loyal supporters and allies here. I know he didn’t want this… this creature, to be his heir and to inherit his lands and titles. That’s why I’m ready to do everything to… to keep an eye on him. What do you intend to do about this marriage? If… if Tyrion Lannister was to marry, I know that dwarves can have children from my studies at the Citadel. Perhaps we should…”

“This is none of your concern, Grand Maester. I welcome your advice, but I don’t need it right now. I’ll ask you when I'll need it. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, your Grace.” The old man bowed, if you could call that a bow. He was so bent all the time that he seemed to be bowing all the time.

Cersei thought about what just happened. The Imp with the Rose of Highgarden. Margaery Tyrell’s father had to be an imbecile to consider a marriage between his daughter and Cersei’s brother. The life of his daughter would be miserable with the Imp. Only whores could be interested in him because he paid them. These girls were only interested in the gold Tyrion could give them.

The gold he could give them. Tyrion was officially Lord of Casterly Rock, even if he had no right over it. The woman who would marry him would be covered with gold. She should have thought about it. Some highborn ladies would be ready to sacrifice everything only for all the gold of Casterly Rock. That Tyrell girl was about to get her hands on it. Cersei couldn’t let that happen. She couldn’t let Casterly Rock and its riches fall into the hands of a stinking rose.

She left her rooms and walked towards those of the king. Robert’s rooms were far away from hers, almost at the other side of the Red Keep, so they could have as much distance they could between them. Renly may be able to convince Robert on his own, but if he failed, which was quite possible, then she had to force Robert to stop this marriage between Tyrion and the Tyrell girl by herself.

Ser Barristan Selmy was standing guard before the door of the king’s chamber. He bowed before her and called her your Grace when he saw her approaching. He announced her presence to the king and allowed her to enter. Without any surprise, Robert was drinking when she came in. He barely seemed to acknowledge her presence until she stood right before him. What a king he made. Joffrey was ten times worthier than him.

“What do you want, woman?” he asked.

“I hoped we could talk. About a serious matter.” She remained standing to make him feel she was superior.

“Ah. A serious matter. Not today, woman. I had my lot of serious matters today. My brother just came to see me about one, and it was more than enough.”

“Your brother? Which one?” Did Renly Baratheon precede her?

“Renly! Talking about some information he received. Apparently your brother, the Imp, is marrying soon.”

Cersei took a surprised expression. That was something she could use. “Tyrion? Marrying? You must be joking.” She put a mocking smile on her face as she said that. She never laughed in presence of her husband.

“I’m not joking, and don’t try to hide you knew about it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see what you are talking about. My brother and I don’t get along quite well. Tyrion is insufferable and a little monster, and we both hate each other. I would the last person to
know it if he was to marry.” Cersei sat in front of the king’s desk. “But I admit that I pity the girl who’s going to marry him. Who’s this poor little dove?”

Robert seemed surprised by her words. Then he burst into laughs. “Even you don’t know. Well, that explains why even Varys couldn’t inform me. Your brother hid it well. He’s going to marry Margaery Tyrell.”

Cersei took a surprised expression once more. “The daughter of Mace Tyrell? Well, I pity the Rose of Highgarden.”

Robert laughed loudly again. “You imagine that! The Imp and the Rose! Even our marriage seems a success when compared to it.” Cersei allowed a laugh to escape her throat. Robert’s expression turned sour not long later. “Ah, so here we sit, thirteen years and three children later, laughing at the only marriage that may end worse than ours. I must warn you, this is not a marriage I can allow.”

“What?”

“Don’t do as if you didn’t know. I may not be interested in making laws or counting coppers or giving justice. I was made to fight, and we stopped to fight after the Mad King died. All the same, I’m not an idiot. The Tyrells fought against me during the rebellion. They besieged my castle and would have taken it if it wasn’t for Stannis’s Onion Knight. Randyll Tarly defeated me at the Battle of Ashford, and he was one of their bannermen. More than half the debts of the Crown are owed to your brother and to his future father-in-law. They have more ships, more men, more gold, more crops than the rest of my kingdoms combined, and these kingdoms are divided. Your father wanted to own the world before he died. I don’t know if your brother is any different, but even if he was different, I cannot allow your family to unite with the Tyrells, or else they could decide to seize the Seven Kingdoms for themselves.”

“I agree. We cannot let my brother marry Margaery Tyrell.”

Robert laughed again at her. Cersei kept a calm attitude, though she wanted to throw her cup of wine to him. “You’re the one to say that? It’s your own family I’m talking about.”

“Tyrion and I hate each other. I don’t really consider him like family. Margaery Tyrell neither. If they were to seize the Seven Kingdoms, and that you were no longer king, how long would I stay queen? What would happen to our children?” What would happen to my children?

“So, you are against your brother’s marriage.”

“I am. To be honest, I would be against almost any marriage my brother could make. I don’t envy the girl who would find herself in his bed.”

“Would you pity her more than you pity yourself?”

Cersei made a sarcastic smile. “Maybe.”

Robert nodded in acknowledgement. “Maybe I would me too. I don’t hate your brother, I have to admit it. Both your brothers, I don’t have much against them, as long as your twin doesn’t repeat with me what he did to the Mad King, and as long as your little brother doesn’t try to control me like your father tried. But this marriage with the Tyrell girl is too dangerous. I cannot allow it.”

“Then it seems we agree on something for once. Perhaps we should work together.”

Robert scoffed. “Work together? That would be the first time it happens, except when we made the children. What would you do? No, better. What would your father do if he was still alive? You move
your lips and your father’s voice comes out.”

“That’s quite simple,” Cersei had poured herself a cup of wine as they talked. She put it back on the table. “The best way to stop a marriage from happening is to kill it in the crib. The best way for that is another marriage. If Margaery Tyrell is already married, my brother can never marry her.”

Robert chuckled a little after some time. “Good idea. Marry Margaery Tyrell to someone else. I suppose that must be possible. After all, I am the king. If I tell the Tyrells to marry their rose to some other high lord, they will have no other choice but to accept.”

“Then I suppose the matter is settled,” Cersei said. She rose from her seat. “Perhaps we should work together more often,” she suggested.

“Aye. In our dreams,” Robert replied while laughing.

“Or in our nightmares, maybe more.” They both laughed loudly.

Cersei left. Ser Barristan bowed again when she passed before him and she heard her husband call for more wine, cursing the absence of his squire. Lancel chose this moment to appear, carrying a huge jug filled to the brim. He flushed while looking at her, but ran to the king’s chamber when Robert shouted again for wine. Cersei didn’t like to laugh with her husband. Their marriage was miserable. Robert still loved a dead body more than her, the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms.

The next morning, Cersei was surprisingly called for a meeting of the small council. When she arrived, all the other members of the small council were already there. Jon Arryn. Stannis Baratheon. Renly Baratheon. Pycelle. The Spider. Littlefinger. The thing that surprised her was that Robert himself was there. She couldn’t remember the last time he attended a meeting of the small council. Except Robert, they all rose when she arrived, the Spider and Pycelle bowing deeply with reverence, Littlefinger and Renly with a mocking expression, Stannis only bowing the way it was required while still gritting his teeth, Jon Arryn with respect.

“That must be the first time I am summoned to a meeting of the small council,” she said, but without scorn in her voice. She didn’t like to be commanded to do things.

“That’s not my idea. It is Jon’s idea,” replied Robert.

“Your Grace,” said the Hand of the King, “we were hoping you could help on a matter of the utmost importance. We received information yesterday that your brother, Lord Tyrion Lannister, was about to marry Lady Margaery of House Tyrell.”

“I had heard about it,” she confessed. With Robert present, it was useless to lie.

“We thought that you could help us to find another bride for the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

Cersei’s eyes widened at the words of the Hand of the King. “What did you just say?”

“Lord Tyrion is unwed, your Grace,” explained the Lord of the Eyrie. “We are of an opinion that we could find him a more suitable bride than the daughter of Lord Tyrell.”

Cersei stared at her husband with fury. “Don’t look at me like that,” Robert told her. “That was Jon’s notion. He is right. If we were to find another marriage to the Rose of Highgarden, your Imp brother would find another woman to marry instead of her. I would rather have him marry a woman we chose instead of marrying a woman he chose himself. I suppose you would like that better.”
Cersei stared back at Jon Arryn, then again to Robert. That wasn’t what was planned. Tyrion couldn’t marry. If he was wed, then he could have children, just like Pycelle told her. If he had children, then Cersei’s chances to get her hands on Casterly Rock one day were almost reduced to nothing. She didn’t have enough time yet to turn people against Tyrion in the Westerlands to overthrow him. However, she couldn’t tell that before the small council. However, she didn’t hide her dissatisfaction.

“Very well,” she simply said. She went to sit to the opposite side of Robert, facing him. “What woman do you think we should get my brother married to?”

“First, your Grace,” started the Hand before Robert could answer, “we must know more about Lord Tyrion. I’m afraid we don’t know your brother very much despite the time he spent in King’s Landing.”

“The only thing I know about him is that he drinks even more than me, and that won’t help us very much,” roared Robert.

“All the more reason to not let him marry at all. I don’t think a woman will appreciate to be married to such a drunkard,” said Cersei, still looking in Robert’s eyes.

“Your Grace,” intervened again the Hand, “we cannot prevent Lord Tyrion from marrying. The king doesn’t have the power to order a lord to never marry. However, he can offer him a bride, and the offer of a king in this sort of matter is not far from an order. But first, we must know what kind of bride your brother would be ready to accept from the king.”

Cersei scoffed. “My brother would accept any woman in his bed or as his wife. He is well known for that. He married a whore when he was sixteen.” The reactions around the table varied very much. Lord Stannis almost spat in disdain, Pycelle looked outraged, Robert was stunned and Jon Arryn too, Renly looked about to laugh. As for Varys and Littlefinger, they didn’t seem surprised by her words. “The girl is dead anyway. However, if my brother was offered the Rose of Highgarden, I doubt he will accept something less than her. If you are to offer him another bride, then you’ll need someone at least as beautiful as Margaery Tyrell, and at least from the same station than her. He won’t accept someone below.”

Cersei didn’t really know what Tyrion wanted for a wife in fact, but she had to make these men understand they wouldn’t be able to find him another wife to replace Margaery Tyrell and that their only option was to find another husband to the girl.

Jon Arryn sighed and cleared his throat before he spoke. “Well, in this case, if we are to offer another bride to Lord Tyrion, she will have to come from one of the great families of Westeros. One of the families ruling the Seven Kingdoms, the daughter or the sister of a lord paramount. Sadly, we don’t have much choice on this side.”

“I think Prince Doran Martell had a daughter,” said Renly. “I met her a few years ago. She was quite beautiful, with a brown skin, long black hair, full lips. She was quite attractive for a woman. She must be around Lord Tyrion’s age now.”

“Lord Renly,” began the Hand, a hand on his forehead. “Princess Arianne Martell died last year of an illness. Anyway, although she would make a perfect bride for Lord Tyrion if she was alive, Prince Doran would never consent to such a marriage. He never forgave what happened to his sister, his nephew and his niece when we took King’s Landing. We couldn’t ask something like this from him.”

“Perhaps someone in the royal family then,” suggested Littlefinger, a little smile on his face, looking
at Cersei.

“If you think I’m going to give Myrcella to that monster, brothelkeeper, then you are a fool! I should have your head!” Cersei’s angry voice echoed in the room on the walls.

“I don’t think it was what Lord Baelish suggested, your Grace,” the Spider intervened. “We both know Lord Tyrion cannot marry his niece, and anyway Princess Myrcella is too young and she hasn’t bled yet. We are no longer under the Targaryen rule. I think the Master of Coin was talking about another girl of the royal family. Princess Myrcella is not the only unwed Baratheon woman.”

Heads turned to Stannis. “Shireen is not even ten, and I will not marry her to some dwarf,” the Master of Ships said, his voice threatening. The look in his face showed there was no discussion to have.

“Too bad,” commented Lord Baelish. “I supposed a woman with greyscale and a dwarf would fit well together.”

The icy stare of Stannis Baratheon fell on Littlefinger, whose smile didn’t leave his face. Cersei intervened after a short time. “I believe no woman in House Baratheon can marry my brother. My apologies, Lord Stannis, but my brother will never accept to marry your daughter even if she was old enough. He’s like that. He will never want to marry a girl with greyscale.”

“My family has no girls to offer either,” resumed Jon Arryn. “I only have a son. As for Lord Hoster Tully, his two daughters are already married. I’m afraid we have no choice.”

“What about Ned?” shouted Robert. “He has children if I remember well. How many?”

“Ned Stark has five children, your Grace, six if we include the bastard, Jon Snow,” answered Varys.

“I don’t care about the bastard. Does he have girls?”

“He has, your Grace. Two girls. The Lady Sansa and the Lady Arya. Sansa Stark is the eldest.”

“Then let’s propose her to the Imp,” decided Robert. Cersei feared the worst for some time, but other people spoke before her.

“Your Grace, you cannot ask such a thing from Lord Stark,” said Jon Arryn. Cersei knew the Hand considered the Lord of Winterfell like his own son.

“Why not? His daughter will become Lady of Casterly Rock. Why would he complain?”

“Your Grace,” interrupted Varys, “I’m afraid Lord Arryn is right. You cannot ask Eddard Stark to give his daughter to Lord Tyrion.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Lady Sansa is only ten-years-old. She hasn’t bled yet. Lord Tyrion will not accept to set aside Lady Tyrell for a little girl he will only able to marry in a few years.”

Cersei sighed internally in relief. There were no marriageable women in all the great houses of Westeros, and Jon Arryn pointed it out very quickly. “Then it seems we have no bride to offer to Lord Tyrion.” Jon Arryn seemed relieved as well, probably because a daughter of Eddard Stark wasn’t condemned to become the Imp’s wife.

Cersei spoke up. “As I said yesterday to my husband the king, I don’t wish to see an innocent girl
end in my brother’s hands. Her life will be miserable with him. It would be criminal to let Margaery Tyrell end up in my brother’s bed.”

“We don’t care about the girl,” said Stannis. “It’s the alliance it would create that would be dangerous. We all know it. We cannot allow the Lannisters and the Tyrells to be bound by marriage like this. If we cannot find another wife for Tyrion Lannister, then we must find another husband for Margaery Tyrell. The matter is simple. We offer another lord to marry their rose to the Tyrells, and they will have to accept it.”

“On this, we have several options,” said Varys. “Many heirs are without wife or betrothed right now, and many are around the same age than Lady Margaery. Prince Trystane Martell, the heir to Sunspear. Lord Edmure Tully, heir to Riverrun. Robb Stark, heir to Winterfell. There is also Lord Robin Arryn, though he may be too young yet. And we mustn’t forget Prince Joffrey. He’s still not betrothed.”

“Joffrey will not marry the Tyrell girl,” Cersei declared, making it clear she wouldn’t change her mind on this. She wouldn’t let her son marry a girl who was destined to the monster who killed his grandmother.

“Alright, have it, woman,” said Robert. He seemed bored by all this. “Joffrey will not marry her, if you really don’t want. Anyway, he’s still young, we have all the time to find him a bride.”

“You forgot about me,” said a voice. Everyone turned to Renly Baratheon, the Lord of Storm’s End. He was the one who just spoke and smiled widely.

“You, Renly! Ah! That must be the first time you are interested in a woman.”

“Well, I will have to marry one day or another. I know Lady Margaery.” He knows her brother much better if what I heard is true. “It wouldn’t bother me to have her as a wife, and I am sure the Tyrells wouldn’t oppose if we were to offer their rose to become Lady of Storm’s End. I have good relations with House Tyrell. They might be reluctant if they were proposed Edmure Tully or Robb Stark, but they will accept immediately if I am the groom for Margaery.”

“Lord Renly is right, he will have to marry sooner or later,” added Lord Arryn. “I think he is probably the best option we have. Furthermore, this will link the Tyrells to the Crown and prevent any rebellion from their side in the future.”

“Very well, it’s done,” roared the king. “Jon, you’ll write to the damn Tyrells and tell them their rose will marry my brother. I never thought I would see the day when Renly would get married, but it seems I will. Now get on with the small matters while I go back to digging myself into an early grave.”

Robert left on this. The rest of the small council was about minor matters, like the king said, and without much importance, but Cersei stayed there until the end. Jon Arryn didn’t seem to approve her presence, but he didn’t dare to tell her to leave if he thought about it. There were discussions about some loans the Crown had towards the Iron Bank and about the two surviving children of the Mad King, still in exile across the Narrow Sea. Later, Cersei thought she heard they were in Pentos, unless it was in Norvos.

Later, Cersei was sitting in her personal chamber, sipping wine. She had stopped Tyrion from marrying. Maybe her brother would stop looking for another wife when he would discover the Tyrells rejected him for a man who preferred men in his bed rather than women. However, she wasn’t ready to bet on it. Tyrion would try to find another wife after he learnt the Tyrell girl was given to someone else. Cersei knew there were many highborn ladies in the Westerlands. Surely
there would be at least one ready to marry a dwarf to put her filthy hands on the gold of Casterly Rock. That wasn’t something she could allow to happen. She had to put an end to Tyrion’s illegitimate power over the Rock before it was too late. She couldn’t ask Robert to stop any marriage Tyrion might attempt. She had to act before it was too late.

All the same, Cersei was satisfied to have prevented her wretched brother from bringing another woman in her mother’s bed. She called for her brother to make a nightly celebration of her victory, though she didn’t tell him she was celebrating. Jaime loved their brother so much that he could reveal everything to him, and that could put her future plans into danger. She was doing all of this for both of them, and for their children. Casterly Rock was theirs.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Chapter Notes

Two very important characters meet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY IV

She opened her eyes, awakening from a peaceful sleep. Margaery Tyrell was tired. She closed her eyes again and tried to drift into sleep once more, but she couldn’t. She simply laid there, listening to the silence around her. Her bed was very comfortable, perhaps more than all those she had in her life. She turned on herself to end on her tummy and looked on her right. She saw gulls flying in the morning sky. The sky was clear, no clouds covering it. She hummed a song she heard a few months ago, her eyes still closed, a feeling of serenity and calm submerging her.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “My lady.”

Margaery opened her eyes and saw Mira towering her at the side of her bed. A thin smile appeared on her lips. “I didn’t hear you enter, Mira.”

“No, I wasn’t.” She shouldn’t have been humming, or else she would probably have had more time in her bed. “I suppose it’s time to get up.”

“Well, I think you could still sleep more, but Lady Olenna wants to visit the gardens with you. If you don’t come, I’ll have to tell her.”

Margaery laughed. She and Mira both knew what that meant. Margaery proceeded to leave her bed. “Don’t worry, my friend. I will spare you another session of sharp comments with my grandmother. Though, considering you own way to deal with them and the fact that Lady Olenna likes it, I’m tempted to stay inside my rooms for all the day.”

Mira laughed as well. She helped Margaery to pull on a dressing gown. There was a little pain left in Margaery’s head from last night’s feast. She didn’t drink very much, but more than she was used to all the same.

“Mira, take care of the covers and the sheets, then come back later for my hair and my dressing,” ordered Margaery.

Mira complied. Margaery noticed her handmaiden had brought a tray of food, though she doubted that was everything for the breakfast. Margaery took an apple and walked to the balcony while munching it.

Fresh and salty air hit her face as she went outside. It was different from the scent in Highgarden, but it was pleasant. There were birds flying everywhere and she could even see some perched on the
castle’s battlements and towers from where she stood. If she looked right before her, all she could see was the sea, completely blue in the light of the morning sun. Only water at the horizon, and a few ships. If she looked on her right, she could see some smoke emanating from the mines not far away. If she looked on her left far enough, she could distinguish the city of Lannisport with its harbor. She remembered how the city was when she walked through yesterday. It wasn’t beautiful like Oldtown, but it had its own charm and was far from ugly.

Two months ago, she hadn’t been sure they would make it. Margaery had been sitting in one of the many gardens of her home along with her friends and cousins, listening to the music of bards, eating pastries, doing some embroidery and doing small talk. They were only two days before their departure for Casterly Rock and Margaery was using all the time she had left to enjoy Highgarden before they went to her wedding. Among the laughs and the conversations and the music however, Sera had come to tell her that her father and her grandmother wanted to see her.

When Margaery had entered her father’s solar, he seemed at loss, stammering, his eyes rolling. Her grandmother was in control of her emotions, but it was obvious she was annoyed and outraged.

“Since it would take too much time if I let your father explain the situation, I think it would be better if you read the raven we just received,” Lady Olenna told her after she took place before them. Her grandmother gave Margaery a short scroll. The message was short, but disturbing and with very important news.

To Lord Mace Tyrell of Highgarden,

His Grace, King Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, hereby offers you to marry your daughter, Lady Margaery of House Tyrell, to his own brother, Renly Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End and Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. It would please the king to mend the scars that remain between House Tyrell and House Baratheon and to unite these two houses by this union. The marriage will take place within the year.

Jon Arryn, Hand of the King

If Margaery had been surprised when she read Lord Tyrion’s letter months ago, that was nothing compared to this. She read the short message several times to be sure this was really what she thought. Then she lifted her eyes to look at her grandmother, then to her father. Lord Mace Tyrell had a sorry look on his face, his mother showed disdain.

“That can’t be.” That was all Margaery could find to say.

“I’m afraid it can be, my child,” said her grandmother. “We received this two hours ago. For once, your father used his brain and didn’t tell your mother. She would have spread the news through all the castle within the hour.”

“But I am already betrothed to Tyrion Lannister.”

“Yes, you are, my dear. This is certainly why we’re receiving this. The king must have heard about this, and he decided it wasn’t to his liking to see Tyrells and Lannisters united. Hence this proposal.”

“Can’t we refuse it? After all, I am already betrothed, and the marriage is for very soon. We’re leaving in two days.”

“This is a proposal from the king.” Her father was speaking for the first time. “We cannot refuse the king.”

“Won’t that make the Lannisters angry if we call off my betrothal to Lord Tyrion?” Margaery
argued.

“For sure, my daughter. But if we don’t, it’s the king we will anger.”

Margaery couldn’t believe it. She was about to become the Lady of Casterly Rock, and a fat drunken
king came to tell her she would marry his brother instead. Renly may be the Lord of Storm’s End,
but being the Lady of Storm’s End was far less advantageous than being Lady of Casterly Rock.

“There must be something we can do,” said Margaery. They were so close to leave. They couldn’t
cancel the betrothal when she was so close to becoming the Lady of the Westerlands.

“Of, course, there is something we can do,” said Olenna. “We can answer the king and say yes. Or
we can say no. In the first case, we sacrifice the best marriage for Margaery. In the second case, we
disobey the king, and that can put us in a very dangerous position. However, we can also choose to
not answer and say nothing.”

Lord Mace Tyrell looked at his mother with an incredulous expression. “To not answer the king,
Mother?”

“Of course. If the raven had arrived a day or two after we left, then we wouldn’t have been
informed, and the king wouldn’t be able to complain since we wouldn’t refuse nor accept the
proposal. We cannot refuse an offer we know nothing about.”

Margaery understood immediately. “Grandmother! I should have thought about this before.”

“But Mother, we received the raven and we are still in Highgarden. We haven’t left,” said
Margaery’s father. “I have no choice but to answer.”

“Oh, really, Mace! Sometimes I wonder who was the most stupid man in Westeros. You, or your
father?” shouted the Queen of Thorns. The Lord of Highgarden’s mouth shut up immediately.
“There are only four people who know about this proposal from the king. Me, you, Margaery, and
Maester Lomys. We will never say anything about this. For the world, the proposal to marry
Margaery to Renly arrived the day after we left Highgarden. I’ll make sure Lomys cooperates.”

“But, shouldn’t I tell Alerie at least?”

“Of course not! She would tell everyone. We will leave tomorrow at the first light. That will make
the official story more believable.”

“We were supposed to leave in two days,” almost complained Margaery’s father.

“We leave tomorrow at the first light. If you still want your daughter to be Lady of Casterly Rock,
that’s what you must do. We don’t talk about this to anyone. Best prepare for the departure
tomorrow.”

“I agree with you, Grandmother,” said Margaery at this moment. “If you still want me to marry Lord
Tyrion, Father, then we must leave as quickly as possible and make everyone believe the king’s
proposal arrived not long after we left. We must go now.”

There was a silence that followed. Her father had a sad expression on his face. He looked at her and
spoke. “Margaery, tell me. Do you really want to marry Lord Tyrion? I know that you said you
wanted, but… Lord Renly is a good man and a great lord as well. Don’t you think that could be
preferable to marrying a dwarf? I know your mother would approve this marriage much more.”

Margaery smiled sadly at her father. She knew that despite being an imbecile from time to time, her
father still cared for her and for Loras, and that he wanted the best for her. Her father also loved his
wife, and he cared for her opinion about this marriage very much. It had taken a lot of conviction
from Margaery and her grandmother to bring her father to accept the marriage proposal from the
Lannisters.

“Father, Lord Renly is very kind, and yes, he is a great lord. But you know what I want through a
marriage, and I will have much more at Casterly Rock than in Storm’s End. Tyrion Lannister
remains the best match I can hope for, and from what we know, he’s not the monster out of
nightmares that rumors are depicting.”

“He doesn’t seem worse than an average man. Only smaller than the average man,” commented
Margaery’s grandmother.

“Father,” resumed Margaery, “I know Mother doesn’t approve this marriage, but I want to marry
Lord Tyrion Lannister. My opinion on this matter has not changed.”

The Lord of Highgarden nodded. “Alright. I cannot satisfy both you and your mother. We’ll leave
on the morrow for Casterly Rock.”

Margaery and her grandmother had spent the rest of the day ordering around the servants and the
handmaiden to prepare everything for the journey on the Ocean Road. Many things were ready
before they received the message, so it wasn’t too difficult to arrange an early departure. Margaery’s
mother had wondered why they decided to leave sooner, but she couldn’t get the real reason from
anybody. Maester Lomys pretended the weather would not be good according to recent reports from
the Citadel and it was better to leave sooner because the rain would slow them down on the road.
They had left the next morning at first light.

Now here she was, two months later, Margaery Tyrell, living in the castle that would soon be hers
and contemplating the view. Her room was more than comfortable and very cozy. Mira’s father had
been right. Almost everything seemed to be made of gold in this castle, and everything that wasn’t in
gold seemed to be made of silver or some other precious stone. When something was in fabric, it was
from the rarest and most costly materials there were from all over the world, and trimmed with gold
or silver. Even in Highgarden, Margaery wasn’t used to such luxury. It almost seemed too much. She
didn’t think it would be difficult to make work with the poor here, at least not from the financial
aspect.

The door opened and Sera came in. She had a tray of food with her. Now Margaery knew why her
breakfast hadn’t arrived entirely yet. “You are late, Sera,” Margaery said, without anger.

“Sorry, my lady. I woke up late. The journey has been wearisome. And this place… It’s so huge. I
lost my way three times while trying to reach the kitchens, and four times while trying to come here.
I had to ask a servant to lead me all the way to your room in the end. I wonder how I’ll be able to
find back the kitchens.”

“Don’t worry, Sera,” said Margaery while laughing. She sat and took a cup of water. “You will have
all the time you need to get used to the place. It’s not as if you’ll leave anytime soon.”

“Mira told me Casterly Rock was the biggest castle in the world, but I never imagined it would be
like this. The maze in Highgarden is a game for children in comparison. I don’t understand how
anyone can find his way here.”

“You should explore the castle with Mira today when you’ll have some time.”

Sera nodded. “Couldn’t we explore it with you?”
“From what my future husband told me yesterday, he is going to make me visit the castle, but I doubt he wants handmaidens to follow us everywhere while we visit it. He will want some time alone with me.”

Sera had a strange expression on her face. “My lady, am I allowed to express my opinion? On Lord Tyrion?”

“Oh, of course, Sera, you can.”

Her handmaiden seemed to hesitate. “Lady Margaery, are you sure you want to marry this man?”

“Oh, of course I am, Sera. Anyway, the betrothal is decided, and the wedding will take place in a week no matter what happens now.”

“Are you really sure? I mean, even after you saw him? I mean… He is… well…”


“Yes. I know he is a great and powerful lord, but still. I’m… I’m not sure I would want him into my bed.”

Margaery had to giggle. “Sera, I asked to Maester Lomys before we left, and he confirmed to me that dwarves are the same under their breeches than all the other men.”

Sera still seemed uncertain. “Yes. Still… I’m not sure…”

“Sera, you have no need to worry about me. I’m all right with this marriage. Despite his small size, Lord Tyrion seems to be a very decent man from what we saw yesterday. He is rich and very powerful, and he is quite experienced if what we heard is true. I’m not afraid for my wedding night. In fact, I’m more curious than anything, and even thrilled in some way. What do you think a dwarf looks like without his clothes?” Sera laughed timidly with her mistress after a moment. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t marry him if it meant you could become Lady of Casterly Rock?”


Sera left and Margaery was alone to take her breakfast. She needed it after all the time spent on the Ocean Road. She wanted some solitude, and many other people were tired and needed some sleep. Her breakfast wasn’t as good as the ones she took in Highgarden. As they entered the Westerlands, Margaery had seen the plains and the crop fields turn more and more to mountains, hills and mines. Of course, the Westerlands were not barren, but it was obvious the food wasn’t as excellent as in the Reach. Even in Casterly Rock, where they surely took the best food for the Lannisters, it wasn’t as delicious as in Highgarden. The feast yesterday and the ones they had on their way as they stopped to dine with certain lords weren’t of the same level than those they had in the Reach. Margaery also noticed the castle didn’t seem to be a place for art. It was a luck they brought jugglers, fools, singers and bards with them from Highgarden, or else it would be difficult to entertain themselves.

The journey to Casterly Rock had been without problems, and they had enough to occupy their time. The Lords of the Reach they encountered on their way had all been generous hosts, and the Lords of the Westerlands had been even better. They were all eager and more than pleased to receive their future liege lady, from the Myatts to the Crakehalls, and Margaery’s father had been overjoyed by their welcome. Her mother had been cold for most of the trip, but after the first western lords they met, she had begun to look better and more relaxed. Margaery had used the occasion to know more about Lord Tyrion, and all the lords had said he was the best Lord of the Westerlands they could
dream of, though in many different ways and with different tones in their voice. They didn’t all seem to believe what they said. That could mean they feared Tyrion Lannister, but since Margaery was the one to ask about him and that she was to marry him, they could simply be afraid she might report any bad word they might say about the Lord of Casterly Rock. Overall, the journey had been very pleasant, but at the end everyone was tired to be on the road all day and were very happy when Casterly Rock came close.

They had stopped when the castle had come into sight and Margaery had left the carriage to look at it. Mira had been right. Margaery had visited Oldtown when she was a child, and Casterly Rock had to be at least twice the height of the Hightower. You could see battlements with towers and everything meant to defend a castle at the top of the hill, all carved into the stone. From afar, Margaery could distinguish three roads in the fields. One came from the east and ended at the base of Casterly Rock. The other two came from the south and the north and met at a city that was probably no more than one league away from the castle dominating it. They were actually on the road coming from the south and heading directly toward Lannisport. Margaery thought she remembered that Oldtown was bigger, but the city was impressive all the same, though it was nothing when compared to the castle next to it. It was the middle of the afternoon and the light of the sun was reflected by the water of the Sunset Sea in the west, making it shine.

They had quickly resumed their way along the Ocean Road until they reached the gates of Lannisport. There, the Tyrells and their retinue were welcomed by a group of knights led by Ser Daven Lannister. Margaery was quite glad to see him again and he seemed happy as well to see her. The people of Lannisport were waiting inside the walls to welcome them as they would travel through the main road of the city. Margaery had decided to walk along the road instead of going through it in the carriage, despite the opposition of her father and her mother. Lady Alerie had always encouraged her to show compassion for the people and the poor, and to be close to them, but she was afraid the people in the Westerlands may not be well-disposed towards them as those in the Reach.

In the end, Margaery’s decision had proved a complete success. They went through the city under cheers, applauses and cries of joy. Banners of House Lannister and House Tyrell were hung everywhere. The people of Lannisport were throwing flowers on their way as they advanced. Margaery caught some in the air as they flew. There were even a few children who managed to get between the guards along the road and to bring her flowers themselves. Margaery always sent them back with a kiss on the forehead. She couldn’t hold all the flowers that were brought to her, so her cousins and her handmaidens brought many in the carriages following them as they went forward. Margaery waved her hands at everyone in the crowd, sent kisses in the air and even sometimes went to see people on the side of the road. The children and the women seemed especially enthralled by her. When they left by the other side of the city, Margaery had made sure that the people of Lannisport would love their new lady.

After they left Lannisport, they had been on the River Road instead of the Ocean Road, but they didn’t stay on it for long and traveled through fields to the Goldroad. There they started the ascent that slowly led them to the ringfort at the peak of the hill. Margaery was back into the carriage with her grandmother, her mother and Elinor. Her dress was quite intact despite the long walk through Lannisport. The main road had looked quite clean. She wondered if it was always like this or if they cleared it before their arrival. After a long climb, turning around the hill, they arrived before a large and high entrance. It was the Lion’s Mouth. They went through it and entered a large courtyard were Margaery could see a lot of servants, guards, knights and highborn people waiting.

They waited for some time inside the carriage as they heard her father speaking with someone. The man who answered had a deep and grave voice and gave sober answers to her father’s boasting. Margaery supposed her father was talking with the Lord of Casterly Rock. The voice who answered
to her father was polite, nor joyful nor threatening. Margaery could tell from the way he answered to her father that he wasn’t impressed by the Lord of Highgarden. Finally, her father had come to the carriage, offered a hand to help her out and brought her before Lord Tyrion Lannister.

That was the first time Margaery had set eyes on the man they called the Imp. As her father had led her to him, she had observed him while trying to maintain a smiling and warm face. He was more than half her height, though his head didn’t reach her shoulders. He had blond hair falling on his forehead, green eyes and was square of jaw. *I am a dwarf, and those who pretend I am one of the ugliest men in the Seven Kingdoms are right.* Well, Margaery had seen uglier men in her life. Except his size, she didn’t have much to reproach to his appearance. He didn’t have quite the appearance people were expecting from goblins or gnomes.

Margaery put on a sweet smile and curtsied. “Lord Tyrion. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I was very eager to see you.”

“My lady, the pleasure is all mine,” he said as he bowed. His expression was serious and he seemed to doubt her words, but he was also smiling. He looked at her for a moment, as if he was examining her. “I see that you’re not called the Rose of Highgarden only after your family’s sigil.”

Margaery giggled after seeing the playing smile on his face. Ser Daven Lannister didn’t seem wrong about his cousin’s humour. “You’re too kind, my lord.”

“I hope your journey wasn’t too wearisome.”

“Well, I must admit it was. We are rather tired.”

“Very well. Let’s not lose more time with presentations and welcoming. This is my uncle, Ser Kevan Lannister, my closest advisor.” He turned his head to his left to indicate a man with green eyes and grizzly hair that still showed some blond. The man bowed to her. “And my aunt, Lady Genna Frey. But never call her Lady Frey, or else you’ll regret the day you were born.”

The smile on Lord Tyrion’s face hadn’t been like the one before. She supposed it was only half a joke then. Margaery turned to the big woman on his right who looked with a stern expression to her.

“How shall I call you then, my lady?” Margaery asked, still smiling.

“Lady Genna will do,” the big woman answered, not without sharpness. Margaery kept smiling, but she took note to be careful with this one. Lady Genna strangely reminded her of someone she knew only too well.

As her father introduced her grandmother, her mother and Loras to the Lannisters, Margaery discreetly noticed that Lord Tyrion kept looking at her with fascination. He turned his head when her father introduced someone, but his eyes always went back to her. Margaery kept looking at the people discussing while being fully aware that the Lord of Casterly Rock was watching her. Finally, her family walked inside the castle to be led to their rooms. She shot a last smile to Lord Tyrion before she went inside as he remained in the courtyard. Later, in the evening, there was a feast to celebrate the arrival of the Tyrells at Casterly Rock in their Great Hall. Since men and women sat at different tables, Margaery wasn’t given the opportunity to speak to her betrothed, but she witnessed a strong and sharp battle of words between her grandmother and Genna Frey that entertained her evening very well. She also looked in the direction of Lord Tyrion to see him talking mostly to Ser Kevan. The Lord of Casterly Rock was sitting between his uncle and her father, but the Lord of Highgarden seemed to bore Lord Tyrion when they talked together. Margaery noticed he still shot glances at her very frequently. She also saw with worry Loras shooting murderous glares in Lord Tyrion’s direction, but was relieved to notice that Willas and Garlan kept an eye on her brother.
As she finished her breakfast, Margaery thought that things had gone quite well for their arrival. She had made a good first impression on the population of Lannisport, on the Lannisters and on her future husband. She could tell he was interested and intrigued by the way he looked at her, and that was very good. His interest in her was the foundation she could build upon to gain his trust, then his love. There were also the family members. She had already good relations with Ser Daven, and during the feast yesterday, Margaery and her cousins had mingled with the ladies of House Lannister. They were all excited to meet her, and she had made sure they loved their time with the Tyrell girls. They spoke, ate, drank, laughed, giggled and sang together. Margaery already had plans to get closer to the women of Casterly Rock, including the older ones.

However, her real work to gain Lord Tyrion’s trust would be with him, his uncle and his aunt. Margaery would be able to spend time with Lord Tyrion in the following days before they married, so she could use these moments to learn more about him and make him feel she appreciated him. Ser Kevan was polite with her, but no more. Margaery didn’t think she would achieve much by trying to put him on her side. He was the one to propose the marriage between her and Lord Tyrion, and he seemed to be a very serious man. He already approved their marriage and was an advisor. He didn’t seem the kind of man to discuss personal matters with his lord. The only one that Margaery worried a little about was the aunt. Lady Genna Frey seemed severe, almost frightening. Margaery saw her argue with Lady Olenna at dinner. She wasn’t someone to take lightly. Margaery would need to make sure Lady Genna was on her side, or at least that she was accepting her, before the wedding. Strangely, she expected it to be a greater challenge than to make Lord Tyrion fall in love with her.

Not long after she was done with her breakfast, Mira and Sera came back to her rooms. Mira took charge of bringing back the empty tray while Sera began to help her dress. Margaery chose a light green gown displaying her hips and her arms while covering her shoulders, with symbols of roses on the top part. As Sera began to comb her hair, Mira came back with a young boy probably younger than ten. He had black hair.

“Lady Margaery, this is Tywin Frey,” explained Mira. “Lord Tyrion’s squire.”

“My lady,” the boy said as he bowed, obviously shy. Margaery interrupted the combing of her hair and stood up to welcome him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tywin. Are you Lady Genna’s son?” she asked.

“No, my lady. She is my grandmother. My father is her son.”

“Then it is still a pleasure to meet you. What can I do for you?”

“My lord… Lord Tyrion would like to know if you would be interested to see him today. He would like to show you the Lion’s Bridge.”

Margaery didn’t have to seek her betrothed. He was the one coming to her. “It will be my pleasure. You can tell Lord Tyrion that I will be very happy to spend some time in his company.”

“Very well. I will come to lead you there in the afternoon.”

Tywin Frey bowed again and left. Mira came to help Sera arrange her hair and put some perfume on her. Afterwards, Margaery left her rooms and went to the gardens where her cousins and her grandmother were waiting for her. The other Lannister ladies were already there, gossiping with the Tyrell cousins of Margaery. They all almost jumped on her when she arrived. Margaery’s mother was there as well, discussing with Dorna Lannister, Ser Kevan’s wife. To the opposite of Genna Frey, she wasn’t fat, though she had a big belly because of her pregnancy. Lady Alerie Tyrell had spent most of the feast yesterday discussing with her, and they seemed to get along quite well.
Margaery knew her mother couldn’t have anything against a fellow mother. The twins, Cerenna and Myrielle, were very insistent in their questions about Highgarden and the Reach, and also about Margaery’s brother. Leonette had to remind Lady Lanna that Garlan was married after she asked too many questions about him. A little girl with blond hair and green eyes like all Lannisters stayed away and Margaery had to go to her before she got involved in the small talk of all the girls. Megga and Alla spoke very much with Joy after Margaery showed everyone she approved of speaking with a bastard. She wasn’t about to set aside a little girl of eight only because she didn’t have the right mother. She didn’t do it with Sera, and she wouldn’t act differently with any other bastard.

In the end, Margaery managed to escape the gathering of ladies, old and young, and found her grandmother engaged in a passionate and sharp discussion with Lady Genna Frey. They were alone in a corner of the gardens and were arguing about the matter Margaery expected.

“You can’t expect us to bring flowers from the Arbor within a few days!” exclaimed the Frey lady.

“A wedding without these is out of question,” firmly stated the Queen of Thorns. “I was born in the Arbor.”

“I thought this was the marriage of your granddaughter, not yours. You seem a little too old for marrying.”

“Exactly, just like you. But I know that Margaery would never want her wedding to take place without something from her grandmother’s home.”

“We already have twenty different wines from the Arbor on the menu for the wedding. Isn’t that enough of the Arbor for a single wedding?”

“No. We mustn’t only drink the Arbor. We must see it as well, and smell it. And there is no better way to see and to smell the Arbor than to have flowers from the Arbor everywhere.”

“The wedding is to take place in six days. We do not have the time to make flowers from the Arbor come by ship on such short notice. I am not going to delay the wedding for flowers.”

“You only have to get some from your gardens.”

“We do not have flowers of the Arbor growing in our gardens,” said Lady Genna with an exasperated voice.

“What?! Are you kidding me? I thought you Lannisters would be able to have all the varieties from all the Seven Kingdoms here, with all the gold you have. I’m deceived.”

“Gold cannot change the weather, and we do not have the weather allowing roses of the Arbor to grow here. So, unless you want to delay the wedding for a month or more, you have to forget about it. Anyway, everything has been decided. All the details are settled and to change the plans for the wedding now would cause too much trouble.”

“This is the wedding of my granddaughter! Do you think I will allow it to proceed without having a word about it? Margaery deserves to have a say in the way her wedding is being organized.”

“She had a say, just like you had. You sent us propositions and instructions by ravens and riders during the last months to tell us what you wanted for the wedding, and we complied to your requests the best we could. Our maester was almost drowned under the piles of letters you sent.”

“Well, that made him do some exercise then. But… the best you could?” mocked Margaery’s grandmother, rolling her eyes away. “The wedding is obviously more Lannister than Tyrell.”
“We did our best to satisfy both the people of the Westerlands and the people of the Reach who will be present for the ceremony. I must remember you that while some lords from the Reach will attend, all the lords and landed knights in the Westerlands will be present. We cannot make a full fashion Reach wedding, even if we wanted.”

“Are you saying that you made this wedding in the Westerlands fashion entirely? My granddaughter may be about to marry your nephew the Imp, but that doesn’t mean she is going to throw away her roots.”

“I don’t think the Rose of Highgarden will lose her roots with the nickname she has.”

“It’s a better nickname than those your nephew has. Better to be called a rose than a halfman or a dwarf.”

Margaery chose this moment to leave the bush of flowers she hid behind and to make her presence known to the two quarrelling women. She enjoyed the barter, but she was afraid it could be turned nasty soon. “Grandmother. Lady Genna. Please excuse me. I heard your voices and I was looking for Lady Olenna.”

“Lady Margaery,” Lady Genna welcomed her, not standing up. “If you wish for some time alone with your grandmother, then I will not use her time anymore.”

“Thank you, my lady. But since you are here, I would like to ask if I could take a look at the arrangements for the wedding. I would like to see if I could bring some enhancements to it. After all, this is my wedding.” Margaery exchanged an amused look with her grandmother.

“Very well, my dear,” answered Lady Genna, obviously exhausted. “Come to see me tomorrow. I’ll tell you everything about it. But I must warn you that we will not be able to make any major changes at the last minute.”

“I understand.”

Lady Genna rose from her seat and left, but on her way she stopped and laid a hand on Margaery’s shoulder. “Enjoy your wedding, my dear. Because after that, you will be Lady of Casterly Rock, and it will be your turn to arrange the weddings of the others. Believe me, this is no small task.”

Lord Tyrion’s aunt left on these words. Margaery was now alone with her grandmother. “You finally found someone you could quarrel with all day,” Margaery told her, smiling.

“Indeed. I begin to regret it. Let’s walk among these boring bushes and flowers. The discussion exhausted me.” Margaery was sure she wasn’t the only one exhausted by the conversation. Her future aunt-in-law had certainly been drained by it as well. No matter how sharp you could be, a discussion with the Queen of Thorns would take all your forces if it lasted too long.

“So, are you well settled?” asked her grandmother.

“I am. My rooms are very comfortable. I expect them to be even more comfortable after my wedding.”

“If you have your own rooms. You will share them with your husband. But we could still ask for separate rooms for you, though not at the beginning of the marriage. Later. We will also leave a hundred guards as a household behind with you after the wedding, and a few of your cousins. You will keep your handmaidens too. We mustn’t let the Lannisters control your life.”

“Grandmother, isn’t that excessive? To leave me with a hundred guards? I will be the Lady of
“Casterly Rock. The guards of the castle and my husband will never let something happen to me.”

“What if your husband is the one to threaten you?”

“I don’t believe he’s a threat. You’ve seen him. Does he look dangerous to you?”

“Not at first sight, but we cannot rely on the external appearance. He doesn’t look like a monster from Asshai-by-the-Shadow, for sure. Being honest, I was really deceived when I saw him. I hoped to see a gnome with a bald head, a moustache and a beard, perhaps with a hat and bells around his neck, and instead I saw this.”

“I’m sorry that my future husband didn’t live up to your expectations, Grandmother.”

Her grandmother took her by the arm and looked straight into her eyes. “Listen to me, my child. Be careful with this man.”

“I will be careful, Grandmother. Don’t worry.”

“Well, I worry. I know he looks like a normal man, except for the fact he’s smaller than all the ones we ever saw, but remember the rumors about him. There is always some truth at the origin of any rumor.”

“I know. I know there must be some truth about it. He surely visits brothels, but then he is no different from most of the men, and if he drinks, then it is the same. Look at Garth.”

“Oh, please. Don’t talk about him. I’m never able to decide which one is the worst of your father or him.”

“We know that the stories about his red eyes, his tail or his claws are wrong. As for the privates of a woman, I cannot verify it for now. I’ll have to wait for my wedding night. But I don’t believe he is a monster. He has flaws, but I can live with them, especially if I live as Lady of Casterly Rock.”

“You’re very sure of yourself. Be careful all the same. I don’t want something bad to happen to you. I will try to learn more about your betrothed before the wedding. Some Lannisters will surely loosen their tongues during a conversation. As for you, try to get something out of him. Better to know more about him before you find yourself into his bed.”

“I must see him this afternoon, before dinner. I’ll be careful. Anyway, I was already planning to know him better before we got wed. How do you think I should? Any advice?”

“Let him talk. Men always love to talk about themselves. Look at your brother and your father. Don’t let him suspect anything about you. Make him feel he is important and that you find him more interesting than anything else in the world. You are good at that, even better than me. And I was very very good.”

They kept walking for a long time before they joined the rest of the family for the midday meal. They took it in the gardens. They weren’t as enjoyable as those in Highgarden and the temperature was cooler, but they were beautiful all the same. Margaery then made some embroidery with the other Tyrell and Lannister ladies until Lord Tyrion’s squire came to lead her to the Lion’s Bridge. They had to travel through most of the castle before they reached the famous bridge.

Lord Tyrion Lannister was talking with another man in the thirties when they arrived. The man had sandy hair and wore a crimson doublet.

“No, my lord,” he said. “We found nothing.”
“Very well, Damion. Keep an eye all the same.”

“Yes, my lord.” The man turned on his heels to walk away, and that’s when he realized that Margaery was approaching. He bowed immediately. “My lady.”

“My lady, this is Ser Damion Lannister. He is a cousin of mine. He helps me to administer Casterly Rock,” Lord Tyrion explained.

“Ser Damion. I suppose you are Lanna’s father,” Margaery replied.

“Yes, my lady.” The knight seemed surprised that she knew it. “You met her.”

“Yes. She is a very kind young woman. You must be proud of her.”

“I am. I’ve been trying to find her a suitable husband lately. She’s coming of age. I wonder if you…”

“That’s alright, Damion,” interrupted Lord Tyrion. “We’ll talk about it later. You may leave as well, Ty.” Ser Damion and the squire walked away, leaving her alone with the Lord of Casterly Rock. “It was better that I interrupted him. Damion is not a lickspittle, but he never misses an opportunity to ask something for him or his family.”

“That’s alright,” replied Margaery. “We have that kind of people in Highgarden as well. I know how to deal with them.”

“Good thing. You won’t lack that sort of people here neither.” Tyrion Lannister was talking jokingly, though perhaps in a less cheerful way than Ser Daven. “So, have enjoyed your stay so far?”

“I have, though this is only my first day here. But it is a good place, my lord. I have nothing to complain about. Casterly Rock looks wonderful.”

“It is. This is where I grew up.” His expression took a darker tone. “Do you miss your home, my lady? Highgarden?”

“No, of course not. I wanted to show you something indeed. In fact, many things. But for that, we must cross the bridge. It’s about three thousand feet long. I hope you won’t find it too long.”

“No at all. I’ll follow you, my lord.”

Lord Tyrion led the way on the Lion’s Bridge. “I heard that your grandmother and my aunt had a little squabble this morning. I hope Lady Olenna is not upset.”

“Don’t worry,” said Margaery with a reassuring smile. “My grandmother likes to squabble with everyone. In fact, I believe she discovered a real challenge in your aunt.”

“Well, that will make dinners between our two families interesting. Two old women with sharp tongues.” They both laughed, but Lord Tyrion put on a more serious expression very quickly. “If you want to change anything to the wedding ceremony, feel free to do so, my lady. It is your wedding, and most of the time, it only happens once in someone’s life.”
"I thank you, my lord. And I’ll try to keep my grandmother away from the wedding preparations if this causes too much trouble, though I must warn you it will be quite difficult to keep her away."

"Very well. I’ll have to handle my aunt and your grandmother, it seems." Margaery shyly laughed.

They kept walking for a moment without speaking, Margaery using that moment to look at the structure of the Lion’s Bridge. It was a very long bridge entirely made of white marble, with a roof to protect from the rain and the sun and arches on both sides to support it. Margaery knew the bridge was very high since it began near the peak of Casterly Rock, though she wasn’t sure exactly what was his precise height. It was a very well made work, almost competing with the white battlements of Highgarden. As she admired it, Margaery noticed again that Lord Tyrion was often looking at her in an uncertain way. He didn’t know what to say. According to Mira and Ser Daven, Lord Tyrion was a very bookish man, so better to start on these grounds.

"When was this bridge built, my lord? Was it made right after the collapse?"

Lord Tyrion stopped to look at her, surprised. "You know about that?"

Margaery took a shy expression. "I have to confess that I tried to learn a few things about the Westerlands before I came here."

Lord Tyrion looked impressed. "You’re quite clever, my lady. But no, this bridge is five hundred years old. So far, it’s the one that lasted the longest. The previous bridges didn’t last more than three centuries, whether they were in stone or in wood."

They resumed their walk. "The first one was in wood, I suppose."

"You suppose well. It was built quickly. About two thousand years ago, there was an earthquake in the Westerlands. The Rock shook like it never did, according to maesters. The center portion of Casterly Rock collapsed. The base had been weakened by the water carving into the rock and the mining for thousands of years. Casterly Rock was cut in two. The southern part had no problem, this is where the Lion’s Mouth is, but the northern part was cut from any contact with the real world. People were stuck on the hill, without any way to get down. King Tommen the First quickly built a bridge of wood to link the two separated parts. His successors built stronger bridges, until Tywell the Third built this one. And here we are, walking on it."

"I hope it won’t collapse while I walk on it," said Margaery on joking tone.

Lord Tyrion smiled and laughed a little. "Don’t worry, my lady. The engineers are telling me it would hold for at least two more hundred years."

"I’m relieved then."

"I spoke with one of your cousins by the way this morning. Willas is his name."

"You spoke with Willas?"

"Yes. He’s quite a good fellow. We had many things to talk about. He surprised me while I was leaving the library early in the morning. He was coming in while I was about to leave."

"That doesn’t surprise me. Willas likes to read."

"I saw it. Though I think you won’t see a lot of him while you’re here."

"Why do you say that?" asked Margaery, intrigued.
“Because we started to speak about dragons, and when your cousin realized I knew more about them than him, I showed him all the rare copies of works on the subject that we had here. I’m afraid he’s going to spend the next days reading them before he has to leave.”

“It seems you met my bookish cousin, my lord.”

“I have nothing against this. For once, I have someone to speak with about these things. Do you know for how long your family will stay after the wedding?”

“Perhaps a month or more. I don’t know exactly. But I can ask Willas to stay longer if you wish.”

“I would be happy. May I ask you how he was crippled?” Margaery told the whole story about how Willas was injured during a tourney. “I’m sorry for him. I was born a dwarf, so I learnt to live with it, but to become a cripple after you could walk, ride, fight… That must be very hard.”

Lord Tyrion’s face only showed empathy. He really seemed sincere. “Willas managed to keep going on. Now he raises hawks, hounds, horses, he reads and studies, and he is strongly involved in the running of Highgarden.”

“I suppose that explains why he’s not studying to become a maester.”

“Probably,” conceded Margaery. “He thought about it for some time, but in the end he chose to stay at Highgarden. When you become a maester, you cannot marry.”

Lord Tyrion nodded. “I thought about becoming a maester when I was young. I even thought about being High Septon. If I had kept my mind on it, maybe you wouldn’t be here.”

“Then I’m glad you changed your ideas,” said Margaery with a fond smile at him.

Lord Tyrion laughed shortly. Margaery felt some bitterness in the laugh. “I hope your cousin Willas will marry one day. He told me he was still a bachelor.”

“He is,” confirmed Margaery, not without bitterness either. “But young women mostly see his lame leg and nothing else. They don’t want to marry a man who needs a stick to walk.”

“But you are willing to marry a dwarf,” Lord Tyrion said suddenly. His expression wasn’t very clear, but Margaery had the impression he didn’t believe that she really wanted to marry him. She had to rectify it.

“My lord, from what I know of you and after the letter you sent to me, you are a very good man. If you were a bit taller, no one would complain about marrying you. And I know that without his lame leg, no one would complain either about marrying my cousin Willas. I’m past the appearances. I saw enough how people were unfair to Willas, and I can imagine how they were unfair to you.”

“You don’t know who I am, my lady. Your cousin Willas is a much better fellow than me,” he said again with bitterness.

Margaery stopped and faced him. “You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe.”

Strangely, Margaery felt she meant these words. Lord Tyrion was looking at her as if he never saw her before. Even for Margaery, it was disconcerting. She realized she no longer smiled, but had a serious expression. With much effort, she brought back a smile on her face, though not as shining as she made them usually. Lord Tyrion averted his eyes.
“We should keep moving,” he only said. They started to walk again and remained silent for a long moment. “By the way, my lady, I would like to speak to your grandmother tomorrow. I have the feeling that she is more the Lady of Highgarden than your father is the Lord of Highgarden.”

“You may not be wrong, my lord,” she replied.

It was at this moment that they arrived at the end of the Lion’s Bridge. Margaery found herself before a wonderful and gigantic garden, more gorgeous than some gardens at home. She spent what was left of the afternoon visiting it and the buildings on the northern hill. There was a hall, paths to walk, several gardens, pools, fountains, many chambers for at least a hundred of people and rooms for music and other entertainments. Lord Tyrion spent hours to explain her the northern part of the hill was some sort of place where important people were staying while here at Casterly Rock and where the people of the Rock retreated when they were tired. That was where the wedding would take place. It almost made Margaery think she was back at Highgarden. She spent hours visiting it, witnessing the preparations for the wedding. She realized at the same time that Lord Tyrion was smiling before her enthusiasm, and that this time there was no bitterness in him. Margaery went back to her rooms only late in the evening.

She had missed the dinner with her family, so she ate alone in her rooms. Her grandmother came to see her before she went to sleep and Margaery informed her of what she could learn about Lord Tyrion during these hours with him. When her grandmother had left and that Margaery was lying on her bed, she thought about what happened on the northern hill. Lord Tyrion had smiled at her so sincerely and he had looked so happy, just as she was happy. I will cherish you as my wife, protect you, care for you, and make sure you have everything you could wish for. I will do everything I can to make you happy, and I hope you will be. Margaery thought she understood him better now. Tyrion Lannister wanted to make her happy because it made him happy. In this case, her task would be much easier. She only had to let herself be happy with him, or to seem happy with him.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion (the wedding)
Tyrion III

Chapter Notes

The Marriage of Margaery Tyrell and Tyrion Lannister. The Rose and the Lion.

The longest chapter so far in this story, and the second longest I have ever written up to now, the longest being Sansa's name day in "A Shadow and a Wolf". A lot of work was put in that one, so please review to tell me how you find it, whether you like it or not. Stories are written to be read, enjoyed, criticized and hated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION III

“Could you help me to adjust that sleeve, Ty. I’m afraid it’s too tight.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tyrion’s squire came to help him to loosen his right sleeve. Tyrion would rather not be uncomfortable in his clothing the day of his wedding. He wore a red doublet with golden pins in the shape of lions. His breeches were black, but with his short legs people would barely be able to see them under the doublet. The collar was circled with gold. His personal dressmaker had done a good job. The clothing for the wedding was very handsome. Too bad he wasn’t handsome as well to fit in it.

“It seems sad that a young woman, and a beautiful one above all, has to marry me Ty, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Lady Margaery doesn’t seem to dislike the prospect, my lord. In fact, I would say she is eager to marry you,” answered Ty.

“Maybe. She is certainly eager to be Lady of Casterly Rock, but I doubt she is eager to be the Imp’s wife.”

“She doesn’t seem reluctant, my lord.”

“No, she doesn’t, you’re right on this.”

Tyrion had spent some time with Lady Margaery each day since she arrived last week. Being honest, he had been smitten when he had seen her the first time. She deserved her nickname. A round and lovely face, high cheekbones, green eyes, a bright smile she loved to display, a slender shape that allowed place to forms, brown hair falling with curls behind her neck, gracious arms and hands soft at the touch. Tyrion couldn’t deny it. The Rose of Highgarden was beautiful. Her gowns and dresses outlined her beauty at the perfection, and even enhanced it. Even more striking was her mind. She had spirit, and a lot of it. Tyrion was able to laugh and joke with her, as well as discuss serious matters. She had a keen mind, understood quickly where he was going when they talked and was quite wise. She even managed to make him feel better than he was. He could still remember what she told him while they walked on the Lion’s Bridge the first day. You underestimate yourself, my lord.
You are a much better man than you believe.

Tyrion could still remember the look in her eyes when she said it. She had looked directly at him, as if she wanted him to know that this time, she really meant what she said, but then her sweet smile had returned to her face and her shining eyes had come back. For a moment, Tyrion had had the impression he had seen Margaery Tyrell really caring for him. He didn’t think he had seen it again afterwards. He had liked to spend time with her. She was seducing him, not only with her body but also with her mind. Only, it was what Tyrion wasn’t comfortable with. She was seducing him. Maybe he should have liked that. There had never been a woman who made advances on him. Jaime always had all of them. Even Tysha never made advances on him, nor Alla. He didn’t really know how to take it. Lady Margaery couldn’t be in love with him, the Imp. That would be my pleasure to become your wife and to spend my life by your side. Her behaviour unsettled him. There was something he didn’t like, something odd with her. He didn’t have the impression she was false to him, but she wasn’t true either. Tyrion spent so much time with whores that he could see through acts and lies very quickly. He could read people very easily. Lady Margaery wasn’t acting with him like a whore, far from that, but there was something with her not entirely unlike the way whores acted to make the men believe they loved them.

Tyrion thought of Alla, of her red locks he used to pass his hands through, her generous breasts, and... How marvelous and delicate she had been. He would never see her again. When the answer from the Tyrells to Kevan’s proposal had arrived a few months ago and that his betrothal with Lady Margaery had become official, Tyrion had had no choice. He had to send her away. He couldn’t have kept her at Casterly Rock for when he would be married. It wouldn’t do to have a mistress among the servants while he was married, or to have a mistress at all. Tyrion knew he couldn’t take the risk to infuriate the Tyrells or his future wife by taking a scullion to his bed before or after the wedding. He had to be faithful to his wife, and he wanted to be faithful. A young girl had to marry him, and he didn’t want to shame her. So he had done the only right thing for everyone.

He had Alla brought to him a few days after the betrothal was decided. He had explained to her the situation, that he was to marry soon and that they couldn’t keep seeing each other.

“I cannot keep you at Casterly Rock either,” Tyrion had told her. “Rumors are already circulating, and they would continue if you were to stay here after the wedding. I don’t know what Margaery Tyrell or her family would do if they were to discover your presence. You could be in danger.”

“I understand, my lord,” she had said her eyes cast down.

“You don’t have to worry. I won’t leave you on your own. I have already arranged everything. You’ll be sent to Kayce. It’s a market town in the near peninsula, west of the Rock. You’ll have your own guards, fine clothes, even a few servants. You won’t have to scrub floors anymore. I’ll make sure you never lack anything. You’ll have a good life.”

“I would have a good life here too,” she had said.

Tyrion had approached her and taken her hand reddened by the scrubbing in his own. “I am a Lannister, and the Lord of the Westerlands. I have duties, and my duties don’t allow me to keep you close to me. I wish I could, but I can’t.” She had looked very sad. “I will be married very soon. Find yourself a husband. A good husband. Someone who will take care of you and who will love you.”

“Don’t you?”

“What?”

“Don’t you love me?”
That wasn’t a question Tyrion had been prepared to. He had never thought about it. Did he love Alla? He had no idea. “I would keep you here if I could, but I can’t.”

She had looked sadder than ever. It broke Tyrion’s heart to see her that way. Tears had begun to run on her cheeks. She was sitting, so he had been able to take her face between his hands. “You are a beautiful, lovely, sweet and kind girl, Alla,” he had told her. “You deserve a better life than the one you had up to now. I loved to meet you, and I’ll never forget you.”

She had looked back at him, tears still clear in her blue eyes. “Do you want me for one last night?” she had asked.

Of course Tyrion wanted her. And so they spent their last night together. Tyrion tried to get the best out of it, and Alla didn’t seem reluctant about that. She even initiated things a few times. Tyrion tried to remember her the best he could. On the morning however, the time had come for her to leave. Tyrion had four of his men escort her to her new house in Kayce, and gave her a first pouch of silver. Others would follow regularly so she could have everything she wanted and needed.

Just as she left, Tyrion had told her something he hadn’t planned to tell initially. “I will visit you from time to time, when I can. Just to see everything is alright. I promise.”

She had hugged him tightly, tears of joy streaming on her cheeks. He would see her again. She left more joyful than he had believed she would. What a fool he had been. A few days later, he had a discussion with his uncle who told him he could never see Alla again. He couldn’t allow any doubt of his fidelity to his wife, or else it could endanger the alliance between House Lannister and House Tyrell. Tyrion had argued, but in the end he was forced to admit Kevan was right. He knew what would happen if he saw Alla again. He wouldn’t be able to remain faithful to his wife if he saw her again. Tyrion had to decide he wouldn’t hold the last promise he made to the girl who shared his bed.

“My lord, are you alright?” Ty’s voice brought him back to the present. Surely his expression betrayed the gloomy thoughts he had.

“Yes, Ty. Is the sleeve well adjusted?”

“I believe it is, my lord.”

Tyrion moved his right arm and hand. Everything was alright. “It is.” Then Ty helped him remove his wedding clothes for the casual ones. Before the wedding was to take place, there would be the breakfast where daily clothing was expected. Tyrion had only wanted to make sure his wedding clothes would be well adjusted for after. “Leave me now, Ty. We still have some time before I go to the wedding, and I would like to be alone.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ty Frey left Tyrion’s apartments on this. Soon, he would have to share them with a young woman. Strangely, Tyrion didn’t find much solace in that. His thoughts returned to Alla. He remembered again their last night together. Then he thought about Tysha, and his mood turned even sourer.

Tyrion shook his head, trying to chase these two women from his mind. He went to the table, seized the decanter and filled a full cup of wine for himself. He took a huge swallow. Why was he thinking about a whore and a kitchen wench the day of his wedding? Why was he sad when he was about to marry one of the most beautiful women, if not the most beautiful woman, in the Seven Kingdoms? Not only did he marry a highborn lady who brought an alliance that would make the Lannisters more powerful than ever, but she was gorgeous like very few women were.
Tyrion knew why he wasn’t satisfied by his wedding. He wanted a wife that would love him, and he knew that Lady Margaery Tyrell didn’t love him. Sure, she didn’t seem to hate him, and probably she didn’t, but he knew she wasn’t in love with him and would probably never be. After the wedding, Tyrion would never have a chance for love, and he cursed the gods to force him to marry a woman who would never love him.

Tyrion emptied his cup and left his rooms, walking to the Great Hall where breakfast was to take place. That is, where his breakfast would take place. In the tradition of the Reach, there were two separate breakfasts on the wedding day. The first one, the biggest, was held in the Great Hall and was attended by the groom and his family, and by all the male members of the bride’s family. This meant Tyrion was stuck with the Fat Flower and the Knight of Flowers. By luck, the way Genna had arranged seats, Tyrion was at the center of the dais with Kevan on his right and Genna on his left. Still, he was forced to share the high table with the Oaf of Highgarden, like Olenna Tyrell called her son, and his future brother-in-law who seemed more eager to remove his head than to see Tyrion married to his sister. He wished they had brought Willas Tyrell and Ser Garlan, Lady Margaery’s cousins, to sit with him instead, but as cousins they had to sit among the other tables.

Tyrion knew that somewhere else, in the gardens of the Rock, his betrothed was breaking her own fast with the ladies of her house. At least, that meant Tyrion didn’t have to suffer the angry glares of his future mother-in-law or the insufferable sharp comments and complaints of the Queen of Thorns. He saw some of her grandmother in his soon-to-be wife, but to be honest he liked it in Margaery when he couldn’t endure it with the Lady Olenna. The old woman’s demands, if all met, would have doubled the cost of the wedding.

Tyrion broke his fast on pork sausages, bacon, pears, summer peaches, gammon steaks, nuts, honeycakes and fish from both the Honeywine and the Sunset Sea. He didn’t eat much. He didn’t have quite an appetite, but he drank a lot. He knew Genna and Kevan disapproved, but he didn’t care. Wasn’t it an man’s duty to get drunk at his own wedding? Anyway, he wouldn’t be drunk even with the quantity he would drink from breakfast. The time to get really drunk would be during the wedding feast.

Once they were done with the breakfast, the food was cleared and Tyrion began to receive presents by the hundreds. Well, no. He would have gifts by the hundreds tomorrow. He and Lady Margaery were to receive presents separately on their breakfasts, but they would receive more tomorrow morning, this time together.

First however, Genna presented the wife’s cloak that would be draped over Margaery’s shoulders. Apparently, that was the cloak Tyrion’s father had put on his mother’s shoulders when they married, and later Cersei had it too when she married Robert. Tyrion hadn’t been there when his mother and father were wed of course, and while he had been present to Cersei’s wedding, he didn’t remember much of it. He had been drunk during most of the celebrations and hadn’t really paid attention. The thing he remembered the most from his sister’s wedding were the dragon skulls in the dungeons of the Red Keep that he visited at the time.

He looked at the red cloak trimmed with gold, noticing it if not seeing it for the first time. So that was the cloak that put her mother under his father’s protection. For all the good it made. She died years later when Tyrion was born, and there was nothing his father could do to save her. Tyrion thought about the young girl breaking his fast in the gardens right now. Soon she would wear that cloak too, and she would take the place Tyrion’s mother had occupied long ago. Only this time, Tyrion would be the one to drape it over a woman’s shoulders. Was the same fate waiting for the future Lady of Casterly Rock? Tyrion though about Margaery, her sweet smiles, the pleasant jokes she made crude sometimes, and the moment on the bridge. You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe. Her face at that moment… Then he remembered the bruises on Alla’s
back, and how she shivered in pain or fear as he touched them. He remembered Tysha, and the barracks. No, he wouldn’t allow that to happen again. If he was to put a cloak on the shoulders of a young woman, he would protect her, and he wouldn’t fail.

Presents started to pour after that. Since all members of Tyrion’s immediate family were absent (his father and his mother because they were dead, his brother and his sister because they were in King’s Landing), it was the father of his betrothed who started. It was accepted they would alternate between a gift from a Lannister and from a Tyrell. Genna had wanted Kevan to offer his present first, but in the end the Queen of Thorns had her way and it was her son who began. Lady Margaery had failed to keep her grandmother away from the preparations of the wedding. She was right, it was almost impossible to force Olenna Tyrell to stay away from somewhere when she had decided not to. Genna was eager for the Tyrell matriarch to leave.

The Lord of Highgarden came with a huge cup in gold that was taller than Tyrion legs and feet. It had two handles, one in the shape of a lion, the other one in the shape of a rose. There were also drawings of roses and lions all over the outer surface. Tyrion thought a rose and a lion didn’t go quite well together. What a marriage and an alliance would that be?

“From House Tyrell and the people of the Reach, my lord, it is my honor to present you with this wedding cup,” boasted the fat man. “May you and my daughter Margaery drink deep and live long.”

Tyrion hoped they would both live long. As for drinking deep, that would be no problem at all, though he wasn’t sure Lady Margaery would drink as much as he did.

“A huge goblet, Lord Tyrell,” Tyrion commented. “Bigger than that and I could drown in it.” Genna laughed along with other people. “Thank you, my lord. I assure you I will drink deep in it, and I’ll be careful to not die drowning in it.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Lord Tyrell bowed and went to take back his place, a huge smile on his face. How many useless presents would Tyrion receive? And how many his wife would receive?

The next present was totally unexpected. Someone brought a horse into the Great Hall. It was a huge mare from the Reach, specially saddled and trained for Tyrion. He came to see it more closely and people were looking at it as well. It was a beautiful and very well raised horse. Tyrion never had such a mount. He turned to his uncle.

“Thank you, Kevan. I admit I didn’t expect this.”

“This is not my present, my lord.” Kevan had a thin smile on his lips. “This is Ser Jaime’s present. He sent it for you from King’s Landing. He regrets he couldn’t come.”

There would be no present better than this one. Tyrion went back to his place after a moment, but only after a very long moment where he observed the mare his brother gave to him. If only Jaime was there.

Willas Tyrell was the second Tyrell to bring a present. In usual circumstances, it would be Lord Mace’s son who should bring him the next present, but Tyrion wouldn’t be surprised if the Knight of Flowers didn’t give him anything. Right now, he was doing everything to ignore Tyrion and seemed hostile towards a wall or a column. Well, Tyrion could do without a gift from Ser Loras. He liked his two cousins much more.

“My lord,” began the crippled Tyrell, “here is my present for you.” A young man brought a heavy book with a binding made trimmed with silver. “The first original copy of Social and Economic History of the Seven Kingdoms by Maester Rostovtzeff.”
Tyrion had heard about this work. It was quite recent and he didn’t have the chance to put a hand on it yet. “Thank you, Lord Willas. I hope you have your own copy.”

“I have the second one. It shouldn’t do to give the second copy at your wedding,” he said with a smirk that Tyrion returned. He liked this cousin of his future wife.

Kevan gave his own present that happened to be a book as well. Considerations on the History of the Reach by Archmaester Perestan. Lord Mace Tyrell almost praised Kevan for choosing such a subject. Willas Tyrell approved as well, though soberly and clearly knowing more about the matter addressed by the archmaester than his father. Ser Garlan Tyrell then offered a battle-axe to Tyrion. He thought he knew why. One of his forebears, King Tyrion II Lannister, was known for his prowess with a battle-axe. Tyrion mentioned it to Ser Garlan who recognized that was the reason he was giving it to him. Tyrion doubted he would ever need it, but still, he appreciated the present. Margaery’s second cousin seemed to have respect for him. In his thanks, Tyrion carefully omitted to mention that Tyrion II was also known as the Tormentor for his delight in torture, and that some historians even reported he desired no woman before he made her bleed.

Presents followed without a stop. Horas Redwyne, the son of Lord Paxter Redwyne of the Arbor, brought two casks of the finest Arbor Gold there was, though Tyrion knew the real presents Lord Redwyne sent were two ships named Lord Tyrion’s Valor and Lady Margaery. Tyrion’s aunt, Genna, brought a tapestry representing Tyrion’s mother, the Lady Joanna. Tyrion had seen her image once, in the depths of Casterly Rock. Ser Baelor Hightower, heir to House Hightower and brother to Lady Alerie Tyrell, brought wine from the Rhoyne and a vase from Meereen. Ser Stafford Lannister, his mother’s brother, gave leather boots richly decorated. Lord Randyll Tarly, who strangely remembered Tyrion of Stannis Baratheon with the way he gritted his teeth, gave a longsword with jewels on the pommel. Another thing Tyrion was quite sure he would never use, and Lord Tarly seemed to share his thoughts. Ser Damion Lannister offered plates made of gold with a lion on one side and a rose on the other one. Lord Mathis Rowan gave him a red silk tourney pavilion. Antario Jast and his betrothed, Lady Lanna Lannister, brought a book as well, though Tyrion happened to already have two versions of this one. His cousins Cerenna and Myrielle brought two little figurines made of gold in the shape of dragons. Joy, his uncle Gerion’s natural daughter, brought a simple wooden figurine that she had made herself and tried to make it look like a dragon. Tyrion kissed her on the cheek to the surprise of many people who didn’t expect the Lord of Casterly Rock to show affection like that to a bastard. At least, Joy’s gift was sincere and not made to flatter him.

Tyrion had several other presents from other lords of the Reach, but also from the Westerlands. Lady Darlessa Marbrand, the wife of his deceased uncle Tygett, offered him a copy of the Seven-Pointed Star. Ser Addam Marbrand, Lord Gawen Westerling, Lord Raynald Sarwyck, Lord Desmond Crakehall, Ser Eldrick Sarsfield, Lord Edric Payne, Lord Reginald Lannister of Lannisport, Ser Harys Swyft… He couldn’t remember all the presents he received. There was a moment he felt Kevan tense by his side when Lady Alyssanne Lefford came to offer her own wedding present. She had grown since the last time Tyrion had seen her, and from his memory he could only tell she had grown both in age and beauty. She was courteous and Tyrion couldn’t find any blame in her behaviour. Perhaps she was only happy Tyrion was to marry the Rose of Highgarden instead of her. He could only understand her.

Once the long breakfast was over, Tyrion went back to his rooms to put on his wedding clothes. Ty helped him. When they were done, Tyrion looked at himself in the Myrish glass. He was garbed like a king, but he didn’t look like one at all. He felt pity for the young woman he was about to marry. No woman deserved a marriage like this one. There was a knock on the door. Ty went to see who it was. He came back with someone else.
“Ser Damion Lannister,” he announced.

“Thank you, Ty. Leave us alone,” ordered Tyrion. Once his squire had left, he asked the question to his cousin. “Is everything in place?”

“Yes, my lord,” Ser Damion. “All the food will be tasted before it reaches you.”

“And the food for Lady Margaery as well?”

“Yes. My men will make sure that nothing happens. I chose them myself.”

“Very well, Damion. You may leave.”

The knight left. What he didn’t know was that Kevan had positioned other men to watch Damion’s men. Tyrion couldn’t be sure about the loyalty of his cousin. Up to now, no other accident had happened, but Tyrion wouldn’t take any chance. He had been close to being killed.

Three months ago, a few days before Mace Tyrell confirmed his betrothal with Margaery, there had been an attempt of murder on Tyrion. A cook had tried to poison him with tears of Lys. It was Alla who had put Tyrion on the track. She had been scrubbing the floor in the kitchens when she had heard a steward speaking with the cook about putting something in the lord’s dessert. Alla had only understood they were going to put something like tears in the pie Tyrion would eat the following day. She didn’t know what were the tears of Lys. However, she had found it strange all the same and had told everything to Tyrion that night when she had come to see him. Tyrion had immediately taken action and questioned the cook. He had guessed right. As soon as he told the cook they knew about the tears of Lys, she had revealed everything, including the place where the poison was.

The cook didn’t know all the details. She had only been paid a bag of twenty silver stags to perform this task by one of the stewards working at Casterly Rock. The man’s name was Steffon. He was the eldest steward of the Rock. To the opposite of the cook, he denied everything. Even after they discovered a vial of tears of Lys in his chamber, and despite the confessions of the cook, he refused to tell anything. Finally, Tyrion had to use something he didn’t like to use at all. After an afternoon of torture, Steffon had spoken. It was Cersei who was behind it. She had promised him the position of First Steward and gold if he managed to get rid of Tyrion before he was married. Tyrion had been furious like the Seven Hells when he heard the confession. He had wanted to return the compliment to his sister and have her poisoned instead. After a brief episode of anger however, he had decided instead to make an example.

Steffon was hanged the next day, then his head adorned the battlements of Casterly Rock for the next month. It was removed as the Tyrells were coming for the wedding. As for the cook, Tyrion sent her to King’s Landing with a pie, a head and a message for his sister. Ever since, Tyrion had tasters to make sure his food was safe. Today, he had even more tasters placed to make sure nothing would happen. All the food he and Lady Margaery would take would be tasted before it reached their lips. Tyrion intended to keep doing it after the wedding. Who knew with Cersei? She could try to poison his wife. Anger rose in Tyrion again as the thought came to his mind. If Cersei ever dared anything against his wife, he would kill her.

Ty entered the room once again. “My lord, Willas Tyrell would like to speak with you.”

Tyrion frowned. “Now?”

“Yes, my lord. Now.”

Tyrion found it a strange moment to speak. He was about to leave for the wedding ceremony. Still,
he had nothing against discussing with Willas Tyrell. They were about the same age and had spent a lot of time discussing studies and books in the many libraries of the Rock since the Tyrells arrived. Tyrion allowed the cousin of his future wife to enter.

Willas Tyrell was a young man of average height with brown waving hair, slender with a long face and golden eyes. He wasn’t very different from his cousin Ser Loras, though less handsome. The thing that caught the attention for everyone when they saw him was the stick he had to use to walk because of his lame leg. No matter how handsome he could be, the young women only saw the stick. Like always, Tyrion felt a wave of sympathy for the cripple.

“Lord Tyrion,” said Willas as greetings.

“Lord Willas. Do you want to sit?” offered Tyrion.

“Yes, that would be welcomed.”

Tyrion may have short legs, but he had no problem walking. Creylen once told him he feared Tyrion could never walk properly when he was born, but in the end his short legs proved to be straight if not long. Willas didn’t have this luck and walking, even standing, was painful for him if he remained too long in that position. Willas Tyrell sat at a nearby table and leaned his stick against the chair. Tyrion sat in front of him and poured himself some wine.

“Are you sure this is wise, Lord Tyrion? There will be more than enough wine at the wedding.”

“Everyone expects me to get drunk today. Why deceive them? It changes nothing if I start right now. Anyway, that won’t be enough to get me drunk immediately. Do you want some?”

“No, thank you.”

So Tyrion drank alone. “Too bad they couldn’t bring the casks of Arbor Gold I received at breakfast. I sent them on the northern hill, in case I or your sister would want some during the night.”

Willas Tyrell didn’t seem convinced. He shared Tyrion’s enthusiasm for books, but not for wine. “Lord Tyrion, I want to tell you that I’m very happy that my cousin Margaery is marrying you.”

“Really?” Tyrion wasn’t quite sure about it.

“Yes, I am. Let’s say that Margaery… Well, she isn’t a romantic. If you see what I mean.”

“I think I do.” That was what Tyrion feared. Margaery Tyrell was marrying him for the title of Lady of Casterly Rock.

“What I mean is… To be honest, I was afraid Margaery would marry anyone who would give her a good position.”

“Well, since she’s marrying me, it seems she did in the end,” replied Tyrion with bitterness.

“That’s not what I mean, my lord. I mean… You see, our grandmother, Lady Olenna, she wasn’t happy with her marriage. She never loved our grandfather. She always complains about him, and Margaery is very close to our grandmother. She had come to think that it was useless to look for happiness in marriage.”

“Perhaps she is wiser than us.”

Willas Tyrell ignored what Tyrion just said. “But I think she has a real chance for hapiness with you.
She likes you very much, she told me herself. She appreciates and respects you. She even admires you, I think, and believe me she doesn’t think so much of many men. I… I would like you to take care of her. Try to make her happy. She needs it."

Tyrion nodded. “You have no fear to have, Lord Willas. Your cousin will be my wife in a few hours. I won’t let her down, nor let anyone hurt her. This is my duty as a husband. And I’ll do everything I can to make her happy.”

“Thank you, my lord. And just so that you may know, if you ever were to hurt her in any way…”

“I suppose Ser Loras will chop my head, then your brother Garlan will cut the rest of me in half, and that before you’ll have knocked me out with a heavy book so I may not escape on my short legs.”

Willas Tyrell sniggered and Tyrion joined him. “Alright, I think I don’t need to threaten you. You know the consequences. Anyway, I doubt that will come to that.”

“Perhaps not for you and your brother, but I’m afraid Ser Loras will try to remove my head even if I treat his sister like a goddess.”

“Don’t worry. Garlan and I will keep him at bay, and Margaery will help us too. Anyway, Loras won’t stay here forever. Or else, someone may come down with a terrible case of sword through bowels.”

More laughs. Tyrion hoped he wouldn’t be the one to suffer the case if it came to that. “Now, if we want to arrive to my wedding in time with my short legs and your lame leg, we should go now.”

Tyrion emptied his cup and left his rooms with Willas Tyrell. The wedding was to take place in the Great Sept of Lannisport. It wasn’t wide like the Great Sept of Baelor in King’s Landing or the sept of Oldtown, but it was the greatest sept of both Casterly Rock and Lannisport. Furthermore, it made the event more public than if the ceremony was held at the sept inside the Rock. The people of the Westerlands needed something to celebrate. Tyrion’s father hadn’t been a lord to give much entertainment to his people, and even less to be the subject of their love. It was time they changed it. Tyrion travelled on a horse from Casterly Rock to Lannisport, Kevan and Damion at his side, Daven, Martyn and Willem following not far behind. The people of Lannisport had prepared them quite a warm welcome. They had known tourneys over the last years, but it was the first time for more than sixty years that they assisted to the marriage of their lord or future lord. Tywin Lannister had married his wife in King’s Landing, so the last time the people of the Westerlands saw the wedding of their lord at home was when Tyrion’s grandfather, Tytos Lannister, had married Lady Jeyne Marbrand. Even then, Tytos Lannister hadn’t been Lord of Casterly Rock yet and would only become so ten years later. Now, the people would witness the wedding of their actual lord with a young and beautiful lady from another kingdom.

Everything was assembled to make the ceremony a success with the people. However, Tyrion knew very well that the people were cheering more for their new lady than for him. Margaery had made a triumphant arrival in Lannisport last week, getting through the main road on feet, waving her hand to everyone, kissing children who brought a rose to her. She had gone to Lannisport two other times since she arrived. The first time was to buy vegetables, fruits, jewels and toys in the markets with her handmaidens and cousins. The citizens of Lannisport saw for the first time the Lady of Casterly Rock, or the future Lady of Casterly Rock, meddle with them. The second time had been to visit an orphanage. She had distributed food and toys to the children there. Within a single week, she managed to make herself more popular than Tyrion’s family.

They arrived before the sept and dismounted. The sept had been built by the Lannisters of
Lannisport, so it wasn’t as richly decorated as the smaller sept in Casterly Rock. Furthermore, the Ironmen never had any scruple to loot the septs, and they sacked Lannisport many times through history. Still, the structure was impressive and taller than all the other buildings in Lannisport. They climbed the steps under the cheers of the crowd and the sound of the bells. Inside, many lords and ladies both from the Westerlands and the Reach had already gathered. Tyrion spotted a few of the Tyrells as well, including Lord Mace and his wife. She gave Tyrion a disapproving look when he passed near her. Perhaps he should be careful to not be poisoned by his soon-to-be mother-in-law. They arrived before the marriage altar, between the statues of the Father and the Mother. There, the septon seemed lost in the argument between the Queen of Thorns and Genna.

“That shouldn’t be so difficult to make these gold roses. I thought you Lannisters shit gold.”

“Then in this case the Tyrells must shit roses, I suppose,” replied Genna.

Tyrion wanted to laugh, and he was barely able to refrain. Kevan, standing by his side, looked annoyed and he was the one to stop all of it before it went too far. “Genna, Lady Olenna, please forgive me for interrupting your discussion, but the ceremony will begin very soon,” he explained carefully.

“Then take it, you’ll need it more than me.” Genna threw the wedding cloak at Kevan who clumsily caught it. “And try to talk sense in that old crone.”

Genna walked away furiously. Olenna Tyrell shrugged. “I suppose it’s time for me to prepare my oaf of a son.”

She walked away as well, though more slowly than Genna. Tyrion turned to Kevan. “I suppose I should take the cloak,” Tyrion said. Kevan gave it to him. “I believe it’s useless to ask ourselves why my sweet sister sent no present.”

“She should have,” said Kevan. “That’s unworthy of her rank, and her name.”

“Don’t worry, Kevan. I would rather receive no present from her. The one she sent to me before my wedding could have been the last.”

Kevan looked uncomfortable. “We shouldn’t discuss about it here.”

“Your own men are in place?”

“They are. You have nothing to fear. Now, be prepared.”

“Kevan.” Tyrion called for him as he started to walk away. “Were you happy at your wedding?”

“I was.” A short smile appeared on his uncle’s face. “Tywin was happy too. Tywin almost never smiled, but the day he married, he was smiling.” Tyrion wondered if he would smile today. “Tyrion, maybe you’re not marrying a woman you love like your father and I did…”

“I wed a woman I loved once.” Tyrion looked straight to his uncle at this moment, and Kevan seemed uncomfortable again.

“Yes, you did. But you are still marrying a very beautiful young girl, who is of age with you, who comes from one of the most powerful families of this country and she doesn’t seem to hate you at all. So don’t complain too much. You could have much worse for a wedding.”

Kevan walked away on that. He was right. Tyrion was marrying a woman half the men of Westeros would dream of marrying, and still he found a way to be unhappy about this. He tried to recover and
thought about the time he spent with Lady Margaery during the last week. *You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe.* She wasn’t evil. She loved flowers and music. She was intelligent and clever, far more than all the other women Tyrion had met in his existence, except maybe Genna. She had a good heart, or else she would never have visited an orphanage. Tyrion couldn’t imagine Cersei visiting an orphanage. She would find that it stank too much and that the people there were ugly and unimportant. And she was beautiful. Very beautiful.

He heard the cheers growing outside. He thought he had an idea why. A servant came to say the bride had arrived. The cheers and the applauses kept growing. Tyrion climbed the last steps to stand at the top. His heart began to pound in his chest. She was coming. For the second time in his life, he would be married. However, for him, all this ceremony was entirely new. When he had wed Tysha, there were only he and his wife, a drunken septon to marry them and a few pigs as witnesses. As for the wedding feast, it had consisted mostly in one of the witnesses. No red cloak, no walk down the aisle, no crowd cheering, no thousands guest, no great feast, no cake, no presents. There wasn’t even a wedding night. The wedding night preceded the wedding the first time. That had been the wedding of the malformed dwarf with a wheelwright’s daughter. Now, that would be the wedding of the Lord of Casterly Rock with the Rose of Highgarden.

The day was almost perfect for a wedding, but there were many clouds in the sky, and right now one probably blocked the light of the sun where the sept stood. As a result, the sun didn’t blind them as it should when the great doors of the sept opened. However, they didn’t need the sun to be blinded. The bride could blind them all by herself and Tyrion himself was dazzled by her appearance. As she walked down the aisle at the arm of her father, Tyrion could only marvel at her. Her hair was a complicated arrangement of braids that added one feet to her height. Her wedding gown was a light one, all white, covered with silver trims in the shape of leaves, branches and roses. It let her arms and most of her shoulders bare, and she had a train that looked like it was covered with autumn leaves that fell from trees. Her gown also allowed a plunging neckline that put in evidence the outline and the curves of her breasts, and a necklace whose chain was made of gold with a double precious stone as a pendant in the shape of a rose. One side of the pendant was a ruby, the other side was a sapphire. Right now, it was the ruby people could see, the sapphire hidden against her chest. Tyrion had sent it to her yesterday in the evening. It was one of the many jewels that had belonged to his mother. He had found all of them in a secret alcove a few months ago. His father had hidden them there apparently, and Tyrion had decided that this one would be particularly appropriate for the Rose of Highgarden. She also wore a green cloak with symbols of roses on it, perfectly adjusted to not cover her arms and shoulders.

As Margaery Tyrell walked to him, Tyrion couldn’t remove his eyes from her. Her beauty was striking to anyone in normal times, but right now it was without comparison. He was so stunned by her that she had almost reached the steps leading to the altar when he realized she was looking at him too. She was smiling, like she always did, sweetly, only at him. She kept her eyes locked on him as she climbed the steps. When she arrived at his level, her father removed the cloak from her shoulders. Tyrion noticed at this moment that half of her back was bare. He wondered what Genna thought about it. She didn’t appreciate the tendency in the Reach to wear clothes that revealed more than they hid.

“You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection,” declared the septon.

They had placed a stool so Tyrion could put the cloak on Margaery’s shoulders, but before he could climb on it, she knelt on the floor and pushed aside her hair with a hand so her nape and shoulders were bare. Taken aback, Tyrion stepped away from the stool and slowly cloaked her. As his hands were on her shoulders, her right hand came to his own and she held it for a moment, tenderly. Then it was over, she stood up with the red cloak on her shoulders and faced the septon, not without casting another sweet smile to Tyrion, though this time he had the impression to see some of the expression
he saw on the bridge.

“My lord, my lady, my lords, my ladies,” proclaimed the septon, “we stand here in the sight of gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. One flesh, one soul, one heart, now and forever.”

Long prayers followed that Tyrion remembered from his readings in the time he had wanted to become High Septon. He looked from time to time at his bride. Many times she caught his eyes and smiled in return, but always moving her eyes towards the septon in the end, to remember him they should listen. There was a silent laugh on her lips a few times when she did so. She didn’t seem to care much more about what the septon said than Tyrion did. Finally, the moment came to tie the ribbon around their hands.

“In the sight of the Seven,” recited the septon, “I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity. Look upon each other and say the words.”

Her hand was over his own, and Tyrion used his thumb to rub hers. She gave a tender squeeze in response as they turned to each other. She was looking down as he was looking up. Tyrion said his words.

“Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, I am hers, and she is mine. From this day until the end of my days.”

She said similar words, and as they looked upon each other, Tyrion realized he meant these words. He had said them to someone else one day, and had meant them too. He barely heard the words that the septon said as a final prayer with his hand on theirs.

“Let it be known that Margaery of House Tyrell and Tyrion of House Lannister are one flesh, one soul, one heart. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder.”

The ribbon was removed, but their hands remained together. Tyrion realized he had to say something, and again Margaery surprised him by kneeling. The words came out by themselves.

“With this kiss, I pledge my love.”

And they kissed. Tyrion barely heard the applauses in the sept. Her kiss was sweet and lovely. He didn’t know how long it lasted, but he knew it lasted for a long time before they both stood tall again before all the nobility of the Westerlands and the Reach. Their hands remained linked together, like they were chained, as they walked down the steps from the altar and through the sept and emerged in the outside, only to be welcomed by an even bigger crowd. All the people of Lannisport seemed to be here, from the richest merchant to the poorest whore. Tyrion walked as if he was in a dream, Margaery smiling to the people and waving her hand at them, shining. As if everything was to go well on this day, sunshine broke and it made Tyrion’s wife appear even more beautiful.

Tyrion only left his walking dream when they entered the carriage that would bring them back to Casterly Rock for the festivities of the wedding. Margaery got rid of her cloak there, and Tyrion wasn’t to complain since it allowed him to contemplate her much better. Anyway, the cloak was only for the wedding ceremony and there was no reason to keep it afterwards.

“So, it appears we are married, Tyrion,” she said once they were inside.

“It appears we are, Margaery.”

She smiled at him again and kissed him another time. The cheers grew much louder all of a sudden, and she broke their kiss, blushing and giggling. “It seems we’re making a show of ourselves.”
“Isn’t that what we must be? A show for the common people?”

They both burst into laughs as the carriage moved forward, people around all the way. Margaery went to the window and waved her hand to the crowd. Tyrion remained behind, letting her be the center of the attention. After a moment she turned to him.

“You should come to thank them too,” she said.

“I’m afraid you’re the one they want to see,” Tyrion replied.

“The people must see you, Tyrion. Or else they will never love you. People don’t love a lord who never shows himself and stays hidden.”

Tyrion smiled. “Alright, but if you turn out less popular because of me, that will be your fault.”

And so Tyrion came to wave his hand and smile at the people of the Westerlands just like his wife. She slid her hand that wasn’t waving into his own as they did so. They had to do it for a very long time. There were people all along the way from the sept to the Rock, even outside the city. It was only when they started the climb to the Lion’s Mouth that people stopped to line along the way and they could take a pause. Tyrion’s short arm was sore, but his other hand remained with his wife’s.

It was only when they reached the courtyard that their hands parted. They left the carriage to go into a common litter that would bring them to the northern hill. There were so many highborn people present for the wedding that they decided the feast would take place there. Even the Great Hall of Casterly Rock couldn’t contain so many people. And the weather allowed to make the wedding feast in the beautiful gardens of the northern hill. Margaery had liked them so much when Tyrion had showed them to her.

Before they could reach the litter however, his wife found herself surrounded by her friends she brought with her from the Reach, and soon Cerenna, Myrielle, Lanna and Joy joined them. They were all complimenting her on everything and congratulating her. Joy went to kiss Tyrion on the cheek, which prevented him from being left completely apart. As he waited away for his wife to find a way to get out of this women crowd, he jumped when someone talked to him from his back.

“Congratulations, Lord Tyrion.”

Tyrion turned to find a young woman of no more than fifteen, wearing a pale blue gown in the Reach style with a brown doublet displaying leaves symbols. She was taller than Tyrion, without any surprise, approximately the same height than Margaery, had angular features and a square face, green eyes and brown hair. It was all brought together in a long single braid falling on her back. Her clothes let her arms free, but completely hid her shoulders and barely allowed people to see anything below her throat. That was disconcerting for Tyrion considering how the people of the Reach, especially the Tyrells, tended to wear very light clothes. There was something strange in her voice as well, an accent that wasn’t from the Reach.

“Thank you, my lady,” replied Tyrion, intrigued by this young woman. He had the impression to have seen her before. Tyrion saw Willas Tyrell coming out of a carriage behind. It dawned on him.

“I saw you with Willas Tyrell once in the library. You’re one of Margaery’s handmaiden, aren’t you?”

“Yes, my lord. My name is Mira. Lady Mira Forrester.”

The name was familiar to Tyrion. He examined her again. The brown hair, the green eyes, the northern accent… The northern accent. His mind went to the tourney of Lannisport more than five
years ago. He remembered a man with a beard, but with the same eyes, the same color of hair and the same accent.

“Are you Lord Gregor’s daughter?”

She smiled, obviously pleased. “I am. He met you at the tourney of Lannisport.”

“I remember. He was a good man, and a man of honor.”

Lady Mira flushed. “It’s very kind of you to say so, Lord Tyrion.”

“Tyrion, I believe it’s time to go if we don’t want to miss the feast of our own wedding,” told him Margaery at this time. She had found a way to free herself from her friends. “Mira, follow us behind.”

“Yes, my lady,” dutifully answered the girl.

Tyrion followed his wife inside the litter and they went forward for the wedding feast. Inside the litter, they tried to talk first, but quickly they closed the shutters and Tyrion kissed his wife. She was so sweet, and so good. She took his face between her hands, returning his own kisses eagerly. He was aroused like he never was for months. How long since he had a woman for the last time? He began to move his hands on her arms, then her shoulders, and started to caress the outline of her breasts. When he started it, Margaery caught his hands and took away her lips from his.

“Be patient, Tyrion. We’re not yet at the wedding night.” However, she resumed their kissing, though perhaps less eagerly.

Tyrion wanted her, but she was right, and he didn’t want to force himself upon her. She was his wife. They kept kissing all the same all the way, and it was very difficult for Tyrion to not start to remove what few clothes she had. By luck, they arrived at the northern side of the Lion’s Bridge, and there they had to get out of the litter. Tyrion would have to wait before he could resume their kissing session. That would be for the wedding night. He wished they were already there.

The dinner consisted of thirty-nine courses. Genna and the Tyrells had agreed long ago on this number because Tyrion was twenty-three while Margaery was sixteen. The addition of their ages gave thirty-nine. The first course was a carrot soup, with onions and Parmesan cheese cut in strips on the surface. The second was shrimps with creamy sauces of the taste of peach and pear. There was also a salad with fried onions and cold peppers.

There was also wine. A lot of wine. Tyrion watched his mother-in-law and his brother-in-law eye him suspiciously at best. Mace Tyrell made many toasts, to his daughter, to Tyrion, to their marriage, to the alliance of House Lannister and House Tyrell, to his wife, to his son, then to the wine and the food until he made a toast for the jugglers and singers and even the people that would sweep the floor after the wedding. He obviously didn’t have Tyrion’s tolerance for wine.

After what may have been the fifth cup Tyrion drank, Margaery put a hand on it. “I think you drank more than enough,” she offered as an explanation.

“Less than I plan to. It’s man’s duty to get drunk at his own wedding,” Tyrion said.

“I don’t want you to end toasting to everything like my father.” She took his cup and put it far away from him, then leaned to kiss him on the cheek. “I don’t want you to be drunk on our wedding night. I want to see if you really are experienced like people seem to suggest.”

She had a wicked smile when she got away. That wasn’t the kind of things people expected from a
lady, but Tyrion wasn’t about to complain about it. So he had to limit himself to water from now on. Sadly, the lack of wine made him think about Margaery and their wedding night even more.

Tyrion mostly spoke with his wife, but he also spoke with Kevan, who was sitting to his left, and Genna who sat a little farther. The left side of the table was completed by Damion, Daven, Dorna who was pregnant and Darlessa Marbrand. Again, Tyrion regretted Jaime wasn’t there. The right side of the high table was occupied by the Tyrells. In the order from Margaery’s right, there was Lord Mace Tyrell, his wife Alerie, the Queen of Thorns, Ser Loras, Lord Willas, Ser Garlan and his wife Leonette.

People came to offer their congratulations of course. All the lords and ladies of the Westerlands and the Reach who attended came, from Lady Alysanne Lefford (her father was mysteriously absent) and Ser Baelor Hightower to Lord Gawen Westerling. Tyrion was glad Gregor Clegane the Mountain wasn’t among the guests. Tyrion saw Lady Margot Lannister, a distant cousin, wife to Lord Titus Peake and Lady of Starpike, for the first time in many years. He expected more marriages to take place between houses from the Reach and the Westerlands in the following years. Joy came to congratulate them as well, kissing Tyrion on the cheek again. Margaery joined in kissing Joy on the cheek too. Tyrion was glad of it. Joy was very lonely since his uncle Gerion disappeared in the Smoking Sea.

A more sensible moment came when Lord and Lady Westerling came to offer their congratulations. They were followed by their daughter, Jeyne, behind them, though her mother seemed to wish she hadn’t followed them. Sybell Westerling acted courteously, but her eyes were cold and it was obvious she was angry that Tyrion had found a wife. She certainly hoped he wouldn’t find one and be left with no other choices than to marry her daughter or spend his life in celibacy. When Lord Gawen and his wife left, Jeyne remained a little while longer. She was still shy and seemed very impressed by Margaery. Tyrion’s wife behaved very well and smiled kindly at the girl, thanking her.

Finally, Jeyne turned to Tyrion. “I want to thank you, my lord. For what you told me the last time. It helped me a lot.”

“It was my pleasure, Lady Jeyne,” replied Tyrion.

The young girl left, thinly smiling. “What did she mean? What did you tell her?” Margaery asked.

“Well, you see my dear, after my father died, there were a few lords who tried to marry their daughter to me. Lord and Lady Westerling were among them. So they brought their daughter Jeyne to a feast here a few months ago.”

“I suppose you refused.”

“Our families were already discussing our marriage. The Westerlings are among the oldest families in the Westerlands, but they are probably the poorest of the highborn families here as well. Lady Westerling is the granddaughter of a merchant, and her grandmother was born in the east. Some say she was a witch. That makes their children bad marriage prospects.”

“But what did you tell her?”

Tyrion sighed. “I saw her being mocked by other people. So I gave her an advice to not let herself being hurt by the opinion of the others.”

“What was it?”

“Never forget who we are, because the world will never forget it. All we can do is accept who we
are, and this way people will never be able to hurt us with that.” Margaery was looking strangely at him. “I am a dwarf, Margaery. There will always be people to laugh at me and mock me, no matter the titles, the power and the riches I have.”

Margaery smiled sadly while taking his hand under the table. “Don’t listen to them. They are wrong.” Again, he saw the same thing he witnessed on the bridge. Again, it disappeared after a very short time and the sweet smile returned. “If there ever are people to mock you, I’ll take care of them.”

“Don’t worry, my lady. I can deal with them myself.”

There were jugglers, singers, bards and many other artists to entertain them. Some came from the Reach and had followed Margaery and her family from Highgarden. There were some from Lannisport and the Westerlands as well. Many familiar songs were played. *A Rose of Gold* for the Tyrells and Margaery, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone* for the septons and the few religious people (Kevan’s wife was delighted by it), *My Lady Wife* for all romantic young girls and boys. Cerenna and Myrielle seemed to love the latter more than anything. *The Rains of Castamere* were not played. Tyrion’s father was no longer alive to be flattered with it, and Tyrion had forbidden the song from being played today. This was no music for a wedding, nor to celebrate an alliance with a powerful family. As they listened to the singers and musicians, Tyrion and Margaery started to drink from the huge cup her father had given to them. Of course, Tyrion was the one to drink the most from it. A young woman came to perform a song titled *False Love*.

A brisk young sailor courted me,

He stole away my liberty,

He stole my heart with a free good will,

I must confess I love him still

Down in the meadows she did run,

A gathering flowers as they sprung,

Every sort she gave a pull,

Till she had gathered her apron full

When first I wore my apron low,

He followed me through frost and snow,

But now my apron is up to my chin,

He passes by and says nothing

There is an alehouse in this town,

Where my love goes and sits him down,
He takes another girl on his knee,
Why is not that a grief to me

Ah, griev'd I am and I'll tell you why,
Because she has more gold than I,
Her gold will waste, her beauty blast,
Poor girl she'll come like me at last,
I wish my baby it was born,
Set smiling on its father's knee,
And I was dead and in my grave,
And green grass growing over me

There is a bird all in yonder tree,
Some say 'tis blind, and cannot see,
I wish it had been the same for me,
Before I had gained my love's company,
There is a man on yonder hill,
He has a heart as hard as steel,
He has two hearts instead of one,
He'll be a rogue when I am gone

But when they found her corpse was cold,
They went to her false love and told,
I am glad says he, she's done so well,
I long to hear her funeral knell,
In Abraham's bosom she does sleep,
While his tormenting soul must weep,
He often wished his time o'er again,
That his bride he might make her merry
And marry her soon.

After this song, Margaery turned to him. “Tyrion, perhaps it is time for the announcement.”

Tyrion remembered. “Well, this was your idea. Announce it.”

Tyrion turned to the herald who hit the floor three times with his golden stick, asking for silence. The conversations stopped. “The Lady of Casterly Rock would like to say a few words,” the herald said loudly. Someone would have to be deaf to not hear him, even if this person was completely at the other extremity of the gardens.

Margaery stood up to speak for the first time as Lady of the Westerlands. “We are so fortunate to enjoy this marvelous food and drink. Not all among us are so lucky. To thank the gods for bringing House Lannister and House Tyrell together, Lord Tyrion and I have decided that the leftovers from our feast be given to the poorest in the city of Lannisport.”

There were general applauses among the attendance. That only caused Tyrion to admire her even more. The declaration was followed by a new singer who played a song who made everyone already drunk or about to get drunk laugh out loudly and cheer up to no end. They were at the twenty-ninth course.

We're merry men of the Reach  
So sturdy and so stout  
When the day is done  
When it's time for fun  
We'll drink and sing and shout!

You weak livered milk drinkers  
Can let your throats run dry  
Cause there's just one drink  
That we will sink  
Until the day we die

Drinking mead in the halls of Whiterun  
The maidens and the men!  
We swig our brew  
Until we spew
Then we fill our mugs again!

You can keep your filthy Skooma

It makes our bellies bleed

Cause when we raise our flagon

To another dead dragon

There is just one drink we need...

NORD MEAD!

Chug a mug of mead

And another mug of mead

Chug another mug of mead

Till you fall down

Chug a mug of mead

And another mug mead

Chug another mug of mead, warrior!

After the long hard days

Of hunting and of war

Our throats are tired and thirsty

And our bodies drenched in gore

But we won't spend our evenings

Feeling tired and feeling spent

We perk right up when we breathe in

That wholesome honey scent

That Cyrodilic Brandy
Too fruity for these tongues
You can keep your fancy alto wine
It tastes like horker dung!

Balmora Blue tastes great to you
But here we like it plain
Just fill my mug
With the mighty jug
Of honey, heart and grain

Drinking mead in the halls of Whiterun
The maidens and the men!
We swig our brew
Until we spew
Then we fill our mugs again!

You can keep your filthy Skooma
It makes our bellies bleed
Cause when we raise our flagon
To another dead dragon
There is just one drink we need...

NORD MEAD!

Chug a mug of mead
And another mug of mead
Chug another mug of mead
Till you fall down
Chug a mug of mead
And another mug mead

Chug another mug of mead, warrior!

Tyrion and Margaery both laughed at the song, but also at the people who were applauding as if it was the best song they ever heard. A giant pigeon pie was served as the main dessert. Time to dance came. A singer from Oldtown had come to play new music.

“I believe we must open it,” said Margaery.

“You really want everyone to laugh at us for the rest of our days?” asked Tyrion.

“I thought you said we were never to forget who we are, so people couldn’t hurt us with this.”

“Perhaps, and that’s because I remember that I’m a dwarf that I don’t dance. This won’t give a good show for the people here. And they will laugh at you as much as they will laugh at me. Let them only laugh at me.”

Margaery smiled fondly at him. “If people are going to laugh at you, then they will have to laugh at me, and this will be enough to convince many of them to not laugh at all.”

Margaery stood up and extended her hand to Tyrion. Surrendering, Tyrion got on his feet and took his wife’s hand to lead her to the dancing floor, unless she was the one to lead him. As expected, some people laughed at them when they opened the dance, though he also saw some incredulous faces among the people of the Reach. Willas and Garlan seemed to find it funny, but in a good sense rather than in a mocking one. In the end, other people joined the dance and they were forgotten in the sea of people. Margaery led him, making Tyrion’s clumsy steps middling instead of terrible. Tyrion found himself lost in the dance, looking only into his wife’s eyes as the slow song played.

The road now leads onward

As far as can be

Winding lanes

And hedgerows in threes

By purple mountains

And round every bend

All roads lead to you

There is no journey’s end.

Here is my heart and I give it to you

Take me with you across this land

These are my dreams, so simple and few
Dreams we hold in the palm of our hands

Deep in the winter
Amidst falling snow
High in the air
Where the bells they all toll
And now all around me
I feel you still here
Such is the journey
No mystery to fear.

Here is my heart and I give it to you
Take me with you across this land
These are my dreams, so simple and few
Dreams we hold in the palm of our hands

The road now leads onward
And I know not where
I feel in my heart
That you will be there
Whenever a storm comes
Whatever our fears
The journey goes on
As your love ever nears

Here is my heart and I give it to you
Take me with you across this land
These are my dreams, so simple and few
Dreams we hold in the palm of our hands
They only made two dances. Afterwards, Tyrion went back to his place and let his wife dance with other people. All the lords of the Reach and the Westerlands wanted to dance with her. She also danced with Kevan, Damion, Daven, even with Martyn and Willem, and she danced with her father, her brother and her two cousins.

Tyrion sat there, looking at her. She was his wife now. He was a married man again. The sun was beginning to disappear and torches were being lit everywhere. Tyrion kept looking at his wife, admiring the way she danced, her gracious movements, her hair, her arms, her hands, her slender frame.

“Lord Tyrion.”

For the second time today, Mira Forrester took him by surprise, only this time she was almost before him when she surprised him. He had been too much focused on Margaery to notice the presence of her handmaiden.

“Lady Mira. Are you not dancing?” he asked.

“No. I already danced, and you can get quite out of breath after some time.” She effectively had some colors on her cheeks.

“Are you enjoying the feast, my lady?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I suppose this is different from the ones you had in the North.”

“It is, but not so much. Feasts in the North are pleasant too.”

“How could a northern girl manage to become the handmaiden to the daughter of the Lord of Highgarden?” Tyrion wondered how that happened. Highborn girls from the North seldom served south of the Neck.

“My mother was born in the south. She is a Branfield. Her family lived…”

“In the Crownlands. They remained loyal to the Targaryens during Robert’s Rebellion, they all died in the war and their lands were given to House Sunglass.”

The young woman looked astonished. “How do you know that?”

Tyrion smiled. “I am a dwarf, Lady Mira. And I am rich. Rich dwarves have nothing to do of their time but read and learn the history of all the houses of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“I’m surprised of your knowledge, my lord. My mother still has relations in the south, and since I am her eldest daughter, she wanted me to learn the ways of the south, so she sent me to Highgarden.”

“Well, you’ve seen Highgarden and Casterly Rock up to now. I suppose you’ve seen much more of the south than many Northerners.”

She nodded. “Probably.”

“Are you going to stay here with my wife?”

“I think I will. Unless my lord doesn’t want me to.”
“Not at all. I don’t want to part my wife from her handmaidens. And it’s been too long since the last time we had people from outside the Westerlands living here.”

A fist fell on the table. Mira Forrester was standing before Tyrion on his left, and Ser Loras Tyrell had arrived from the right. Tyrion noticed he was staggering and shaking, and his eyes were lost in some way, but he looked with all the anger in the world at him.

“You stay away from my sister,” he said, babbling in a low voice. His breath only brought further evidence that he was drunk. He didn’t have his sister to stop him from drinking like Tyrion.

“Ser Loras, I think you should sit down,” Tyrion said calmly.

“You do not touch her.” The Knight of Flowers separated his words as carefully as he could in his drunken state. His eyes were set on Tyrion and didn’t move from him.

“Ser Loras,” intervened Lady Mira, “you promised to dance with my friend Sera to Lady Margaery. Did you dance with her yet?”

The heir to Highgarden didn’t give any attention to the northern lady. “I saw what you did in the carriage, when you left the sept,” he resumed. Tyrion didn’t like the turn this conversation was taking. “You stay away from her. Or else I’ll cut you in half and make you the quarter man.”

Tyrion shrugged. “I just wouldn’t have the same ring to it.”

Ser Loras didn’t seem to take the jape very well and seemed about to really cut Tyrion in half when a firm hand gripped his arm. Taken aback, the young knight turned on his heels to face another knight, Ser Garlan Tyrell.

“Loras, you are drunk,” he said. “It’s not because you’re a knight that you can threaten a lord. Go back to your place and don’t leave it until the wedding is over if you know what’s best for you.”

Loras Tyrell seemed lost for a moment, but in the end he walked away very clumsily. Ser Garlan watched Ser Loras until he sat down, then turned to Tyrion. “Please forgive my cousin’s behavior, Lord Tyrion. He’s drunk.”

“It’s obvious,” said Tyrion. “I have quite an experience for being drunk. But I’ll forget about it as long as he doesn’t carry out his threat to make me the quarter man.”

“I’ll make sure he won’t. Loras may be good with a sword, but not as good as me.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Ser Garlan Tyrell didn’t seem about to kill Tyrion for marrying his cousin. For the first time since the wedding began, Tyrion was glad Jaime wasn’t there. If he had been there, he and Loras Tyrell would probably have ended fighting with real sword, and whoever would have died, both the alliance between the Lannisters and the Tyrells and Tyrion’s marriage would be over.

Ser Garlan Tyrell turned to Lady Mira and invited her to dance. Margaery was dancing with Daven. When another song came, she and Lady Mira traded their partners. However, the song that played at this moment caught Tyrion’s attention and his mind focused on it entirely, not noticing his wife anymore.

I loved a maid as fresh as spring,
with sunrise in her hair.

I loved a maid as fair as summer
with sunlight in her hair.

I loved a maid as red as autumn,
with sunset in her hair.

I loved a maid as white as winter,
with moonglow in her hair.

The song was sung in the Myrish language, so many people didn’t understand it. Tyrion did. There was a girl who sang it for him years ago. Black hair. Blue eyes. A lovely face. Dozens silver coins, and a gold one.

I loved a maid as fresh as spring,
with sunrise in her hair.

I loved a maid as fair as summer
with sunlight in her hair.

I loved a maid as red as autumn,
with sunset in her hair.

I loved a maid as white as winter,
with moonglow in her hair.

Tyrion looked at his wife, a gorgeous rose from the Reach, the pride of House Tyrell. Who was he? A dwarf. A malformed and stunted dwarf. He had a wife once, and she proved to be a lie. He looked at Margaery Tyrell. Her sweet smiles, her supposed innocence, the way she always looked happy… As always, he was a fool. The song came to an end, though it kept playing in Tyrion’s head. Before another one could start, Lord Mace Tyrell awkwardly stood up and loudly cleared his throat.

“My dear friends,” he declared, “there is no greater joy for a father than to see his daughter married to a brave and good man.” Here he went again. “However, my happiness is much greater than that, since this marriage has bound the Reach and the Westerlands forever, bringing our two families together, to make only one. To House Tyrell, and House Lannister.”

Lord Mace Tyrell raised his cup and everyone who still had one raised it too. “TO HOUSE TYRELL! TO HOUSE LANNISTER!” Tyrion had to do the same, but before he brought his own cup to his lips, his new wife came back to him and they both drink from the giant goblet her father offered in the morning. She was still smiling sweetly at him. Her smile produced mixed feelings in Tyrion.
“But now…” Tyrion’s father-in-law didn’t seem to be done. He stammered before he could articulate words correctly. “There is an important part of the wedding that hasn’t been carried out yet. What am I saying, an important part? A vital part, that is.”

So the time had come. Tyrion looked at Margaery. Her expression hadn’t changed. Maybe she didn’t understand what was coming, but Tyrion didn’t think that was it. The other possibility was that she didn’t allow her emotions to surface. The thought didn’t make Tyrion happy.

The Fat Flower kept going on. “For every wedding, there must be a bedding. And every bedding calls for a bedding ceremony.”

There was a moment of silence, and then a first guest shouted. “To bed!” A second one did the same, then a third, until it was all a rabble of the same shouting. “TO BED! TO BED! TO BED! TO BED!”

There was still a cup of Arbor Gold that Tyrion hadn’t finished near him. He seized it and emptied it in a single gulp. He walked around the high table to stand right next to Margaery, but on the way he made a sign to the herald. Without hesitation, he hit the floor with the golden stick very loudly, and the shouts ended. No matter where, when or why, he always did as the Lord of Casterly Rock ordered him. Tyrion had the silence he wanted.

“I’m sorry, Lord Tyrell, but I believe we can dispense with the bedding ceremony.”

Mace Tyrell didn’t seem to understand what Tyrion just said for a moment, but then he stammered. “Lord Tyrion, there must always be…”

“There will be no bedding ceremony,” repeated Tyrion firmly. “Or else I could end up like the quarter man. That wouldn’t be good for our new alliance. Ask your drunken son if you don’t understand what I mean.” Tyrion turned to his wife, who was looking at the whole scene with disbelief. “Would you follow me, my lady?”

“As they walked through the silent crowd, Tyrion threw a last comment. “Don’t make these faces. I understand the men are deceived, but you ladies have all reasons to be happy.”

There were a few laughs among the guests, but mostly the silence lingered. They walked away from the wedding without anyone stopping them. They were at Casterly Rock and this was Tyrion’s castle. No one would dare to oppose him publicly there. They walked along an outside corridor with arches linking square pillars in red marble, torches keeping enough light to not let them fall into darkness. Tyrion looked at his wife. She had an odd expression.

“Sorry I deprived you from the bedding ceremony, my lady,” he finally said. “Only, I wanted to prevent an accident between me and your brother.” He was lying. That wasn’t the reason why he forbade the bedding, though that was probably a good reason enough.

“What is the matter with my brother? Did he do something he shouldn’t have?” she asked.

Tyrion shrugged. “It seems he didn’t take well the show we made in the carriage. He told me to stay far from you, or else he would cut me in half. And it is difficult to stay far from someone we marry during the bedding. He was drunk.”

“I’m sorry, Tyrion. That’s unacceptable. I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

“Don’t bother yourself, Margaery. He’s only a brother who wants to protect his beloved sister.”
Tyrion could easily imagine Jaime acting just like Ser Loras at Cersei’s wedding. He wondered how his brother kept still when she married Robert. He couldn’t pretend he would have done the same as Jaime at their sister’s wedding. They entered the Golden Tower, a five roofs tower whose tiles at the top were made of gold, hence its name. Unfortunately, the bedchamber was at the top of the tower. When they reached it, Tyrion’s legs were painful and he knew wince was obvious on his face.

“Are you alright, Tyrion? Have you hurt yourself?” asked Margaery, looking concerned.

“No. That’s the disadvantage of being a dwarf. With short legs, every climb of stairs turns into an ordeal.”

Tyrion went to sit. His legs needed rest and he sighed when he dropped himself in it. The bedchamber was richly decorated. It was circular, like the Golden Tower was, with a balcony encircling it all. Four huge windows gave access to it, with silken curtains flying in the wind at each of them. The curtains to the east and the west were of golden color, while the curtain at the north was red and the one at the south was green. If the windows had been positioned differently, the two northern ones would have been red and gold while the southern ones would have been green and gold. The bed they had was large enough to contain six people. The cover was all of gold color, while the sigils of House Lannister and House Tyrell were finely carved into the headboard. The pillows were green on one side, red on the other one. Everything in the room had been arranged to display the new alliance between Tyrion’s and Margaery’s families.

“I understand what it is. Willas has the same problem. And yet he keeps climbing the stairs to the rookery where he can look at the hawks and ravens flying,” Margaery said.

Again, Tyrion saw the face she had on the Lion’s Bridge. You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe. “I like your two cousins. They are good fellows.”

“Yes, they are. They like you too. Especially Willas.”

“I wish we could say the same about your brother.”

“He just needs time. I’m sure he’ll come to appreciate you.”

“Let’s hope this happens before he decides to kill me for real.”

“Before that, he will have to get through me.”

There was a playful smile on her lips and they both sniggered. Tyrion looked at the jug of wine on the table. He recognized the Arbor Gold that was given to him this morning, and poured himself a cup. He offered one to Margaery and she took it, sitting right in front him. As she sat, she leaned forward, which put in evidence the lines of her breasts. Tyrion took a gulp, still looking at her. He could only notice how beautiful and gorgeous she was.

“I’m sorry I annulled the bedding ceremony,” he said.

“Well, that was unexpected. I didn’t think I would get to our chambers on my feet and with my clothes still on me. That was unusual,” she answered, smiling.

Tyrion sighed. “Both my weddings were unusual. I’m unusual, so that’s no surprise if my weddings are too.”

“Both your weddings?” Margaery had a questioning look on her face. The smile was gone. “You’ve been married before?”
Tyrion wanted to curse himself. He let it escape. He didn’t want to talk about it, but there was no way back. Better to tell her than let her wonder what happened. “Yes. I was only sixteen at the time, and it didn’t last very long. Only a fortnight.”

Margaery’s face showed utter surprise. “She died?” Tyrion nodded. In truth, what had happened to his first wife had been far worse, but he had no wish to share it with the woman he could be about to sleep with. “Only after a fortnight?”

Tyrion sighed and looked down at his cup. “A very short marriage… as befits a very short man, I suppose.”

He stared at his cup for a moment, remembering what he thought to be his first wedding. He felt a hand on his left one that laid on his knee. He looked up to see Margaery’s concerned face. “I’m sorry, Tyrion.”

Again, he saw the face he saw on the bridge. You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe. Tyrion kept looking at her for a moment, waiting for the sweet smile to return, but it didn’t come back this time. Finally, he said something to break the heavy silence.

“I would like it if you were always like that.”

Margaery frowned. “What do you mean?”

Tyrion freed his hand from hers. “I’m not an idiot. I can see it when someone is playing with me, and I know you play with me.”

Margaery’s expression was confused for a time, but then her lips formed a thin line and she looked on the ground for a moment before she brought her eyes up to meet his again. “Not always. When I laugh with you, I’m not acting. I really find you funny, and you really make me laugh. That’s no act of me.”

“Maybe, but I know there are times when you pull on a smile or a shining face that it is not spontaneous, or sincere.”

Margaery joined her hands on her knees. “I have to do it, Tyrion. This is what is expected from a woman. To smile, to dance, to sing, and to stand by her husband’s side. And also to give him children. There are moments when I must hide my feelings and show other ones.”

“I’m your husband. You can take off your feigned emotions.”

“Do you want me to take off my clothes as well?”

The question surprised Tyrion. She had said it on a mocking tone. “Not yet. First, I would like to make something clear. If we are to be married, I want us to be honest with each other. To trust each other.”

“As you wish, Tyrion.”

“So, there is something I must know before we do our duty. Why did you accept to marry me? I gave you the choice to not marry the Imp, and yet you wrote to me that it would be your pleasure to marry him. Why?”

Margaery looked away, then stood up and walked on her right before she turned to face him again. “Tyrion, I almost knew nothing about you when my parents started to discuss our marriage. All I had heard were rumors.”
"I suppose these rumors weren’t very good."

"No.” She laughed almost inaudibly. “But then I received your letter, and… I didn’t know what to
think of it, but I knew rumors could be really unfair. There are rumors about Willas after all, and they
are almost all false. So I thought there might be some untruth in the rumors about you as well, and
with your letter I thought it was certainly the case. The thing is, I don’t really care about the fact you
are a dwarf.” She had to be one of the very few women in the Seven Kingdoms to not care about her
future husband being a dwarf. “What I was worried about were the other rumors that depicted you
like a monster. I didn’t really believe in them. You seemed to be a good man, and when I arrived,
that was just confirmed. I told you that I’m over the judgments on people because they are cripples or
ugly or small. I don’t care about it. You are intelligent, funny, kind, we are both highborn and both
our families see great opportunities in our alliance. I see no reason to refuse, and when I answered to
you I saw no reason either.”

“That’s all?” asked Tyrion.

“You?” She smiled laughingly. “I heard that you are quite experienced.”

Tyrion scoffed while laughing too. “I’m afraid I am. The rumors about it are probably true.”

“Is it true that you used to visit three brothels each night?” She seemed more curious than disgusted.

“I’m afraid I don’t remember enough of these nights to give the right answer.”

They both laughed. He liked her laugh. She took back a half-serious expression, with a smile that
seemed sincerer this time. “I will be honest, Tyrion. I do not love you. I will not pretend that I do.
But I like you. I like you very much. I loved the time we spent together these last days, and I hope
we’ll have more in the future. I will not allow Loras to put an end to our marriage, in one way or
another. I want to be your wife. I’m not lying.”

Oddly, Tyrion didn’t think she was. She wasn’t trying to seduce him right now, so he believed her
words were true. He knew for sure she didn’t love him now, but Tyrion had never thought that as a
real possibility. He preferred it if she told him, and if she said she was ready to marry him and liked
her time with him… Well, there had been worse marriages.

He looked at her again. Beautiful, young, highborn, bringing the second most powerful family of
Westeros at his side, willing to marry him, clever. What more could he ask? Love? There would
never be a woman who would love him. Margaery would never love him. However, she didn’t hate
him, and he didn’t hate her either. They could live happily together. She was smiling at him, again.
Tyrion smiled as well.

“So, what do we do now? Isn’t it supposed to be our wedding night?” she asked.

“It is. Though… You know, we’re not forced to do it tonight. I can wait, if you don’t feel ready.”

She looked surprised, but then she laughed. “I thank you, Tyrion. This is very kind, but it’s useless.
We are husband and wife. That’s what we must do.”

“I will never force myself upon you. What I wrote to you, I meant it.”

“I know. And I mean it when I say I want to do it.”

She had a wicked smile again. Without warning, she discarded her gown at the level of her shoulder
and brought it down to her feet. She was standing naked right before him now. Tyrion had tried to
imagine how she looked like without her clothing before, but here his imagination had been unable
to equal the reality. He remained there, agape, unable to speak, looking at his wife who wore nothing.

“Have you nothing to say?” she asked.

Tyrion tried to recover his mind, but it was hard to focus on something else than Margaery’s nakedness. “I’m sorry. You must be the first person to make me speechless.”

A little laugh escaped from her mouth as she walked towards him. She leaned over him and kissed him on the mouth. Tyrion returned it immediately. She was passionate, and he was too. It had been too long since he had a woman. He wanted her. She may not love him, but she wanted to do it, just like he wanted.

She began to unbutton his doublet, but there Tyrion stopped her like she stopped him in the carriage. “You undressed on your own. I’ll undress on my own,” he said, breathless. Her own breath was sending hot winds on his face.

She was giggling. “As you wish. I’ll be waiting for you in our bed.”

She straightened up and Tyrion watched her walk to the bed and lie down on it. He finally managed to get his eyes away from her, left his chair and turned his back to her. Then he began to undress. He was hard, and getting harder. Even while not looking her, all he could see and think about was Margaery Tyrell. He finally managed to end naked him too. With hesitation, he turned around and walked to join her. She had undone her headdress, so her hair was all falling on her shoulder and her back as she laid on her stomach, waiting for him. Her head was at one border of the bed. She looked at him with a smile. She was good at faking. He arrived before her. Because of his small size, his head and hers were about the same level.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m not a pretty sight,” he told her, ashamed. She was a real beauty, and he was an ugly dwarf. Only, she kept smiling at him, not looking repulsed in any way. She even seemed to have pity. She kissed him again, but their kiss was faltered by her words.

“I know very handsome men. In Highgarden, many girls are dreaming about them. But most are idiots. Or they would deceive me, once in bed. Not you. Won’t you?”

No, he wouldn’t. If they were to share the same bed, then they would enjoy it, both of them. Tyrion climbed into the bed, still kissing his wife, and proceeded to consummate the marriage. He made sure she liked it. For the first time in three months, he spent a night with a woman, and he loved it.

Chapter End Notes

For those who expected a lemon here, sorry but you won't find any in this fic if that's what you're looking for.

The next chapters will be mostly the life of Margaery and Tyrion in the next two years, before the beginning of Season 1 and the death of Jon Arryn. We will see their relationship and their marriage progress through these chapters, and the effects this will have on the political balance of Westeros, so expect almost only chapters from Tyrion's or Margaery's perspectives for some time.

Tyrion is capable of seeing through some of Margaery's game, but he has conflicted and
mixed feelings about her all the same. Margaery's behaviour is quite unsettling for him. Tyrion is someone who wants to be loved, and he wants Margaery to love him. However, he feels guilty for Alla, and his wedding brings back old memories of his previous marriage. He has a lot going on through his head, and it's not easy for him to deal with all of it. Hence the various feelings and states he goes through all over the chapter.

The songs in this chapter, in order of appearance:
- False Love by Karliene Reynolds (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZvRpMDGUyE)
- Nord Mead by Miracle of Sound (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCHq0m67jq8) (I changed a word or two from the original song)
- Never-Ending Road by Loreena McKennitt (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgcY-nSeGUo)

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Margaery V

Chapter Notes

89 subscriptions, 138 kudos, 23 bookmarks, more than 4000 hits and more than 50 comments. Thank you everyone who read this story despite my irregular updates. Thank you very much.

I'm sorry, everyone, for taking so much time to update, but studies in Economics are demanding. This chapter is short, but the next ones will be longer. Mostly, this chapter is there to see the thoughts of Margaery after her wedding night. I'm eager to publish the next chapters. We will see more in details the marriage of Margaery and Tyrion, their dynamic, how their relationship evolves, and the consequences it will have on the politics of the Seven Kingdoms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY V

Margaery took the stalk of the flower and brought it to her nose. It was a white rose she knew to have a sweet smell like honey. She was rewarded when her nostrils caught the beautiful scent. She smiled. It wasn't at all the same, but it made her think about the scent of her husband’s hair when she had buried her head in it during the night. Her body shivered at the thought of last night and she sighed as she revived a part of what had happened. Margaery had the impression to be walking into a dream ever since she left the Golden Tower like they called it.

That wasn’t as if it was the first time. She was no shy maid, far from it, even though she was still a maid. Well, she was a maid according to the definition. No man had ever penetrated her, and her maidenhead had never been taken. However, there were ways to lie with other people and to have sexual experiences without going that far. Margaery had experienced some of these at home. She knew how her body reacted. She knew what it was. At least, she thought she knew what it was until last night.

Her husband had been good to her. Very good, truth be told. The tales were true about his experience. He was good at kissing, and with his fingers and his tongue too. Margaery saw again in her head a few of the things they made that night. She hadn’t expected this. He had made love to her, passionately, but also gently. They had made it twice during the night, and a third time in the morning. If she had known that her wedding night would be like this, she would have begged her parents to organize the wedding as quickly as possible. When she thought that right now she could be betrothed or married to Renly Baratheon if they hadn’t ignored the king’s offer… They did the right thing to ignore it.

Tyrion had made some of the things Margaery had experienced in Highgarden, but he had done it even better. And of course, they had become one. It hadn’t been painful. It was uncomfortable in some small way, but only the first time. Her husband had made his best to make it enjoyable for her. When Margaery thought about it, she hadn’t even bled. The night had been perfect. Tyrion had managed to make her scream in pleasure. If their nights and their mornings were to be like that, Margaery was eager for the day to end. She smiled wickedly towards the rose as she thought about
the things her husband might try the next time.

Margaery looked at the position of the sun. They were already about midday, and she just left their chamber. She and Tyrion had spent some time in bed together after they had awoken, and Margaery wouldn’t have minded if they had remained longer in it, even for the whole day. However, she had things to do. She had to speak to Loras, to her grandmother, to her parents, and to all her family. They had to know she was alright. If she didn’t see them, Loras might believe she was chained somewhere at best, and that she was dead in the worst case.

Margaery walked along one of the many trails of the wide garden that led to the place where her family would take the meal of midday. Many people crossed her path on her way. They all bowed or curtsied before her, and she talked with a few of them. Many of them were lords or ladies of the Westerlands or the Reach. Casterly Rock had become the greatest gathering of powerful lords since Robert Baratheon’s wedding. Almost all the nobility of the west was here. As she approached the central place where her family was supposed to be, she met her cousin Elinor. She almost jumped on Margaery as soon as she saw her. Soon, Alla and Megga joined her. The three were very happy to see her, and looked quite relieved as well. Margaery knew that her cousins were very uncertain about her husband. She would tell them later about her wedding night. Instead, she listened to her cousin’s stories about the events that followed at the feast after she left.

She arrived at the square where her family was waiting for her. Garlan hugged her warmly, welcoming their *married* Margaery, like he said it. Willas apologized for not standing up because his leg was too painful today. She kissed him on the cheek and hugged him all the same. As for her father, his smile was wide like the entire Reach when he welcomed her.

“So, here you are, my dear daughter. The Lady of Casterly Rock.” He was proud like he rarely was, and that said a lot.

“How are you, my dear,” asked her mother, pushing her father aside and taking hold of her arms. “Are you alright?” She was distressed, and Margaery knew why. She put an appeasing hand on Lady Alerie’s left arm.

“I’m alright, Mother. In fact, I’m very well.”

Relief and confusion were fighting for the place on Lady Alerie’s face. Margaery’s grandmother intervened at this moment. “Leave her alone, Alerie. She’s alive. If you managed to survive your wedding night with Mace, then I don’t understand why you believed Margaery couldn’t survive her own with the Imp.”

Garlan, Willas, Elinor, Megga and Alla could barely hold their laughs, and Margaery couldn’t hold it at all. Loras had remained behind, so Margaery went to him and hugged him as well. He didn’t seem to have recovered entirely from his drunkenness of the last night. He only murmured he was glad to see her. They sat and began to eat. Mostly, Lady Olenna and Margaery’s cousins were the ones to give life to the discussion, her mother and Loras remaining silent for most of the time. People were talking about yesterday’s festivities, and Margaery took part to the conversation with pleasure, though she was eager to talk about her wedding night with her grandmother, Elinor, Megga and Alla. But she wouldn’t talk about it with all the others who were present.

“How is your leg painful today?” Margaery asked. “Did you make a wrong move this morning?”

Sometimes, if he put too much weight on his bad leg, Willas could go as far as to stay in bed for an entire day. Most of the people at the table laughed behind their hand or their handkerchief. Willas flushed and stuttered when he answered. “I… I did make a bad move. I tried to dance.”
“What? You tried to dance!?”

“I did. After you left the feast with Lord Tyrion.” He sighed. “And of course it didn’t end well. I fell on the floor and became the laughingstock of the whole ceremony.”

“No one talked about anything else after that,” added Lady Olenna. “You did well, Willas. Thanks to you, no one thought anymore about the bedding. I never thought that a wedding where the Imp was the groom would end without bedding ceremony.”

“Don’t worry, Grandmother. We didn’t need the bedding ceremony to perform the actual bedding,” said Margaery.

“I shall hope so. Or else my great-grandchildren will never be lords of Casterly Rock.”

“Mother!” shouted Margaery’s own mother.

“Don’t call me that, Alerie, I didn’t give birth to you. And don’t shout like this. We all know this is Margaery’s duty, and in our interest, for her to have children as quickly as possible. A marriage makes an alliance stronger, but once there are children from this marriage it is unbreakable. And anyway, don’t you want grandchildren?”

“Of course, I want grandchildren, but…”

“Then the matter is settled. There’s no reason to talk about it any further.”

“Yes, there is.” Loras almost spoke for the first time since they started to eat. “Lord Tyrion is a dwarf. Do we want Margaery to have children like him?”

A heavy silence followed that declaration. Willas stepped in. “Well, in this case Loras, I suppose you don’t want a cripple as your cousin.”

“That’s entirely different.”

“That’s not entirely different,” stated Willas. “I may not have short legs like him, but I have one that will remain useless for the rest of my life. Lord Tyrion can walk without the help of a stick at least. And anyway, Loras, the fact that Tyrion Lannister is a dwarf is no indication about how Margaery’s children will be. There are many cases of dwarves who had very normal children, as much as there are many cases of two normal people having dwarves. There are even cases of two dwarves having children of normal height and size.”

“How do you know that?”

“Contrarily to you, Loras, I do not only look at the pictures in the books. I read what’s written under the pictures as well. Maybe that sounds boring, but it’s also very useful.”

“Who did you dance with?” Margaery asked to Willas, trying to turn the conversation into another direction before it became too serious. Loras wasn’t drunk like yesterday, but he wasn’t in a good mood either and it may not be a good idea to provoke him.

Willas smiled shyly. “Lady Mira. I was the one to ask her. That wasn’t her idea. I’m the only one to blame for my humiliation.”

They both laughed, joined by many other people, and Loras didn’t seem to wish to continue their previous discussion. The ambiance was good for the rest of the meal. Even Margaery’s mother seemed to recover some spirit and talked. However, at the end, when they all left the table, Margaery
took her brother apart. They needed a few words together.

“Loras, I know what you did at the feast. What was your idea to threaten Lord Tyrion?”

“I was only trying to protect you,” he answered.

“Protect me! By telling him that you would slice him in two?”

“What did you want me to do? To tell him that I would shout at him if he touched you?”

“We are married now, Lord Tyrion and I. I am his wife. Do you think it will be possible for us to have children without touching me?”

“Do you hear what you’re saying, Margaery? You really want to have children with the Imp?”

“My children will rule the Westerlands one day. My son will be Lord of Casterly Rock. Sons learn from their mothers. I plan to teach mine a great deal. And to have sons, I must share my bed with the Imp.”

Loras was angry. “I won’t…”

“It’s too late, Loras. It’s over. We consummated our marriage last night. There is no way to break it now. Even the king can do nothing. So don’t think about writing to Renly to intercede in your favor.” Loras was agape. Margaery and her grandmother weren’t sure, but they thought the king’s proposal could find its origins with Loras. It seemed they were right. Loras had almost ruined the best marriage Margaery could hope for. “I know you didn’t want me to marry Lord Tyrion, but now it’s done, and there’s nothing you can do about it. Learn to live with it, Loras. I don’t want you to cause any trouble. If you ever try something again, I’ll have no choice but to have you confined until you leave for Highgarden.”

Loras’s eyes widened in shock, and he didn’t seem able to speak for a moment. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would,” replied Margaery, determined. “My marriage allowed our family to become allies with the Lannisters. I will never harm you, little brother, but I won’t let you sabotage our new alliance. Whether you stay quiet voluntarily and have freedom to go wherever you want, or I force you to stay quiet in the rooms you were given when you arrived. You will be provided with everything you need, but you won’t be allowed to walk freely while you stay here if you want to cause problems. Do you understand?”

“I can’t believe you take the defense of this man.” Loras was incredulous.

“This man is your brother-in-law. Maybe not the one you wanted, but it’s not because you don’t want him in your bed that you can kill him.”

Loras seemed furious. He walked away. Her brother was acting like a child right now. Their family would gain much more with Margaery’s actual marriage than with the one he planned. She saw Garlan follow her brother. It would be better if her brother was watched by someone. Margaery led all the Tyrell women to another part of the garden where they could discuss in private. There, she gave to Elinor, Megga and Alla all the details about her wedding night. Her grandmother listened with great interest, but Margaery’s mother looked about to throw herself from the top of the Hightower. After they were done with the little talk and that she tried to reassure her mother after everything she heard, Margaery found herself walking alone with her grandmother.

“Your wedding night was much more interesting than my own. Especially for the bride,” the Queen
of Thorns declared. Margaery thought she perceived some envy in her voice.

“Let’s hope Mother will recover,” Margaery replied playfully.

“Just give her some time. She’ll get used to it. But tell me, Margaery, was your wedding night really so perfect?”

“After we took off our clothes, yes,” answered Margaery with a mischievous smile.

“I was a little worried after he refused the bedding ceremony, and what he said concerning Loras. We’ll have to keep an eye on your brother.”

“I agree. I already talked to him, but we need someone to watch him all the time while he’s here. Lord Tyrion told me Loras threatened to cut him in half. We are lucky Loras was drunk when he told him so.”

“Of course. We cannot threaten a lord under his roof. It would be in his rights to arrest Loras, even execute him.”

“He won’t,” Margaery denied without hesitation.

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am. He will not execute Loras. He knows that killing Loras would break our alliance. Anyway, I will make sure he doesn’t. But we must make sure Loras causes no more trouble.”

Olenna Tyrell nodded. “So, you are capable of influencing him?”

“I think I am, though… That will be difficult. Much more difficult than I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“He knows that I’m pulling an act very often. He could see through it. He talked to me about this before we went to bed last night. He said he wanted us to be honest with each other.”

“Were you?” Her grandmother looked concerned.

“I was. I told him things that were true, but not the entire truth.”

“You did well.” Lady Olenna seemed relieved.

“I’m not entirely sure, Grandmother. I mean… I think he wants me to love him, but I cannot feign that. When I told him I didn’t love him, he looked deceived, very sad. I cannot act on things like this, or else he would realize it, and that wouldn’t help us.”

“No, indeed.” Her grandmother sat on a bench and Margaery imitated her. “If he can see through your act, you must be very careful. Handle him cautiously. You must get him to trust you, to make him lower his guard. It will be long work, but that’s the only way.”

“Well, we are married now. I suppose I will have a lot of time for this.”

“Of course, but don’t start late. This business at the wedding will not go unnoticed. All our bannermen were present, and you know how difficult they can be. The Lannisters ensured their bannermen’s loyalty when Tywin Lannister dealt with the Reynes and the Tarbecks. I asked around and no lord in the Westerlands is thinking about rebellion right now. The memory of Tywin Lannister is still too fresh in people’s mind. The Lannisters have a better hold on their bannermen
than we have on ours. We must make our minor lords see that we can count on the support of House Lannister if the Florents or anyone else tries to usurp our place. The events of yesterday will make them doubt about it.”

Margaery’s grandmother was right. There were still many houses in the Reach who saw the Tyrells as upjumped stewards that Aegon the Conqueror made Lords of Highgarden only because they didn’t fight against him. The Oakhearts, the Rowans, the Peakes, the Redwynes, even the Hightowers, and of course the Florents, were older houses and had closer blood ties with the Gardeners. Marriages (Lady Olenna was a Redwyne and Lady Alerie was a Hightower), wards, spy networks and their allegiance to the Targaryens had ensured the loyalty of their bannermen to the Tyrells. The wars against Dorne also allowed to divert their attention to another enemy, and many of these houses no longer seriously thought about taking the place of Margaery’s family. However, the Florents persisted in their ambitions. The wars with Dorne were over when it joined the Realm, so they had no common enemy to fight anymore, and the Targaryens were gone as well. The Battle of Ahsford hadn’t helped during the Rebellion. Everyone knew Randyll Tarly was the one who won the battle, despite her father’s boasting. The failure of their army to take Storm’s End had made it plain to everyone in the Reach and the Seven Kingdoms that the Tyrells had failed to achieve anything during the war, and in the end, they bent the knee to Robert Baratheon.

Their position wasn’t desperate at all, but they had to be careful. House Tyrell had lost their allies on the Iron Throne. They had been without help from the outside after King Robert seized the Throne and could only rely on themselves. Their alliances with the Redwynes and the Hightowers made their position very strong, but still, if the Florents ever rebelled because they felt a weakness, their position could be in grave danger. Margaery’s marriage was crucial to have the support of House Lannister, and they had to show the two families were like one, or else the Florents would immediately think about an uprising.

“I can get Lord Tyrion to trust me. I’m sure,” Margaery declared.

“I don’t doubt it,” her grandmother replied, taking her hand. “You are even better than me. This dwarf won’t stand a chance against you.”

They both chuckled. “There’s something else. He told me something last night. Did you know he was married before?”

Her grandmother looked more than taken aback by this. “Married? And I thought nothing could be more surprising than the cancelling of the bedding ceremony.”

“Yes, that’s what he said. He said it by accident. I don’t think he wanted me to know. Have you ever heard about something like this?”

“No. It’s quite strange. If Tywin Lannister’s son had been married, the news should have reached us. Did he tell you who he was married to?”

“No. Only that his wife died two weeks after their wedding. I didn’t ask him more about it. He didn’t seem eager to talk about it, and it was our wedding night too.”

“You did well. That wasn’t the time to press the matter.” It was true, but there was another reason why Margaery hadn’t wanted to talk about it furthermore. Her grandmother looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, if he was married only for a short span of time, it might explain why the marriage went unnoticed. Though the wedding had to be quite discreet and unannounced for no one to know about it. How strange. I’ll try to learn more about it. Did he tell you when it took place?”

“He said he was sixteen when it happened.”
“Hmm. I’ll dig into this. In the meantime, focus on gaining his trust. That’s what you’re best at.”

They resumed to walk, but Margaery left her grandmother after some time and went to sit on a bench under an apple tree. She thought again about her wedding night. It had been so beautiful. She knew her husband wanted her. It was quite obvious, but at the same time he had been hesitant to consummate their marriage. He had even suggested they could wait if she wanted to. That was so strange, and unusual. Why offer her to not consummate their marriage immediately when he obviously wanted to consummate it? His eagerness after they began to kiss in bed was proof enough of that.

*Maybe because he doesn’t want to marry an unwilling bride.* Words that Mira told her a long time ago came back to her mind. For now, it seemed Mira’s supposition could be right. However, this was only the first day of her marriage and Margaery couldn’t let her guard down. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to see Tyrion Lannister like the possible monster some people described. Not after the letter, the week she spent here and their wedding night. His behaviour on that night hadn’t been the one of a man who wanted to claim his wife. It was the one of a man who almost seemed like he didn’t dare to claim the woman he married as his.

Margaery remembered how he looked when he talked about his first wife. She had seen him before with a grim expression, but never like that. It seemed very painful for him to speak about her. Did he love her? That wouldn’t surprise her. Or did it have something to do with the way she died? Did Tyrion have something to do with it? Margaery didn’t really see how he could have. At her third day here, she had heard that her husband had forbidden every man in Casterly Rock to force a servant to lie with him. Soldiers had been whipped publicly for that repeatedly. There was also this young girl, Jeyne Westerling, who came to thank Tyrion yesterday. He seemed reluctant, even horrified, before the possibility of girls being mistreated. That wasn’t something Margaery hated. If you were to marry a powerful man, better to marry a kind one.

Margaery left her corner and went back to the Golden Tower. She had received a new gown this morning as a wedding present, and she wanted to wear it for tonight’s dinner. She would try it with her handmaidens’ help. As she walked, she thought again about the sadness on Tyrion’s face for the short time he had talked about his wife. Maybe she could help him. She felt she should help him. She was his wife after all. That was probably the least she could do for him. If she was to influence her husband, why not make him happier at the same time. And she wanted to help him. She really wanted to help him.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

New chapter! Sorry for making you wait. I hope you'll enjoy this chapter even more because of the waiting. It's also twice the length of the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION IV

Under the rule of Quellon Greyjoy, the Iron Islands prospered more than they ever did in the past. The revenues from the mining activities doubled, then tripled in the first five years of his reign. The wise administration of the islands’ resources allowed Lord Quellon to keep his people from starvation during the four winters of his reign. The population of the Iron Islands grew up again, fishing, trading and farming increasing. The coffers of House Greyjoy were filled during his reign and taxes on all economic activities were lowered to encourage production. However, the increase of population soon led the Iron Islands to depend on food importations more and more and left many people without employment. His son, Balon Greyjoy, would use it to bring the Ironmen to rebel against the Iron Throne, a decision that would lead to the invasion of the Iron Islands by Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark, and ravage the lands of these islands, making the economic situation of the Islands even worse than before the rebellion. Today, the Iron Islands face a scarcity of food again, scarcity that Balon Greyjoy was unable to solve, being uninterested by trade and farming and fishing, while his coffers had been emptied by his useless rebellion. It is to be expected that the Iron Islands will rebel again as soon the Lord of the Iron Islands believes he can claim a crown again, since it would be the only way to fill again his chests and to give an occupation to all his people without work. Balon Greyjoy will certainly rebel again, only to be defeated like every time the Iron Islands rebelled.

Tyrion was reading the Social and Economic History of the Seven Kingdoms. However, as much the work was interesting, his eyes always came up at the end of a chapter, a paragraph, or a sentence, to look at his wife. It was still night, and again Tyrion had difficulty to sleep and read to pass time. He only had a candle next to him on the table to see what he read. It never woke up Margaery up to now when he wouldn’t be able to sleep, and she never complained about it.

Tyrion set aside the book Willas gave him last month and contemplated his wife. She was lying on her chest, the sheets only covering her body under her waist. Her head was turned in the other way, so Tyrion couldn’t see her face, but even in the dim light of the candle, he could see the brown color of her long curling hair. He could also see her soft skin, shadows playing on it because of the candle. Tyrion thought about the times he caressed and massaged her back and her shoulders. She was soft and sweet in every sense, and he liked the sounds she made when they made love, like the ones she did last evening. For a moment, he thought about awakening her and doing it again, but he decided not to. He didn’t want to wear her out, or her to wear him out. The two scenarios were possible.

Doing their duty as husband and wife hadn’t been difficult for them. In fact, it was the part of their marriage where Tyrion couldn’t find anything wrong. In bed, they were only two people giving pleasure to each other, and nothing else. Tyrion knew that Margaery loved her time with him, and he
certainly loved it more than her. Their wedding night had been sweet and passionate, and some nights that followed had been even better, Tyrion knowing more and more what she liked the most. Furthermore, she wasn’t a shy maid. Margaery knew some things about lovemaking. Many things, truth be told. Tyrion had suspected she wasn’t a virgin on their wedding night, seeing she hadn’t bled. He hadn’t really cared about it, truth be told, but he had been curious, and two weeks after their wedding he had asked his wife if she had been with a man before. According to her, she had never made one with a man, but she had done other things. Her explanation was possible. Some women among the noble ladies lost their maidenhead to a horse if they rode a lot, and Margaery actually did a lot of riding with her cousins and friends. Tyrion didn’t think she lied on this, and for now he didn’t really care if she lied about it.

He kept looking at the beautiful young woman he was married to. After a month of marriage, Tyrion already felt he couldn’t live easily without her. She was everything he needed, or could dream of. Not only was she beautiful and made his nights wonderful, but he was amazed by her talents as a lady. She was here for barely a month, and already the people and most of his bannermen loved her. She disarmed people with her smiles, her sweetness and her kindness. No one could reproach her anything or find her any flaw.

Tyrion had seen quite quickly that Margaery Tyrell wasn’t an innocent rose. The rose had thorns. He could see some similarities with her grandmother. She was cunning, and knew how to use her charms for her own interests. She was capable of making everyone love her. She had even succeeded with him. Tyrion couldn’t help but love her. She was so perfect. He may not have loved her if she had been only cunning and beautiful, and using her beauty to gain power and influence. Margaery was another sort of cunning woman. Tyrion’s sister was only manipulative and using her beauty to have services from other men. She used her body to get power like whores used them to have money. Margaery didn’t do that. She was using kindness to get people to love her, unlike Cersei who only used lust and desire. And she was really caring for them.

Tyrion had accompanied her to an orphanage one day. She had been the one to insist for him to come with her. He hadn’t been sure, but she had insisted so much that he gave in in the end. The children were afraid of him at the start, but Margaery managed to get them close to him and in the end he thought the children found the dwarf they had as a lord more funny than scary. However, what stroke Tyrion the most during this visit was the look on her face. She was looking at the children with the same fondness and pity Tyrion witnessed sometimes, when she looked at him and let her sweet smile down. You underestimate yourself, my lord. You are a much better man than you believe. It was the same face she had when she told him that. She really cared about these children. Tyrion knew she used her work with the poor to make herself popular. She made sure she was seen visiting the orphans, the beggars, the sick, the old and the dying, but she really cared for them. And sometimes, Tyrion felt she cared for him too.

The only thing that made Tyrion uncomfortable was her way to always smile sweetly at him, no matter what happened, as if she was always happy to see him. He knew she was acting very often. It was as if she had a mask she was wearing and only put out from time to time, like when Tyrion told her on their wedding night. It had happened again during the last month, but for every hour she put her mask aside, she spent an entire day with it. Tyrion cherished these few hours each week when he had the impression to see the true image of his wife. She told him she did it on habit, because women were expected to smile and to agree with everything their husband would say and think. Tyrion understood Margaery might have been forced by her circumstances of a woman to develop this behaviour, but he wished she hadn’t. He wanted to comfort her, to hear her laugh, to come to him willingly, to bring him her joys, her sorrows, her lust. But more than everything, he wanted her to do it because she wanted it, without any second thought. Because she loved him. Right now, even though he was almost certain Margaery didn’t hate him and even appreciated him, he wasn’t sure if she loved him. There were times, especially at night when they came together, that he thought she
loved him, but doubts returned as soon as he saw the same smiling face she always put on. Maybe she smiled sincerely sometimes, and she said she didn’t fake her laughs. Tyrion wanted to believe it, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was acting more than half of the time. He couldn’t be sure of what she felt. He wanted to be sure about her. He wanted her to love him.

Tyrion got up from his chair walked around their bed to look at her face. They were well advanced in the night, so the moon was at the other side of the Rock by now. Still, it let some light to see the outline of her face. Tyrion could distinguish her eyebrows and her closed eyes. He knew they were brown under her eyelids and Tyrion loved to see the lust in them at night, or the concern and care he loved to witness when she dropped her mask. He managed to see her pink thin lips he kissed every day. He thought she was smiling. It wasn’t the usual smile she made. It was a simple smile, one of contentment and peace, one of true happiness, not like the smile she always did as if she was excited. It was a natural smile, a reserved one. Tyrion stayed there in his dressing gown, looking at Margaery. He probably stayed still there for a long time since light shyly began to pour into their chamber, progressively illuminating her face. With the sun rising, she looked more beautiful, like a rose blooming. She wasn’t made for the night, but for the day. She was a rose, and she was his. Her beauty was growing with the light of the day, and again Tyrion could only marvel at her and be unsurprised by how quick he had fallen in love with her.

Tyrion climbed into the bed and got close to his wife. He stroked her cheek and pushed aside some of her thick brown hair. Then he wandered his hand along her shoulder, her arm, her back, bringing it back to her cheek to caress it again. After a few minutes of this exercise he would have liked to last longer, Margaery opened her eyes. Her sweet smile returned to her face again, and Tyrion tried to convince himself she was really happy to see him.

“Hi,” she simply said.

“Hi.” He kept caressing her until she turned on her back, looking at him straight in his eyes, giving him permission. But for the first time since they were married, Tyrion didn’t take it.

“You wanted to wake up early,” he reminded her.

Her face changed all of a sudden. She remembered something. It relieved Tyrion to see her react naturally, but her sweet smile, returned almost instantly. “You almost made me forget.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said as she sat into the bed.

“I know. Or else you wouldn’t have reminded me.” She kissed him, first almost lightly and timidly, but the kiss grew deep and even passionate. Their tongues met and Tyrion wanted to go forth, but she broke the kiss at the moment he was thinking about it. Their foreheads still connected, and Tyrion was breathing heavily. “We’ll do it later. I promise.”

She had a wicked smile as she stood up, all naked, and slowly walked to her dressing gown lying on the back of a chair. Then she slowly put it on.

“Do you want to take your bath with me? We would save time,” she suggested.

“unlikely. The last time we took a bath together, we remained in the tub for an hour.”

She laughed lightly. He loved her laugh. “You’re right. It wouldn’t be wise. Not now. We’ll take a bath together another time. It doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all. Your family is leaving very soon. Go to them. I’ll see you later when they’ll leave.”

“Thank you.”
This time, her smile was different and the usual one didn’t return as she walked away. Again, Tyrion wished this happened more often. He remained in the bedroom, waiting for Margaery to be done with the bath her handmaidens had prepared, though he would gladly go to her and fuck her like he did last night. With the way she behaved when she woke up, his wife had made sure he would only think about making love to her for the rest of the day. She was mostly good at making people love her, but she could also make them desire her, and she always succeeded with him. For a moment, he wondered if Cersei did the same with Jaime, and the thought almost made him sick.

Tyrion went to take a bath when Margaery was done, then broke his fast on the food Ty had brought him. Then he went to the library. He thought he would find someone there, and he wasn’t deceived. Even only two hours before the Tyrells left, Willas Tyrell was still reading the many books in the main library of Casterly Rock.

“Too absorbed by the lecture?” commented Tyrion as he approached his cousin-in-law, who almost jumped. He had dark rings around his eyes and had obviously not slept. He probably spent the night reading.

“Tyrion. I’m glad to see you. Is the night already gone?” Willas Tyrell asked. You couldn’t tell if it was day or night in this part of the library. There were no windows.

“It is, I’m afraid,” confirmed Tyrion.

“Damn it. I won’t have time to read everything I want.”

“You can still bring this book with you, if you wish, and send it back once you’re done with it.”

“No, I already took too much, and our party cannot bring all the books of this library with them anyway.”

He looked exhausted. Tyrion supposed the Tyrell wasn’t used to reading all night like him. “What were you reading?” the Lord of Casterly Rock asked. Willas Tyrell looked at the first page of the book.

“The Hobbit by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. There’s a dragon in the story, but he doesn’t look much like those we had two hundred years ago.”

“No, indeed. Smaug is much different from Balerion the Dread or Vhagar. First, he can speak, and dragons could never speak, though some maesters say that dragons are more intelligent than men, but we don’t see it since they are intelligent in a different way than us. Still, I like the stories of this man. The smaller men are the heroes in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, and it doesn’t happen often. Hence, The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth are less interesting for a dwarf like me.”

Willas Tyrell smiled. “I suppose so.” He looked around. “I’ll miss this place.”

“Aren’t you eager to see your home back?”

“Of course, I am. But still, I like Casterly Rock, and you have a larger library than we have in Highgarden. And I’ll have to leave Margaery behind.”

Tyrion felt a pang of guilt for the cripple. He had grown quite fond of Willas Tyrell during the last month. They both loved books and the man was very civil with Tyrion. The only other member of Margaery’s family that Tyrion really liked besides Margaery herself and Willas was Ser Garlan. The knight strangely seemed to have a great respect for him. Tyrion knew the two brothers were very close to Margaery. “I’m sorry to take her away from you.”
“Don’t be. Margaery will be happy here, I’m sure. I’ll probably come back to visit her, or you could come to Highgarden one day.”

“I will,” assured Tyrion. “I don’t want to keep my wife away from her family forever. But that won’t be before a few years. I haven’t been Lord of the Rock for long, and the lords of the Westerlands have to get used to your cousin. But I think that in two or three years I might be able to bring her back to her home.”

“I look forward for it. In the meantime, take care of Margaery.”

“I will,” promised Tyrion.

“Friends?” The young man handed his hand for Tyrion to shake it, and Tyrion accepted the invitation.

“Friends. I wish your other cousin was like you.”

Willas Tyrell chuckled again. “Don’t be too rude with Loras. He’ll come to heel in time.”

“Before his father passes out and that he becomes Lord of Highgarden, I hope.”

“If this happens, then Margaery, Garlan and I will have him under our thumbs, believe me. Loras may be good when it comes to win a tourney or to fight in battle, but when it comes to politics, he needs help.”

“He’s much like his father, then.”

“My grandmother wouldn’t disagree.”

They both laughed. At this moment, someone came out from the shelves. Tyrion recognized the book she held to be an exemplary of Septon Barth’s *Unnatural History*.

“Lord Tyrion,” she said, curtsying even with the book in her hands.

“Lady Mira. I thought you would be attending my wife,” Tyrion said.

“Lady Margaery told me to help Lord Willas to prepare for departure.”

“She did well,” commented Willas. “With my leg, I would never be able to gather all these tomes. I’ll miss you, Lady Mira.”

“We’ll see each other again soon. I’m sure of that.”

Willas Tyrell smiled fondly at the young handmaiden as she laid the book she was holding on one of the many piles. Willas Tyrell wouldn’t lack lecture in Highgarden with everything he borrowed from the libraries of Casterly Rock. In the meantime, however, his eyes didn’t give any attention to the books and more to the girl arranging them. Tyrion felt a little out of place and excused himself.

Tyrion had noticed the large amount of time his wife’s cousin was spending with her handmaiden. The girl was far from ugly, though she couldn’t compete with Margaery in Tyrion’s eyes. She was also very kind, and to the opposite of the other handmaiden of his wife, she didn’t seem afraid of him. It was obvious the cripple young man was fond of the northern girl, though Tyrion never noticed any sign that she reciprocated the interest. That was probably one of the reasons why he said he would regret Casterly Rock. Tyrion’s wife was keeping her handmaidens with her, along with a few of her female cousins from minor branches of House Tyrell, and a hundred knights and guards
sworn to her family as a household. Tyrion didn’t expect something less. His marriage was a political alliance and the Tyrells wouldn’t leave their Rose here without symbols of their power… and means to protect her. At least, his brother-in-law wouldn’t be among the household.

Tyrion went to his solar in order to verify a few things before the Tyrells left. He verified the accounts of the taxes paid by his bannermen to Casterly Rock over the last few years. He was considering a curious drop in the taxes paid by Clegane Keep when Ty came in to announce that Lady Tyrell wanted to see him. Tyrion didn’t know if he would rather face the mother-in-law who hated him or the father-in-law who was more stupid than he was fat.

Lady Alerie Tyrell was a tall woman with the same brown eyes than her daughter. She was handsome, but not beautiful and gorgeous like her daughter. She stood with all the dignity a great lady could have. She had been very cold towards Tyrion ever since she arrived, though her behaviour may have been a little more civil recently. Maybe she realized her daughter hadn’t married someone who would eat her.

“Lord Tyrion,” she greeted him.

“Lady Alerie. I thought you would like to spend the last hours here with your daughter.”

“I have come to present you my apologies, Lord Tyrion.” Tyrion was surprised by this. “I know I have been rather rude with you ever since I arrived, but you seem to treat my Margaery very well, and she never stops to tell me you are very good to her. So I want to present you my deepest excuses for my behavior towards you these last weeks, and for the inappropriate behavior of my son as well. I have been unfair to you.”

“That’s alright, my lady. No sane mother would happily give her daughter in marriage to the Imp,” Tyrion joked bitterly. Lady Alerie’s face remained impassive. She may be making apologies, but she wasn’t about to hug Tyrion either.

“I just want to ask something to you. Something as a mother. Take care of Margaery. I don’t want her to be sad while she’s here.”

“Don’t worry. I will never harm your daughter, nor let anyone harm her. You have my word.”

“Thank you. Now if you will excuse me, I must prepare to leave, my lord.”

She left. With some hope, she didn’t want Tyrion dead anymore. Two hours later, the Tyrells left. Margaery hugged and kissed on the cheeks all the members of her family who were leaving. Lady Alerie gave Tyrion an almost imperceptible smile before they left, but Ser Loras only shot him angry glares like always. Tyrion hoped Mace Tyrell would live long. The Lord of Highgarden and Willas were very warm in their farewells, and Garlan Tyrell and his wife were very civil, but in the end they all left, even though Margaery tried to make the goodbyes last as long as it was possible.

She climbed to a tower to look at her family leaving and watched their convoy as they disappear on the horizon. Tyrion was with her and he could see his wife was sad. Her eyes never left the convoy as it rode farther and farther from Casterly Rock. She loved her family. Tyrion remembered how he felt when Jaime had left their home for Harrenhal, knowing he was to become a member of the Kingsguard. He had been a little boy but still, his big brother had ben gone. A few months later, his father, furious about the decision of the Mad King to make his heir a kingsguard, had come back to Casterly Rock with Cersei. Far away from his brother and close to his sister and his father. Nothing could have been worse for Tyrion.

“You already miss them?” he asked to his wife.
“Yes.” She didn’t turn her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. It had to happen one day.”

“We’ll visit Highgarden. I promise.”

“Thank you.” She turned. She had a sad smile this time, and it wasn’t fake. Tyrion noticed the Tyrell retinue had disappeared at the horizon. They were far away. His wife was separated from the rest of her family. “How did you feel when your brother and your sister left?”

Tyrion was startled by the question. He wasn’t expecting it. “Well, I was only six when Jaime was named in the kingsguard. I almost didn’t understand why he had to leave. I cried for days.”

They exchanged a little smile. He preferred not to speak about the time when Cersei left, but his wife didn’t leave him be. “And your sister? How did you feel when she left to be queen?”

“Relieved for myself, terrible for the Realm.” She looked quite surprised. “We don’t get along very well Cersei and I,” he explained. He hadn’t told Margaery about the attempt of murder, and he didn’t think it would be a good idea. Anyway, now wasn’t the time.

She recovered from her shock and sighed. “Well, let’s take a day off. I don’t really feel like working today.”

“Of course, I understand.” He couldn’t blame her. The last month had been very tiring for everyone at the Rock between the festivities for the wedding, and Margaery had to be introduced to her duties as Lady of Casterly Rock as well. That and she was the center of all the attention of the hundreds of lords and ladies from the Reach and the Westerlands who had come to assist the wedding. She barely had time for herself. Tyrion wasn’t the one who would pressure her to work on the day her family left.

“Anyway, I think I promised you something this morning, and I heard that since I’m a Lannister, I must always pay my debts,” she said with a wicked smile.

Tyrion chuckled. “I won’t argue with you about it.” They walked away, both grinning.

Some time later, Tyrion didn’t know, they were lying in their bed. His wife was breathing heavily by his side. Tyrion was too, but he thought he did it less than her. It was almost a competition when they were lying together to wear her out more than she wore him out. He looked at her, still recovering, and could only note once more how beautiful she was. He allowed her some more time, then closed the distance between them and kissed her on the lips. She giggled as he caressed her throat with his lips.

“Are you going to do this all day?” she asked between two giggles.

“Should I remind you’re the one who started it?” He unburied his face from the curve of her neck all the same and looked at her. “But if you want me to stop, I will.”

She caressed his cheek with the back of her hand. “Just give me some time, or else I won’t be able to come out of bed tomorrow.”

They both laughed lightly and Tyrion laid back. After some time, Margaery rose and put on a golden dressing gown. Tyrion already thought about the best way to remove it. She went to the small table
in the corner and poured two cups of wine.

“I suppose I should thank the girls you visited before we were married,” she said as she filled the cups.

“One good thing that came out from my whoring,” said Tyrion, bitter.

He wasn’t very proud of it anymore. He had visited brothels assuming he would never marry, that no woman would ever want of him. But now he had Margaery, and he wouldn’t break his vows.

“I should thank the Mad King as well, for naming your brother in the Kingsguard,” she resumed. “My father wouldn’t have agreed to our marriage if he hadn’t done it.”

“No. If Jaime hadn’t been a kingsguard, he would be the one with you actually.” Or he would be with our beloved sister in another room while you would be alone in here.

She came back with the two cups filled. “I never met him. How does he look like?” she asked while she handed him one of the cups. Tyrion took it.

“Tall, handsome, with blond shining hair. The greatest swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms. Everything that I’m not. Tywin Lannister had two sons. There’s the pretty one, and there’s the clever one.”

“Which one are you?” They both laughed. “Is he good in the bed?” she asked, a malicious smile, but the short laugh escaping from her throat betrayed that she was probably only teasing him.

“He is a kingsguard. Kingsguards are forbidden to marry and to have children.” Though Jaime hadn’t fulfilled the latter. As for the former, he had taken no wife before the altar, but he had taken their sister to bed, and very often.

She seemed to think for a moment, her eyes looking at the ceiling with a faked concentration. “Then I’m glad I married the Imp instead of the Kingslayer.”

They both laughed, but Tyrion went half back to seriousness very quickly. “Never call him this way before him.”

“Promise. I won’t.” She took a sip of wine. “It’s strange when we think about it. If Willas was my brother, he would be heir to Highgarden and he would have no trouble to marry. But since he’s not, no girl is interested in him. All that just because he walks with a stick.”

She looked exasperated and angry as she said the last words. Tyrion had the same resentment for being left aside all his life just because he was a dwarf. His only crime was to be a dwarf, and Willas Tyrell’s only crime was to be a cripple. “I know. It’s unfair. Truth be told, with all the respect I owe to your brother, I think your cousin would make a much better Lord of Highgarden.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. You’re not the only one to think the same.”

“I suppose Willas Tyrell, future steward of Highgarden, will rule the Reach for your brother just like the Queen of Thorns rules the Reach for your father.”

She scoffed. “It’s not so bad as that. Yes, my grandmother is a great advisor of my father, but he does a lot of ruling actually.” With a lot of advisors to tell him what to do, certainly. Advisors who make the Reach prosperous and bountiful, and of course history will forget about them and only remember the Fat Flower. “I would like to help Willas. He should be married. He deserves it.”
“I agree.” Tyrion did. He thought about the way Willas Tyrell looked at his wife’s handmaiden this morning.

“Don’t you think there is something we could do? Surely there must some lord in the Westerlands who would be ready to marry his daughter to Willas if you suggested it?”

Tyrion thought about it for a moment. “Well, maybe. In fact, your father asked me the other day to intercede with Lord Leo Lefford. He wanted to propose your brother Loras in marriage to Lady Alysanne,” he revealed all of a sudden.

Margaery showed surprise, but Tyrion couldn’t decide if it was real surprise, or if she faked it. She had hesitated before she reacted. Did she begin to talk about the matter of her cousin to bring up the matter of her brother? Tyrion couldn’t know. She was very good at acting, it was obvious. “Really?” she finally said. He still wasn’t sure, but he thought she wasn’t completely honest in her reaction.

“Yes, he did. But I’m afraid I won’t be able to help him in this matter. And if he ever hopes for the heir of the Golden Tooth to marry his son, then he’s fantasizing.”

Margaery was frowning now. “What do you mean? My brother is the future Lord of Highgarden. Why would Lord Lefford refuse without hesitation his daughter to marry Loras?”

She was interested in what he said, but he couldn’t get anything more from her expression. “When I became Lord of Casterly Rock, I wasn’t married like you know. Kevan started to look immediately for someone I could marry, and like you probably know he wrote to your father.”

“Not something I will complain about,” she said with a smile. The same smile like always.

“Well, you see. you weren’t the only match that was considered for me,” Tyrion explained. “My uncle was planning to ask Lord Lefford to marry his daughter to me if your father was to refuse.”

“Oh. I see. But you didn’t ask for Lady Alysanne’s hand?”

“No, of course. But still, around the time your father finally gave us an answer, the word had somewhat spread that my family was actually thinking about marrying me and Lady Alysanne. Lord Lefford started to send ravens, inviting me to spend some time at the Golden Tooth, suggesting that his daughter would like to see me again. I had met her a few years ago. Well, everything to say that he was expecting me to propose to marry his daughter. And then the news of our betrothal came.”

Margaery seemed to understand. “I suppose he wasn’t happy about it.”

“He wasn’t. He didn’t attend our wedding. He said he had health problems, but that’s not the real reason.”

“He was angry that you chose me over Lady Alysanne,” said Margaery. She was clever, Tyrion couldn’t deny it.

“Indeed. He will not want to hear anything about House Lannister or House Tyrell for a very long time. He was just despoiled of the hope to see his daughter Lady of the Westerlands. And by your family.”

“But… surely he could reconsider. After all, his daughter would be Lady of Highgarden and the Golden Tooth if she was to marry Loras.”

“No, he won’t. He will not consider any marriage with a Lannister or a Tyrell, not before a few years at least.”
“Are you so sure? It would be in his interest to marry Lady Alysanne to Loras. He would have many benefits from that.” She was arguing. If she didn’t know about her father’s request, she was fighting for it. Fighting for her family. Tyrion would do the same.

“I know that he will refuse to hear me, you, and any member of our families. I hold this information from someone very well placed.”

“Who?”

“Lady Alysanne Lefford.” This time she truly looked surprised. Tyrion supposed her previous surprised expression could have been faked. “She came to see me a few days before our wedding, and she explained everything to me. She didn’t want this to tarnish the relationships between House Lannister and House Lefford, so she told me everything.”

Hi wife needed some time to recover from her surprise. Finally, she sighed. “And I had been thinking for a moment while she was there that I could propose Willas to her.”

Tyrion wanted to laugh on this, but he refrained. “Lord Lefford would never accept, even without this business. His daughter is the heir to the Golden Tooth. He will marry her to someone who has something to bring him. I’m afraid Willas won’t find his wife at the Golden Tooth.”

Tyrion felt sorry for the man who had called him friend this morning. He would have made a good husband to Alysanne Lefford, he was sure of that, and she would have made a good wife for him too. And he would have the Golden Tooth.

“Anyway,” Tyrion resumed, “it’s probably for the better.”

“For the better?” Margaery asked.

“For your family, I mean. You are already married to me. If your brother, the heir to Highgarden, had married a lady of the Westerlands, all the children of Lord Mace Tyrell would have been married in western families. I suppose the Florents would have liked to use that against you, and to make the others believe your family was selling herself to the Westerlands. Your brother would probably be better to marry someone from the Reach.”

She was looking at him with a very strange look now, as if she didn’t know what to think of what he just said. She looked down at her cup, a pensive look. “You may be right,” she said in a low voice. Finally, she shook her head and emptied her cup. “I’m sorry my father bothered you with that. Really, I am.”

She seemed sorry by her expression. “No need to be sorry. No harm was done.”

He emptied his cup as well. Margaery took it and brought them back on the table. She sighed and turned back to him. “No more talk about politics. It’s supposed to be a day off.”

“I agree. No more politics.”

Tyrion preferred it when he didn’t talk about politics with his wife. He had seen quite quickly that she was trying to convince him to make things that would mostly benefit her house, sometimes to the detriment of Tyrion’s house. In some way, it was funny. It was some sort of game for Tyrion, to undo her attempts to make him do certain things he wouldn’t do in normal times, but at the same time, it unnerved him that his wife was trying not only to influence him, but also to manipulate him.

They exchanged smiles all the same. She climbed back into the bed and came over him to kiss him. She still had her dressing gown, but she started to slowly remove it as she kept kissing him.
“Though… if you put a… child… in me… I suppose… there is some… politics… in that.”

She was naked once more and they made love again. When they set aside politics, when they were simply talking, walking, enjoying their time together, or fucking like they did right now, Tyrion loved Margaery. She was beautiful of body and mind. When they were done, Tyrion wondered, like he did sometimes, if all this was only a dream. It seemed almost too beautiful to be real. He looked at his wife breathing heavily on his left, then looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He kept them closed for some time, then opened them again. He looked at his left, afraid that Margaery would be gone, but she was still there, her eyes closed, a peaceful smile on her lips. Tyrion went to her and kissed her. Their tongues played together. She was real. The woman he loved was real.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist to include Tolkien's books in the story. :)

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Margaery VI

Chapter Notes

Tyrion and Margaery are back. See how they fare as Lord and Lady of Casterly Rock together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY VI

The golden rose slowly took form. The thread was coming in and out of the linen, taking the shape of her family sigil. Margaery wasn’t the best at needlework, but she could do one without problem. All girls from noble families were trained to do so by their septas, and Margaery was no exception to the rule.

The rose was precise, distinct on the tissue like it was in Margaery’s heart. After two months married into House Lannister, she still felt every bit like a Tyrell. She was a Tyrell, and would always be a Tyrell. No matter who she was married with, where she lived or the name she bore, she had been born a Tyrell, and she would die a Tyrell. She kept her focus on the rose.

Her family had left last month, and Margaery missed them. She was relieved that the threat of Loras cutting Tyrion in half was removed, but she missed her brother all the same. She also missed Willas, Garlan, Mother, Father, her grandmother with her sharp comments and Leonette, Garlan’s wife. She still had her cousins Alla, Megga and Elinor, and her friends Mira and Sera with her, but they couldn’t entirely replace her family. Margaery hoped it wouldn’t be too long before they could go to Highgarden, even if she knew it wouldn’t be before a year if she was lucky enough.

She was well settled in her new place. She had quickly become friends with most of the ladies at Casterly Rock. There was only Genna Lannister she was still unsure of. Margaery had taken the habit to think about her as Genna Lannister instead of Genna Frey. Sera had made the mistake to call her Lady Frey one day, and her friend never received a colder look. Since then she received the same stare each time she was in presence of Lady Genna. Margaery limited the most she could the contacts between her aunt-in-law and Sera from this time on. She only brought Mira with her when she went to see Genna, and Mira was very careful to call her Lady Genna, without her family name.

Despite her coldness and her sharpness, Genna Lannister had been a great help for Margaery. She initiated her to her duties as Lady of Casterly Rock. Since Lord Tywin’s wife had died, she had been the one to act unofficially as lady of the castle, running Casterly Rock, managing its household, supervising the feasts, name days and other ceremonies, advising the other ladies of the family, receiving guests, overlooking the education of all the young Lannister girls. Now all these were Margaery’s duties, and Genna made sure the transition went well. She would always help Margaery when she asked for.

However, Margaery had to fulfill other duties as well, that were more in link with her new title of Lady of the Westerlands. She had to intercede for House Lannister with the ladies of the other houses, sat besides her husband when he held court and took decisions with him, and took part in the ruling of the Westerlands. Tyrion was a very active lord. He woke up early in the morning and
worked almost until dusk. He made sure the taxes were levied, that his bannermen paid their due, solved quarrels between the people on the lands of the Lannisters and between the minor lords in the whole Westerlands, gave justice, ensured that enough gold was dug from the mines in the depths of Casterly Rock, and much more. His days were quite filled. But he always had time for her. He never rebuked her when she had to speak with him, and always managed to dine with her in the evening. Most of the time, he broke his fast with her as well, unless he had very important matters to attend. And of course, he spent all his nights with her. There were also other times within the day they would spend time together. When they held court, when Tyrion made her visit the castle (even after two months here, Margaery hadn’t seen everything of Casterly Rock), or when they would simply decide to spend a morning, an afternoon or an evening together.

Margaery enjoyed the moments she spent with Tyrion. She spent time with her friends from Highgarden and the other girls from Casterly Rock and loved these moments, but she had to admit she had come to love those with Tyrion even more. He had a way to make everything funny and to make her laugh in all circumstances. Some of his jokes could be of doubtful taste for some people, but Margaery didn’t mind. They were part of her husband, and she liked this aspect of his personality. There was also the way Tyrion behaved with her, showing her respect and consideration in every circumstance. He asked for her advice on several matters, involving her in his duties of lord. He wasn’t waiting for all solutions to come from her, but he wanted to know her opinion and took it into consideration. He didn’t see her only like a jewel or an ornament to be shown to the Westerlands and to parade before the smallfolk. Or like a baby workshop to make him sons to be his heirs and daughters to marry to powerful lords. She was a person in his eyes, and showed her the same respect than to the other members of his family, if not more.

Tyrion’s behavior towards her was no different during the night. Margaery could see without difficulty that Tyrion wanted her. With the number of whores he visited before their marriage, she wasn’t surprised to have such an eager husband when it came to make children. However, he didn’t only take her. He made sure she enjoyed their time together at night. Margaery liked what he did to her, and she returned it to him in the same way... or in different ways, depending of the night. Margaery knew that he loved her, and it touched her. She had developed ways to verify if Tyrion spent time with any other woman since they were wed, and she had found out that he had been entirely faithful. Coming from a man who used to visit three brothels at night, she felt proud that she was capable of turning him away from whores, and she felt touched by the fidelity of her husband so far. Maybe it wouldn’t last, after all they had only been married for two months, but still she appreciated Tyrion’s effort, and she liked to think it wasn’t only temporary. Ever since I became Lord of Casterly Rock, I’ve done my best to relent my flaws. I also stopped to visit brothels. He had stopped before they were married, so he could be really serious about being faithful to her. The only thing that made her keep some doubts were some rumors about a scullion who would have been seen a few times entering and leaving Tyrion’s chambers in the night before she came here.

Tyrion was trying the best he could to make her happy, and Margaery didn’t complain about the intention. She could ask everything she wanted, and since House Lannister was the richest family in Westeros, there were almost no limits to what she could ask. Right now, she was making plans to have a maze, similar to the one in Highgarden, built on the northern hill of the Rock. Genna had been against it when she spoke about the idea, and Ser Kevan as well, but Tyrion had waved their objections and allowed her to go forward with it. He said he wouldn’t stop his wife from feeling at home here, and the maze would remember her of Highgarden. Margaery could only agree with him.

Still, there were certain things about her husband that made Margaery uncertain, even anxious from time to time. First, there was the matter of the wife he had before. Margaery had been unable to grab any information about it. Her grandmother hadn’t been able to find anything while she was here. Margaery hadn’t succeeded either in the month that followed her departure. She had even involved Mira, and her northern friend had failed to find anything consistent. One day, Margaery had directly
asked Genna about it.

“How do you know Tyrion was married? Did he tell you?” Genna had asked.

“Yes, on our wedding night,” Margaery had answered.

“What did he say?”

“Not much. That their marriage had only lasted a fortnight and that she died.”

Genna had nodded, looking thoughtful. “Well, there isn’t much more to know, or to say.” Her voice had let no place to discussion, but Margaery had tried to know more all the same.

“But what happened? How does it come she died only two weeks after their wedding?”

“It’s not to me to tell you about it, my dear. If Tyrion isn’t ready to tell you, then I can’t tell you neither. Only know this. Tyrion loved his wife, and not long after they were wed, something terrible happened to her. Tyrion had always been lonely and recluse because he was a dwarf. He spent his time with Creylen studying the history of the Seven Kingdoms, learning about religion, politics, geography, even medicine. He read while the other boys were sparring in the courtyard with the master-at-arms. He thought about becoming a maester or a septon, even Grand Maester or High Septon. He could have been. But one day he married, and he fell in love with his wife. When he lost her, he was destroyed. He began to drink and to visit brothels afterwards. I would suggest you to not bring up the topic again, especially not before him. Sometimes, it’s better to let things buried.”

This had only made Margaery more curious and afraid about it. What could have happened for no one wanted to talk about it? Something terrible, according to Genna, but what was that terrible thing? She had to find out what it was, but she doubted she would get any answer from Tyrion. She still remembered his expression when he had talked about his first wife on their wedding night. It would do no good to ask from him.

However, this matter wasn’t the only one that preoccupied Margaery, far from it. Two months after her marriage, she had to admit that she had failed to gain any significant influence on her husband. He was listening to her and involved her in the affairs of the Westerlands, but he didn’t let her guide him. Many times, when Margaery had tried to convince him to do something in her family’s interest, he had found a way to refuse. He never refused inconveniently. He always gave good reasons to not do something or another, but what bothered her the most was the way he looked at her in these moments. It was as if he could read her like he read books. He could sense she was trying to influence him. Not always, but most of the time he seemed to know what she was doing. No matter how she tried, he seemed capable of uncovering her.

Margaery had decided that it was time to change her strategy. Tyrion could see easily through her play, just like he told her on their wedding night. Her only option was to not act at all, or at least to put as few acting she could in her behaviour. She couldn’t use Tyrion the way she thought. She had to try another approach.

Margaery kept embroidering the golden flower, the shape getting more precise every minute. It was morning, and they weren’t far from midday. She and Tyrion would hold court this afternoon in the Great Hall. Margaery would have to change her clothes for it, but for the time being she wore a green dress with golden symbols of trees and leaves. It was one of the many dresses she brought with her from Highgarden.

Tyrion entered their apartments. The Lord of Casterly Rock was richly dressed like always, though more covered than his wife. He looked at her with a smile when he came in. Still after two months
together, she knew her husband was looking at the regions her clothes weren’t hiding.

“My lady,” he greeted her.

“My lord,” she replied.

“What are you doing?” She showed him her work. “Growing strong,” he said with a smile.

“Hear me roar,” replied Margaery, imitating the roaring of a lion at the same time.

They both laughed and Tyrion went to pour himself some wine like he did very often. “That sounds like some of the noises you made last night,” he quipped.

Margaery smiled at the memory, but she decided to go to serious matters. “Is there anything to expect from the court today?”

“Not much. Only Lord Westerling who’s present.”

“Lord Westerling? What is he doing here?”

“I suppose we’ll learn soon. He will present his request first. This is his right as one of our bannermen.”

Her husband took a long gulp of wine. Although Margaery was trying to temperate his drinking, he still drank a lot. Strangely, to the opposite of her father and her uncle Garth, wine didn’t seem to reduce Tyrion’s wits. Sometimes she even thought it had the opposite effect. She decided to try her new strategy now.

“Tyrion, I’ve been thinking about something you told me the other day.”

“What was it?” he asked.

“It was…” She didn’t have the time to answer. Mira and Sera had come inside with the food for midday.

“Ah. Lady Mira, Lady Sera. You’re welcome,” Tyrion said.

Margaery put aside her embroidery to join her husband at the table, but when they had laid the plates, she asked her friends to leave them alone.

“Well, your handmaidens are gone. So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?” her husband asked.

“You told me you wanted to increase trade between the Reach and the Westerlands some time ago,” she began.

“Yes, I did. I even tried to talk about it with your father before he left, but he didn’t seem very interested.”

“You said there would be a problem to convince the Hightowers and the Redwynes to get involved.”

“Yes, indeed. These two families get most of their revenues from taxes on goods that come into their harbors. They won’t accept to lower the duties they take on it easily. In the Westerlands, this is not very difficult. The main harbor is Lannisport, and the Lannisters of Lannisport are almost servants of Casterly Rock. I already discussed with Lord Reginald and he’s quite open to lowering the duties on imported goods, as long as I divert some of the ships that come into the Rock to the harbor of
Lannisport and lend him money to expand the docks in the city. But I’m afraid your father would find it more difficult.”

“What are you really thinking about, my lord? I would like to understand your intent.”

Tyrion started to explain. “When my father was Hand of the King, he managed to make the Seven Kingdoms prosper. He lowered the excise duties on traded goods all over the Realm and encouraged trade with the Free Cities and the Summer Islands. It worked out quite well, but for that he needed to lower these duties. I’m thinking about repeating the experiment, but this time with the Reach and the Westerlands only. Imported goods that travel by sea are taxed by the Crown, the paramount lord and the family ruling the harbor. We cannot force Robert and Jon Arryn to lower their own duties. Our king spends too much and he will never allow these taxes to decrease. We can lower and even abolish the duties collected by our two families very easily, if your father agrees, but to have a real impact we must convince the local lords to lower them as well. This means mostly the Lannisters of Lannisport and the Farmans of Fair Isle in the Westerlands, and the Hightowers of Oldtown and the Redwynes from the Arbor in the Reach.”

“Will the Farmans agree?”

“I don’t think they will oppose. I will probably send them a bard like my father did thirty years ago,” Tyrion said with a grin. “The problem would come mostly from Oldtown and the Arbor. It would be to ask them to renounce some of their main source of income.”

Margaery had her answer ready. “My mother is a Hightower, and my grandmother is a Redwyne. They can pull some strings in their families to make it work.”

Tyrion didn’t seem convinced. “The queen is my sister. It doesn’t mean Robert Baratheon listens to me when I make requests of this type. We’re not talking about a possible marriage with no obligation in the immediate time. We’re talking of persuading powerful families to renounce some of their wealth.”

“This is worth a try all the same,” Margaery argued.

Tyrion nodded. “Yes, it is. It would probably be for the best to begin small all the same. We could start by eliminating the duties our two families are collecting on the trade between the Reach and the Westerlands. If this proves to be a success, the Hightowers and the Redwynes will be more receptive to the idea. Your mother and your grandmother may start to talk about this with their families, but for now I would mostly need you to persuade your father.”

“That won’t be a problem. My father will listen to me,” she assured.

“Ask your grandmother too. We both know she is the real power in Highgarden.”

Margaery smiled. “You’re right.” He was. “I’ll write to them this evening.”

“Thank you.” He smiled at her. “What have you done of your morning?”

“I’ve been discussing with brothers to open soup kitchens in Lannisport. That’s horrible to see people begging in the streets for a few coins to eat.”

“It is,” Tyrion agreed. “but I don’t know if this will really help them.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, uncertain.

“Well, if you open such places, you can be sure people who don’t need free food will come. And
sometimes giving food to the poor only takes this food away from other people, or worse the poor ask for even more afterwards.”

“We cannot let them starve in the streets, Tyrion.”

“I know very well. All I mean is that it might not have the effect we want. Some people will start leaving the countryside for the food they are being given in the town. Less people will work on the lands, there will be less food produced, and in the end things might be even worse than before. We may only end up taking food that would have been bought and giving it freely. In this case, people won’t starve less.”

“We have a plentiful summer, Tyrion. I don’t think food supplies are a problem. Anyway, I can make more food come from the Reach if we lack some here in the Westerlands. We are married. My father is not going to abandon an ally.”

Tyrion seemed skeptical about what she just said, but he said nothing about it. He talked about something else. “We had a long summer, it’s true. And Creylen is telling it won’t end soon, but this means the next winter will probably be very long. We have to prepare for this eventuality. I’m already filling the larders of the Rock to have enough food when winter comes, and I’m encouraging the other lords to do the same. I don’t want the people to get a big belly now only for them to starve during winter.”

Margaery had some doubts. She had seen Tyrion acting very kindly towards orphans, cripples, blinds, beggars and even the servants here at the Rock. “Do you disagree with the work I do?” she asked.

Tyrion’s face showed stupor. Then he shook his head and smiled sadly. “No, not at all. Quite the opposite, I admire what you’re doing. I’m just asking you to be careful. We want the poor to be fed, not the ones who already eat to not pay for their food.”

Margaery was relieved. That was the Tyrion she knew. “I will need some money to build or repair buildings for this.”

Tyrion waved his hand in the air. “Take what you need. The vaults of Casterly Rock are full of gold thanks to my father. I think it’s time the people benefit from it.”

They spent the rest of the meal discussing about her charity works. Tyrion also told her about the discovery he made recently that the Leffords and their bannermen had been hiding some of their revenues, not paying their taxes to Casterly Rock. They would have to deal with Lord Lefford soon.

They ate honey cakes with strawberries on them and impregnated with wine of the Arbor for dessert. They came from the Reach. Margaery had discovered not long ago that her husband had given the order to have something from the Reach to eat every day. Something else to please her. After the meal was done, Margaery went to her dressing room where Mira and Sera prepared her for the court.

In normal circumstances, Margaery wore clothes from her home. Light clothes of bright colors, often displaying her shoulders, a part of her back or her hips, with flowers, branches, leaves or trees depicted on them. Casterly Rock had become a world where the style of the Reach coexisted with the style of the Westerlands. Cerenna and Myrielle Lannister were already asking for gowns like those Margaery wore, but their mother had forbidden it. Margaery wondered for how long Lady Myranda would hold against the complaints and demands of her daughters.

Margaery dressed like she did in Highgarden whenever she visited Lannisport and her works there. However, when it came to hold court and to receive bannermen of her husband’s family, she
changed into proper clothes for the Lady of the Westerlands. She had to show she was the Lady of Casterly Rock, and not a girl from the Reach who knew nothing of the lands she was supposed to rule. She showed the girl from the Reach to the smallfolk, but she showed the powerful Lady Lannister to the bannermen.

When her handmaidens were done with her, she wore a heavy red gown trimmed with gold and silver. She had five rings of gold, silver or diamond at each hand, and a costly gold hairnet with rubies. Around her neck was a beautiful flowered pendant with a sapphire in the middle, hanging from a silver chain. It had belonged to Tyrion’s mother, Lord Tywin’s late wife, Joanna Lannister. Tyrion never spoke about her when she thought of it, but she supposed there wasn’t much to tell about your mother when she died not long after you were born. He didn’t talk often about his father either.

Margaery left her room to join Tyrion. He wore a black and red doublet that made him look taller than usual. They walked together to the Great Hall, followed on their heels by Tyrion’s squire, Ty Frey, and by Margaery’s handmaidens. They also had guards with them. Half of them wore green armor, the other half red armor. They did some small talk on the way with their servants. Margaery noticed that in the dark tunnels of the castle, with the torches lit on the walls all over the corridors, her husband’s shadow grew very large.

They arrived to the Great Hall and entered through a door dissimulated behind a column in the back of the Hall. The petitioners would come in through the main doors. Ser Kevan, Ser Damion and Lady Genna were already there, sitting on the dais but on a lower level than the one where Margaery and Tyrion sat. Two thrones entirely made of gold were waiting for them and they took place, Tyrion to her right. Margaery remembered that the first time she sat down in this throne, when the people had come to address requests to her and her husband, she had felt like a queen. And when she looked at the way she was dressed, all covered in gold, jewels, silver and silk, she had to admit she looked every inch like a queen. She had the same feeling every time they held court. The people would only need to call her *Your Grace*, and she would be a queen. Better to be a queen if you couldn’t be the queen.

The doors of the Hall opened and people poured in, kept away from the dais by both Lannister and Tyrell guards. Margaery displayed her benevolent smile while keeping a dignified attitude, her chin high. As for Tyrion, he sat in a less appropriate position, leaning on his left side, his left arm resting on the throne’s golden arm, his fingers tapping on it. However, Margaery knew the people shouldn’t rely on appearances. Tyrion’s gaze was attentive to what was going on in the Great Hall, and nothing escaped his attention. He had a serious, even a threatening face right now. He was the Lord of Casterly Rock and the people who ignored he was the master here would learn it to their expense very soon.

The herald hit the floor with his golden stick. “You all stand before Tyrion of House Lannister, son of Tywin, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. And before Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands.”

In Highgarden, Margaery had thought it would be funny to hear it and that her name sounded good with *Lannister* after her first name, but she had to admit she was still unused to being called this way and that it felt strange to be called *Margaery Lannister*. But she showed nothing of this. Lord Gawen Westerling, Lord of the Crag, came forward to present his case.

“My lord, my lady, I come here to seek your help about a great injustice that has befallen to my house. Our lands have been seized by an unscrupulous merchant who claims we failed to pay a debt we owed him,” explained the Lord of the Crag.
“Your lands were seized,” said Tyrion, a skeptical look on his face, but a little exaggerated or so Margaery thought. “Who seized them? The merchant?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“How could a merchant seize your lands? You have guards and knights at your service. Couldn’t they defend your lands?”

Lord Gawen Westerling turned red. “He… He hired sellswords. Criminals, outlaws, and ordered them to occupy our lands until we paid the debt back.”

“And you were unable to turn these outlaws and criminals, like you call them, out of your lands? You were unable to keep peace on your own lands?”

People laughed in the Great Hall and Lord Westerling grew redder from humiliation. “They… There are too many of them. My lord, I’m asking for your help as your loyal bannerman.”

“What kind of help do you want, Lord Westerling? Do you want me to drive these men out of your lands? Or do you want me to repay the debt you contracted?” Silence followed. The Lord of the Crag didn’t seem to know what to answer. Margaery decided to intervene.

“Lord Westerling, perhaps you should tell us the whole story from the beginning. First, are you in debt to this merchant, whoever he is?”

“He is,” shouted someone. A fat man with brown hair and richer clothes than the Lord of the Crag came out of the crowd and stood before Tyrion and Margaery, right next to Lord Gawen. “My name is Roan Hyser. Citizen of Lannisport and owner to several trading ventures, including one with the wine sellers from the Arbor.” He bowed deeply to Margaery as he mentioned this. He seemed to hope this would make her sympathetic to him. “I lent money to Lord Westerling two years ago through an arrangement I made with his castellan. He failed to pay back the loan, so I seized his lands as a compensation.”

“These lands belonged to my father and his father before him. They are the lands of House Westerling. You have no right to occupy them,” shouted the Lord of the Crag.

“The law allows a creditor to seize any propriety of his debtor if he fails to pay back the loan in time, if the value of the seized proprieties is equal or less than the value of the debt owed. Your lands are worth much less than the money I lent you.”

“Roan Hyser, perhaps it would make things more clear if you gave us the contract. Surely Lord Westerling and you made one when he borrowed your money,” interrupted Ser Kevan.

“We did,” confirmed the merchant.

“Then could you give it to us?”

Roan Hyser seemed to hesitate a moment, but he gave it nonetheless when Ty came to take it. Tyrion’s squire brought it to him. Tyrion looked at it, then handed it to her so she could have a look as well.

“What do you think of it?” he asked, leaning on his left to whisper in her ear so no one else could hear them.

“Everything seems in order,” she told him after she had read it. The merchant was telling the truth. The castellan of the Crag, Rolph Spicer, had borrowed for about ten thousand golden dragons to
Roan Hyser of Lannisport two years ago. The term to repay the debt was last week.

“Is there nothing you noticed?” asked Tyrion, still murmuring.

“No. He really made an arrangement with the castellan of the Crag.”

“Yes, he did. Rolph Spicer is Lord Gawen’s brother-in-law, his wife’s brother. He signed the contract, and after his signature we can see his title, castellan of the Crag, but if we read the contract well, we can see there is no mention of House Westerling or Lord Gawen anywhere, and that the Crag is only mentioned in the signature.”

It dawned on Margaery. “The debt was not contracted by House Westerling.”

“No. It is a personal debt contracted by Rolph Spicer himself. But because he wrote that he was castellan of the Crag at the end, the merchant considered it was in his rights to seize the lands of his brother-in-law as a repayment. The Westerlings are poor and don’t have enough men to defend their lands against a whole company of sellswords.”

“But the debt is not owed by the Westerlings. We should put an end to this, Tyrion. This affair concerns Rolph Spicer, not the Westerlings.”

“Indeed, but you see, I met Lady Westerling, and I have the impression she has a lot of power in the Crag. Maybe more than her husband. The Westerlings are an impoverished house, and it is very possible that Sybell Spicer brought more money in the marriage. She’s not going to abandon her brother, and maybe Lord Westerling doesn’t want to abandon him either. Hence his presence here. Or else he would have thrown Rolph Spicer to the merchant and there would be no problem at all.”

Margaery saw what Tyrion meant. And this posed a problem. The Westerlings may be poor, but they were their bannermen all the same. They couldn’t allow a simple merchant from Lannisport to take the lands of a noble family like that, or sellswords and outlaws to terrorize the people living there.

“Couldn’t we say that Lord Gawen owes nothing to Roan Hyser and that the debt is owed entirely by Rolph Spicer? The merchant has no right to hold these lands. Maybe Lord Westerling ignored about this debt until recently,” Margaery suggested.

“That wouldn’t surprise me, but I have the impression Lord Gawen won’t let down his castellan, even though he should. He’s proud, and he won’t let the others know that his castellan was incompetent, even less when he is his brother-in-law.”

“But we cannot allow merchants to seize lands of our bannermen.”

“Of course, we can’t. The contracts must be respected. Most of the wealth of Lannisport comes from trade, and merchants do the trade. But Lord and Lady Westerling will protect their castellan. He is family for them. And we can’t allow a conflict to escalate between a merchant with a sellsword company and a minor lord.”

“Then we must pay back the debt,” said Margaery. There was no other way out. “We have no choice.”

“Maybe not,” her husband conceded. He looked deep in his thoughts. “But if we pay back the loan, it will be at our conditions.”

Tyrion looked at the lord and the merchant standing before them and spoke loudly. “Lord Westerling, Roan Hyser, Lady Margaery and I have agreed on a solution to your dispute. You recognize, don’t you, Lord Westerling, that your house owes ten thousand golden dragons plus the
“I do,” said Lord Westerling, though reluctantly. Tyrion was right. He was protecting his wife’s brother.

“Then in this case, House Lannister will pay the ten thousand you borrowed. You will only have to pay for the interests. I do hope you are still capable of paying them.” Some people scoffed in the crowd. The poverty of House Westerling was well known.

“We are, my lord. I thank you,” said the Lord of the Crag.

“Hyser,” resumed Margaery’s husband, “you will order the men you hired to disband and to leave the lands of the Crag immediately. I will dispatch a company of soldiers led by my cousin, Ser Daven Lannister, to the Crag tomorrow on the morning. They will make sure that your men left. If they ever find that your sellswords mistreated the people living there before they left, or if they find them still here, you will be held accountable for it. Any theft, any murder, any rape done by your men will be considered as if it was done by you, and you will receive the same sentence as if you had done it yourself.”

“Yes, my lord.” The merchant had gone blank all of a sudden and left immediately after bowing deeply before Tyrion ad Margaery. Surely he was going to write immediately to his men to leave the lands of the Crag without causing trouble.

“Thank you, my lord. Thank you very much. My house is forever in your debt. We won’t forget about it,” babbled the Lord of the Crag who Tyrion just saved.

“Ser Daven,” called Tyrion. His cousin stepped forward and knelt, waiting for orders. “I give you the command of a hundred men of Casterly Rock to make sure that peace is being kept at the Crag. You will leave tomorrow with Lord Westerling. When you come back, I’m counting on you to ensure the safety of Ser Raynald and Lady Jeyne on their way here.”

Silence fell in he Great Hall. Margaery herself was silent, but she understood more quickly than the others what it meant. Tyrion wouldn’t let the Westerlings get out of it without payment.


“You must understand, Lord Westerling, that the ten thousand golden dragons we gave to Roan Hyser is now a debt you have towards Casterly Rock and House Lannister. We will give you time to pay this debt. You can take all the time you want. All your life, if this pleases you. But as long as you will remain in debt to House Lannister, your eldest children will remain here, as wards.”

Lord Westerling was agape. Margaery decided it was time to say something. “Your children will be our honored guests, Lord Westerling. It is a great honor for a lord to see his children accepted as wards of a great family like House Lannister. Surely you won’t complain about it. For myself, I’m very eager to see your daughter, Lady Jeyne, again. She seemed a sweet girl when I met her two months ago.”

There was nothing the Lord of the Crag could reply to this. He was still searching for his words, and Tyrion spoke again before his silence. “Lord Westerling, we came to your help this time, but the next time you fail to pay a debt, whatever it is, House Lannister will not come to rescue you. I would advise you to make sure your wife and her brother understands that when you see them. The next time, if sellswords ravage your lands, it will be your duty to deal with them. I think that if this time ever comes, you’ll find great solace in knowing that your heir and your eldest daughter are safe and
sound at Casterly Rock. And I think some distance with their mother and their uncle would do them some good.”

Tyrion pulled on a smug smile, the one he used to make the others know that they had lost and that made them so uneasy when it came to his lips. He displayed it a few times for her as well, though in a kinder way, but still Margaery didn’t like it when it was meant for her.

The Lord of the Crag could only accept their conditions in the end. He left, escorted by Tyrion’s cousin. Margaery noticed that Tyrion looked at his uncle who tilted the head in approval. He always seemed to approve her husband’s decisions. The rest of the court passed very quickly. For every matter, it was always the same. Tyrion did the unyielding lord who never allowed any failure, and Margaery played the caring lady. The truth was different. Margaery knew they had to be firm with their bannermen and criminals, though she preferred to rule by convincing people she loved them and would care for them. Tyrion was better for looking decisive, and she left him this role with pleasure, while she played the good role. However, Tyrion was far from being ruthless or cruel. He could seem so to some people, but his jokes made the atmosphere in the Great Hall more pleasant and, truth be told, he was quite generous. He had just helped the Westerlings, but warned them strongly about the consequences of a future failure, and made sure they would have great interest in paying back their debts. A mix of kindness, rudeness, gentleness, firmness, generosity, ruthlessness and pragmatism. That was her husband. Tyrion came up with the decisions requiring a strong arm while Margaery came with those requiring a soft touch.

Later that night, Margaery was lying on her left side, looking outside through the open window. Fresh air from the sea caressed her skin and she shivered. Her Tyrell blood may run warm, but sometimes it only made her feel the cold more strongly. She brought the sheet up to cover her breasts, still looking at the moon. She heard Tyrion grumbling behind her. He was asleep. It was probably the first time he slept while she was awake. Normally, it was the other way around.

Margaery reflected about the result of her new strategy. She had written to her parents and her grandmother after they left court. She thought it could be worth it. After all, she had to get the best from this alliance. Like her grandmother told her, they had to show that House Tyrell and House Lannister were united as one, to keep their bannermen at bay. Margaery already displayed their unity in public, whether while visiting an orphanage, buying a necklace in the markets of Lannisport or holding court like today. The alliance between their houses was strong in everyone’s eyes… except it wasn’t. So much still separated her family and Tyrion’s family. Their alliance was made for mutual interests, and both hoped to get as much as they could from it. Only the problem was that Margaery couldn’t get much of it so far. Her attempts to influence Tyrion had failed because he saw it when she tried to use him. She had to try another approach. In public, they were allies, working together. Why couldn’t they do it in private as well? Work for the interest of both their houses, instead of competing for their respective family to take as much as they could from the other? She didn’t think Tyrion opposed the idea. He was obviously in love with her, but he wasn’t blinded by this love. She had to convince him that she was on his side, but the only way to convince him, as far as she could tell, was to be on his side.

She didn’t hate Tyrion. She loved to laugh, talk and eat with him, she enjoyed the time they spent exploring Casterly Rock together, he made ruling something they could laugh of, and he was very attentive to her. He did everything for her to be happy, and truth be told, Margaery liked Casterly Rock up to now. As for making heirs… Well, that wasn’t a hard task. Margaery had her last moonblood two weeks ago, so she was certainly not with child, but with the way they did it, she would be the mother of the future Lord of the Westerlands before long.

Tyrion stirred on the other side and grumbled something. Margaery turned to look at him. His head went from one side to the other for a few times and he breathed more quickly, but he went back to
calm after a few seconds. Probably only a nightmare. His breathe steadied and he remained
unmoving, still sleeping. Margaery laid her head on the pillow and looked again at the moon through
the window. Slowly, she drifted into sleep, but thought she heard her husband whispering something
before she fell asleep. Something like Tysha.

Chapter End Notes

For a mention, the flowered pendant that Margaery wears here is the same that Tyrion
gave to his wife in another fic, "Wolf in the Lion's Den". A fic I enjoyed very much to
read.

Please review

The next two chapters will be aired together about New Year. One will be from
Tyrion's POV, and the other from Margaery's.
Alright, first of the two chapters I will upload this week. You'll understand why. This is a crucial point for the beginning of the fic.

The first part of this chapter is quite... hard to read. Let's say Tyrion remembers something horrible in the first section. I tried to handle the subject as well as I could, to not add too much while still making it horrible enough so we can understand how Tyrion feels, but if there are some people who don't feel easy with it, jump to the end of the section. It is indicated around the third of the chapter.

They almost threw him into the Great Hall. They just brought them back from the cottage. Tyrion and his wife had been together in bed when his father’s men had irrupted. Without ceremony, they had separated them and put them on horses. Tysha had a bag on her head, and she was tied. Tyrion wasn’t tied, nor did he have anything to cover his eyes, but he was closely watched by the men in red armor. When they rode through the Lion’s Mouth, they brought Tyrion and his wife in different directions. Tyrion shouted and struggled to reach her, attracting many looks on him. While on their way to the Great Hall, he didn’t stop asking where they brought her, what would happen to her, what they would do to her, without any result. None of his father’s men answered.

When the guards pushed him into the Hall, Tyrion managed to the last minute to get his foot and avoided a fall. The heavy doors closed behind him. He looked at the dais and there sat his father. Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West was sitting in the great and high golden throne of the Rock, his icy stare upon Tyrion like it always happened when his father deigned to look at him, though this time his father seemed more merciless than ever, which was no little saying. Nothing good was going to happen. Tyrion realized at this moment that Jaime was there too, standing at the bottom of the dais. Despite their father’s presence, Tyrion managed to croak the question he’d been asking all the time since he arrived at the Rock.

“Where is Tysha?”

“Tysha? Is that her name?” The question his father asked was addressed to Jaime.

“I don’t know her name,” Tyrion’s brother answered.

“No matter. Her name is of no importance.”

“Where is she? Where is my wife?” asked Tyrion, loudly this time.

The cold eyes of his father landed on him once more. “To answer your question, she is in the next room, under heavy guard. You’ll see her, if that is your wish. But first, my son has something to tell
Tywin Lannister would always speak of Jaime as his son in Tyrion’s presence, to remember Tyrion that he didn’t consider him, and would never consider him, like his son. His brother Jaime walked to him and went on one knee to stand at the same level than Tyrion. He had a pained expression on his face, and seemed to struggle to do something. Finally, he spoke.

“Tyrion, there’s something I must tell you. The girl… What’s her name you said?”

“Tysha. She’s my wife, Jaime. I’m married. I could present her to you.”

Tyrion wanted to introduce Tysha to Jaime. He had talked to her about his brother, and Tysha was eager to meet Jaime. He saved her after all, but didn’t have the chance to meet her brother-in-law properly. Jaime’s face was indecipherable. He seemed to not know what to do. Tyrion didn’t understand. He knew that his father wouldn’t like it that he married a lowborn girl, but he thought Jaime would be happy. They were brothers. His little brother was married.

“Tell him,” shouted their father from behind Jaime’s back. Tyrion’s brother looked back at Lord Tywin, then with a resigned expression, he turned to Tyrion and cleared his throat.

“Tyrion, this girl is a whore. I hired her. I thought it was time that you had a woman. So I hired one.”

“Your brother went so far that he paid double for a maiden. He even invented all this little scenery of an innocent girl chased by rapists on the road to make it better. And here we are now, a Lannister wed to a whore.”

Tyrion couldn’t speak for a very long moment. Tysha, a whore? No, she wasn’t. “No, she’s not. She’s not a whore. She is a wheelwright’s daughter. Her father lived at Lannisport, but he died two weeks ago. She was forced to live in the near forest for that…”

“Tyrion, I’m sorry, but that’s all a story. She is a whore that I hired for you, and everything she told you is a lie. I asked her to lie to you, I settled all this. I wanted your first time to be enjoyable. I was planning to tell you the next day. I’m sorry. I should have told you the truth at the beginning. I’m sorry, little brother.”

Jaime seemed close to tears, something Tyrion had never seen. He patted Tyrion’s shoulder and left on these words. Tyrion stayed there, his eyes looking nowhere. He heard the doors opening, then closing again as his brother left, but he had the impression the sounds were coming from another world. Tysha? A whore? Jaime had hired her for him? Jaime just told him so, and his brother would never lie to him.

“I hope you enjoyed your time with your whore,” his father said. “Did you really think she loved you?” Tyrion didn’t answer. He was in a daze and couldn’t think coherently. “You are a fool if you believed she loved you, and even more a fool since you married her. A wheelwright’s orphan.”

Tywin Lannister said the last word with venom. Tyrion felt the eyes of his father on him. He didn’t look at the face of his father, his eyes fixing the floor, for he knew what he would meet if he ever looked up. Hatred, contempt, judgment. If only there was some deception on his father’s face, but he knew there would be none. His father was never deceived of him. He always expected the worst from his second son, and again Tyrion proved he was right. He married a whore. The world was falling apart around him.

“Bring the girl in,” the Lord of Casterly Rock shouted. The heavy doors opened and guards entered, dragging a young girl of fourteen, black of hair, blue of eyes and unwashed. His wife. Tysha. Tysha,
his wife. Tysha, a whore. That’s what his brother told him. One of his father’s men pushed her on the floor. Tyron noticed her clothes were ripped on her back. He saw blood through the gashes. She had been whipped. She was crying. He noticed other cuts and grazes on her arms.

She kept crying for a time, but slowly turned her head towards Tyrion until their eyes met. Tears were streaming all over her cheeks, washing some dirt away. “Tyrion.” That was all she said. Tears kept rolling on her face. This girl is a whore. I hired her. I thought it was time that you had a woman. All of it was a lie. Everything that happened in the last two weeks was a lie. That was all arranged by Jaime. Tyrion held the gaze of his wife… of the whore, until he couldn’t and turned his face away, avoiding these eyes he looked into when they were wed. She was a lie. He had feared it since the beginning. That was too perfect to be real. It wasn’t real. Only his brother would try to invent something good like this for him, but it was still a lie.

“Captain, bring her. She’s yours,” said Tyrion’s father.

The man grasped her hair and pulled from behind, making Tysha wail. “Come with us. We’ll show you what it is to be a woman,” mocked the captain.

“No. Tyrion! Help me! Tyrion. No! No! Nooooooooo!”

The cries faded as Tyrion’s wife was dragged away. He didn’t look at her. He couldn’t. If he looked at her, he could try to rescue her, and it was useless. She was a whore. What could he do for her? Why should he try to help her? Tyrion felt horrible. He had the impression he was betraying her, and yet she was the one who betrayed him.

“This girl needs to learn her place,” declared his father. “But you need to learn yours as well. Lead my son to the barracks. Make sure he sees everything.”

There were some guards who had stayed behind. They carried out their lord’s order. Tyrion followed them, barely conscious of anything surrounding him. They arrived in the barracks. There was a great room, some sort of a hall for the soldiers. That’s where they brought him. It was time for the soldiers to eat in the middle of the day, so most of them were present. Tysha was curled up in an empty space. The guards led Tyrion to a corner. Tysha looked in his direction again, her eyes pleading for help, and just like he did in the Hall in his father’s presence, Tyrion avoided her eyes.

“This girl is a whore. I hired her. I thought it was time that you had a woman. One of his father’s guards stepped forward and roared.

“We have a little entertainment for you, men. I’ll start, but don’t worry, there will be more than enough for all of you.”

All the hall laughed. The man who just spoke went to Tysha and tore her clothes apart. It was a dress Tyrion had bought for her the day after their wedding. It was simple and made of wool, had nothing rich or costly on it, but her eyes had been shining when Tyrion gave it to her. She said she had never wore something so beautiful, and probably it was true. Now it was all in pieces.

From the position where he was, Tyrion could see everything. He saw the man taking his wife. A second soldier, a third, a fourth came, and many more. Tyrion lost the count. Each time a man took his wife, he felt something break within him. Tysha wailed and cried and even screamed the first time, but each time she grew silent, though tears kept flooding her face. Tyrion saw blood appear under her legs after what might have been the twentieth or the thirtieth man. He didn’t know.

In the end, they stopped. The men seemed to have grown bored of the entertainment and walked freely around Tysha, not caring about her. She stayed there, lying on the floor, a cry or a wail escaping from her throat from time to time, blood spreading under her. Tyrion felt he was bleeding
from the inside just like she did. When all the men had gone and that only Tyrion was left with a few of his father’s guards and Tysha, he realized that the Lord of Casterly Rock was here as well. He didn’t know for how long, but his father had been there for a part of the entertainment.

“Now you know what she is. And she knows it too. It’s time you treat her for what she is.” His father put a golden dragon in his hand. “Go. A Lannister is worth more than a soldier.”

The other men had paid Tysha a silver stag each. They had thrust it into her palm when they came over her, and now there were so many that the coins had almost all slipped through her fingers and rolled on the floor. Tyrion approached her, feeling his father’s gaze over him. He came before his wife and hesitated. He didn’t look back at his father. He knew what he would meet. He went to her right hand where all the coins had been put, and tenderly put the golden dragon in it. Then, just like his father told him, he took her one last time, not like his wife, but like a whore. And as he took her, he felt himself being torn apart, shattered in a million pieces. His screams joined the screams of the girl he was raping, and he was no longer in the barracks. He was in complete darkness, and he heard his wife calling for him.

**END OF THE HARD SECTION**

“Tyrion! Tyrion! Tyrionoooon!”

She was calling for help. Tyrion ran everywhere, trying to find her, but he could see nothing. He couldn’t decide where the screams were coming from. He kept running all around in the vain hope to find her.

“Tysha! Tysha! Tysha!” he kept calling and shouting. “Tysha!”

“Tyrion. Stop that! Tyrion! Wake up.”

Tyrion found himself into a dark room he couldn’t recognize, lying on a bed he didn’t know, breathing heavily. He couldn’t see anything. There was no light. *Where is Tysha?* This is what he thought about immediately. A hand laid on his shoulder and Tyrion looked on his side to see who was with him. He met green eyes he didn’t recognize on the moment.

“It’s alright. You were only dreaming.”

Tyrion needed to blink a few times before his mind went to work and he remembered where he was. His father was dead, Tysha was gone and he was in bed with his new wife, Margaery. It was her hand that was on his shoulder, calming him. Her eyes were worried in the dark and Tyrion looked away, catching his breathe.

“Sorry. Did I wake you up?” he asked her.
“Well, yes. You were shaking and moving wildly, and about to scream. Do you want me to call Creylen?”

“No. I don’t need Creylen.” There was no need to bring the maester here.

“Do you want something to drink? Wine, or only water?”

“There is some mulled wine on the table,” he answered, not really caring about it.

“I’ll bring you some.”

Margaery climbed down the bed and put on a night gown before she went to pour some mulled wine. Tyrion remembered the first time he had been drunk. This first time had led to him having his first whore. His first wife. His second wife came back a minute later with a goblet. Tyrion emptied it in a single gulp. He wasn’t sure if it cleared his mind, but it made him feel better in some way.

“You’re very bad at sleeping, you know,” Margaery said.

“You’re very observing like always,” he replied on a neutral tone. He was in no mood for small talk. Images of Tysha being raped by his father’s guards were coming back. I hope you enjoyed your time with your whore.

Yes, Tyrion had enjoyed it… until his father gave her to his men.

“Tell me what’s going on. I want to help you.”

Tyrion looked at her. She seemed concerned about him. Tysha had looked concerned about him as well from time to time, like when he almost burned his hand because he tried very clumsily to light a fire in their hearth, but that had been a lie. She was a whore, and everything she did, it was for the money his brother gave her. Her laughs, her smiles, the sweet things she told him, the time they spent in bed, all of it was a lie. He turned his eyes away from his wife.

“Tyrion, look at me.” She put a hand on his arm, but Tyrion jerked it away violently. He didn’t want her to touch him.

“Why?” he asked.

“Tyrion, I’m trying to help you.” Her voice was still kind, but with some reproach too.

“Why would you help me?”

“Because I’m your wife, and you’re my husband.”

Tyrion scoffed. “If my brother had been Lord of Casterly Rock, you would be married with him. If I had married another girl, you would have another husband to warm up in your bed.”

A silence followed. “Tyrion…”

He didn’t let her finish. “Stop that! You have nothing to gain from it. Our families married us because it was in their interest. There’s nothing more to it. That doesn’t mean you have to console me at night, or that you must look as if you love me. Leave it for the court. Your family won’t get anything from me because you were kind.”

“Tyrion,” she said in an unbelieving voice, “I’m really trying to help you. I’m not expecting anything in return. I just want you to be well.”

Tyrion laughed dryly. “Strange. Many whores I visited said the same. Maybe I don’t pay you, but you’re not that different from them. After all, you would never have married me if it didn’t mean you
would become the richest woman in Westeros. That’s the only reason why we’re wed.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Time seemed to stop. It lasted a long time, and not a single moment did Tyrion look at his wife. He felt he said something wrong, but didn’t want to take it back, nor did he think he could. Finally, Margaery left their bed and walked to the door of their chamber.

“I’ll sleep in the other room.” She left.

Tyrion realized what he just said. He wanted to call her back, to apologize, but then he remembered Tysha again. She had been his wife, and had lied to him, making him believe she loved him. Margaery had almost succeeded in it as well through the five months of their marriage, but Tyrion could see through her act. He wasn’t young and stupid, nor drunk, nor in love. Well… Yes, he was in love. He still loved Tysha, he loved Alla, and he had come to love Margaery despite everything, despite knowing very well she was trying to manipulate him. He couldn’t help but love her. He was a fool.

Tyrion didn’t sleep for the rest of the night. A part of him wanted Margaery to come back, the other part didn’t. He stayed, sitting on their bed, hoping and fearing that his wife would come, but she didn’t. Instead, Tyrion kept seeing the images of this day seven years ago, the day he lost the woman he loved. The night went on, slowly giving place to morning. Tyrion didn’t leave the bed, but at some point he realized he wore nothing and hastily put some clothes on him. Ty brought him his breakfast, but Tyrion ate nothing of it. He simply stayed there, afraid that if he left this room, he would have to face his wife, the past, the present, the future.

He drank, like he always did in these circumstances. By midday, ten empty jugs were on the small table. Tyrion decided to leave, the wine making him braver, bolder and more foolish than usual, but it seemed it was useless to be brave. Margaery wasn’t in their apartments. He wouldn’t face her. He left their rooms all the same and wandered through the Rock. He went to the library first. Then his short legs led him to the Lion’s Mouth outside. It was there, in this courtyard, that he was separated from Tysha for the first time. He walked to the Great Hall afterwards, where his brother told him the truth, then to the barracks, where he watched dozens of men taking his wife before he did the same. He didn’t stay long at any place, for each brought dreadful memories he normally tried to avert.

Somehow, he ended up in the godswood. He didn’t remember walking to this place, but he supposed he did since he realized he was sitting on the twisted roots of the tree. He thought he crossed Kevan’s and Daven’s paths before he found himself there, but he wasn’t sure. He supposed they were probably in the middle of the afternoon. He didn’t know for sure. Tyrion had a lot of work to do, many duties to attend to, but he couldn’t care less about it right now. He looked to the face of the tree. He had never believed in the Old Gods, nor did he really believe in the Seven. He had wanted to join the Faith once, thinking that if he became High Septon, then he would wear a crown that would make him taller and do his part for the honor of his house. But then, he met Tysha. The New Gods made him discover something new if they ever existed, and he abandoned the idea to serve them. People wanted to believe that gods existed, and that they were good. It gave them hope. Tyrion couldn’t entirely blame them, but he had given up any hope from these gods a long time ago. Tyrion once heard about a substance in Essos, the opium, that caused you to have strange living dreams. Some maester once said that religion is the opium of the people. Tyrion was tempted to agree with him, though he suspected this wasn’t the only opium the people could have. His opium had been wine and whores for many years, and before that it had been love. Everyone had his own opium. His father’s opium had been the Lannister name, Cersei’s opium was power, and Jaime’s opium was Cersei. They were all blinded by something. No matter what it was, there was always something to blind them.

Tyrion felt tears running on his cheeks as the thoughts of Tysha came back to his mind. He had
loved her, just like he loved Margaery now. Was she all a lie too? He should have known Tysha was a lie. Truth be told, he had been afraid she wasn’t real ever since the beginning, but he hadn’t wanted to consider it, not until Jaime told him the truth. He didn’t blame his brother. After all, how could he know Tyrion would marry the girl? He had only wanted to make his first time with a woman memorable, and for that Tyrion thanked Jaime. He was the only one to really love him in his family since his uncles Gerion and Tygett died. Jaime would never betray nor abandon him. He couldn’t say the same of their sister and their father, or even of Kevan and Genna.

Tyrion remained there, unmoving, tears drying on his face as he remembered the woman he had loved. The woman he raped. The woman he paid. His first whore. He remembered the Myrish song she used to sing to him. A maid as fair as summer. She had been a maid, yes. Jaime had paid double for one, but she was a whore nonetheless, and no woman would ever want him except for the gold he could offer them.

“You once told me you didn’t believe in gods. Were you only speaking about the Seven?”

She was standing there, right in front of him. Tyrion didn’t know how she had approached, but somehow he hadn’t heard her coming. Margaery wore a green gown made of silk. He remembered she had it made only last month. The dressmakers of Casterly Rock made for his wife clothes both in the fashions of the Reach and the Wetserlands. Tyrion tended to like her gowns in the Reach style better. They were easier to take off. He remembered the day she had worn this one for the first time. In the evening, he had taken great pleasure to strip it slowly, very slowly, from her, and she moaned loudly as he had trailed his mouth over her body.

“Truth be told, I don’t care about faces carved in trees, nor about the trees with the faces either. I don’t care either about the Father, the Mother, the Crone, the Smith, the Maiden, the Warrior or the Stranger, or the Seven Hells and Seven Heavens. I don’t care about the Drowned God or the God of Flame and Shadow either, they can all go to hell if it exists. But no one ever comes here, and there’s always someone in the sept.”

He dropped his eyes to the floor again after he answered, but he knew that Margaery was still standing there. He wanted to look at her. He wanted to contemplate her beauty like he always did, then to bring her to their chambers where they would fuck, but he didn’t feel for it. He didn’t think he could. Not after what he said this morning. Not after everything that happened this night.

“I suppose you only want me to come back to our chamber tonight so you can fuck me.”

Her words hurt, and not only because of the hard tone she used. He wasn’t used to that with Margaery. She was always sweet and kind. Perhaps that made her false in some way, but kind and sweet all the same. He looked at her, and for the first time he saw anger on her face. He dropped his eyes on the floor, ashamed. He supposed her mask was dropped, and for the first time he wished it was back. With difficulty, the words came out from his mouth.

“I didn’t think what I told you. I never thought of you as a whore. You’re a formidable woman. Beautiful, clever, cunning, kind. I never thought I would marry someone like you. I never hoped to marry someone like you. Sometimes I wonder if you’re just an illusion. You’re so perfect in everything. I feel I don’t deserve you most of the time.”

Right now, he felt it even more. Margaery was nothing like the other girls had been for Tyrion. She was an ally, a friend, a great lady who sat by his side, who ruled with him, who shared his life. Yes, he took comfort in her and loved their time in bed when they became one, but that wasn’t all of it. She was his wife, not his whore. He loved her.

He heard her sitting a few feet away from him on another root. “I have tried to use you and to
manipulate you, Tyrion. And it’s true, I married you because you’re the Lord of Casterly Rock, and for no other reason. But you wouldn’t have married me neither if I hadn’t been the daughter of Mace Tyrell and only some crofter’s daughter.”

*If I met you as a crofter’s daughter, I may have fallen in love with you all the same.* Yet, she was right. Tyrion married her because her father was Lord of Highgarden. As Lord of Casterly Rock, that was what he had to do. Margaery kept speaking.

“I don’t regret our marriage. I’m very happy here, my friends too, and I like to spend time with you and members of your family. I like when we dine together, when we walk together, talk together, hold court together, rule together, and I even like it when you make your crude jokes. I also enjoy it when we fuck. But I don’t want you to see me as some whore in a brothel who welcomes you in her bed because you give her something. It’s not who I am.”

“No. That’s not who you are,” echoed Tyrion. She wasn’t a whore. Not like Tysha.

“What is it that happened last night? What were you dreaming about?”

Tyrion looked at her. She really seemed to care about him, and he did all he could to convince himself that she indeed did. Still, he looked away when he answered.

“It was nightmare. A horrible nightmare.”

“What was it about?”

Tyrion didn’t answer. He couldn’t tell her. How could he tell her about Tysha, about her gang rape, about what he did? At best, she would probably be insulted only to know that he married a whore, believing she was a wheelwright’s daughter, or consider him like the greatest idiot in Westeros. He didn’t want her to think of him this way, or worse, and surely she would think worse of him if she ever learnt the truth.

“Who’s Tysha?”

Tyrion was expecting everything but this. He almost jumped to the roof of the cave. How could she know her name? He looked in Margaery’s eyes to see a certain sadness. What was she sad about? If she knew it, then she should look at him with hatred.

“You were whispering her name in your sleep last night. And that wasn’t the first time,” she said.

It took some time for Tyrion to truly assimilate her words, but when he finally did he was on the brink to sigh in relief. She only heard him whispering her name. She didn’t know what Tyrion had gone through in his dreams.

“Is she the girl in Kayce to who you send a bag of silver every month?”

Again, Margaery startled him with her words and he looked at her again. She wasn’t smiling. Not exactly. Her expression was between smile and sadness. It was chagrin and disappointment he could see right now, perhaps even some exasperation.

“This kind of things can be found, Tyrion. I’m not an idiot. You said it yourself.” She made a dry smile and looked intently at him. “So, it’s her?” He didn’t answer immediately. He wasn’t sure, and he didn’t want to betray Alla. His wife sighed. “You remember, on our wedding night, you told me you wanted us to be honest with each other. You said you wanted us to trust one another. I know it’s not easy, but I’m trying. I only hope you’re trying as well. Unless it only works one way for you.”
There was some accusation both in her voice and in her face. Tyrion remembered saying her that, and he had meant it. He still meant it. How could he ask Margaery to trust him if he couldn’t even tell her about this? After a moment of reflection, he spit it out.

“That’s not what you believe. I don’t have a mistress, or a lover. I haven’t been with another woman ever since our betrothal became official. The silver I send every month to Kayce is for a girl named Alla.”

Margaery frowned. “Alla?”

“Yes, I know. She has the same name than your cousin, but the resemblance stops there. She was a scullion in the kitchens here. She… I had her come to my chambers a few times after my father died. I sent her away when our betrothal was decided. I didn’t want her to be around when you would arrive. So I made her leave and organized something for her in Kayce. That’s where she lives now, and yes, I send her a bag of silver each month, so she may have a good life.”

Margaery looked at him with an expression that didn’t express much. “You’re not the first lord or knight to bring a servant to his bed. And you won’t be the last.”

“I haven’t seen her since she left the Rock, and I don’t intend to see her again. I just… I don’t want her to live in misery, and I promised I would look after her.”

Margaery nodded, a thin smile on her lips. “A Lannister always pays his debts.” He loved her smile when it was like that. It was a discreet one, without act. “That could have been worse. I don’t blame you. Men have needs. Just like women.”

They both laughed shyly. Tyrion knew very well that Margaery was no stranger to bedding outside the bonds of marriage, though he had seen nothing up to now to make him believe she was unfaithful to him. Only, she hadn’t waited for the marriage to experiment, and she knew Tyrion hadn’t either. Tyrion was sure the whores had gone begging from Dorne to Casterly Rock when he married. They lost their best customer, and certainly the most generous one.

Margaery’s face had gone serious once more when she spoke. “Who’s Tysha then?” Tyrion didn’t answer. He couldn’t tell her, and yet he didn’t want to lie to her, not when she just reminded him he wanted them to be honest with each other. He hoped she would abandon the matter, but his hopes proved to be worthless. “Tyrion, you were about to scream the other night when you woke up. You were not whispering this name randomly. Please, tell me.” She brought her hand on his. “I want to help you.”

She had the same expression that she had the day on the Lion’s Bridge, and on their wedding night when he told her his first wife died two weeks after their wedding. You are a much better man than you believe. He wanted to believe her. At least he owed her a part of the truth.

“She was my first wife.” He said it. He finally said it.

“The one who died? How did it happen?” she asked.

Tyrion kept looking in her eyes for a time, but at the end he couldn’t answer, neither with words, nor with a movement of his head. He looked down. He couldn’t lie to her. Not again. He couldn’t tell her the truth either, and yet… How could he ask her to trust him then? A long moment passed. Margaery’s hand remained where it was, and he could feel her eyes on him. Eyes full of pity. A pity he didn’t deserve. Without realizing it, he confessed.

“I lied. She didn’t die, but she should have. It would have been a lesser evil if she had.”
Her hand didn’t leave his own, but he felt its grip tighten. “What do you mean? She’s still alive?” Her
voice was worried.

“I don’t know.” He kept looking away from her. “She may be dead, as far as I know, but if she’s alive, I don’t have the slightest idea where she is.”

Another silence. “Tyrion, what happened?” Her voice was insistent now, and her grip had tightened even more. Then everything poured out of Tyrion’s mouth.

“When I reached my sixteenth’s name day, I wanted to take a tour of the nine Free Cities of Essos, just like my uncles Tygett ad Gerion had done before. I had always wanted to travel the world to see it by myself. But when I talked of this with my lord father, he forbade me, saying if I did then I would have to pay for it myself and forget about any hope to ever return home. He said he wouldn’t allow me to bring shame on House Lannister through the Free Cities. Instead, he gave me charge on all the drains and cisterns of Casterly Rock. I suppose he hoped I would fall into one, but in that I disappointed him, like always. The drains were never drained half so well, and all the shit found its way to the sea. But as the year passed on, my brother Jaime came to visit us. And then he decided we had to do something to celebrate me reaching manhood.”

“So we packed our things and started a tour of the Westerlands. I almost never left the Rock before. It was my first real time out. Jaime and I visited every corner of the Westerlands. We stopped at every castle, every town, every harbor, every inn. We traveled for months. And at the end, on our way back, when we were only a few miles from Casterly Rock, a girl ran into us. She was being followed by two men, her clothes were all torn apart. You can imagine what my brother did. He unsheathed his sword and chased the men. While he did it, I tended to the girl. I wrapped my cloak around her shoulders. She was too scared to send away on her own, she was starved, and I learnt she was an orphan. She had to be around fourteen. Her father had been a wheelwright in Lannisport who died last month. She had nowhere to go. So I brought her to a nearest inn and fed her.”

Tyrion grinned as the good memories came back. He resumed his tale. “She was hungry. Terribly hungry. We finished three chickens and a flagon of wine. It may look strange, but there’s been a time when I wasn’t used to wine. I forgot how afraid I was around girls. I forgot how I always expected them to laugh at me, or to look away embarrassed, or to ask about my tall and handsome brother, or even about my sister the queen. I forgot about everything but her. And somehow, I don’t remember how it happened, nor can I know how it could have happened, but I found myself into her bed. Next morning, I was mad enough in love to ask for her hand.”

“You married a wheelwright’s orphan? Someone from the common people?” asked Margaery. Tyrion looked at her. She looked mostly surprised, but not very outraged. Her grip had loosened.

“I did. What did you expect? That it would some great lady of the Westerlands? I wasn’t Lord of Casterly Rock back then, and my father hadn’t deigned to make me his heir officially. No lady would have accepted to marry me back then. Tysha did.”

“Now I understand why I never heard about it before you told me.”

“Many people in Casterly Rock know the story, or at least a part of it, but my father didn’t allow anyone to talk about it when he was alive. Lord Tywin Lannister wasn’t about to let it known that he was the father-in-law to a wheelwright’s daughter.”

“So you were wed in secret?”

“Of course. If I had asked my father, he would have refused immediately. I convinced a drunken septon with a few lies and fifty pieces of silver, and we were wed in the presence of a few pigs to
bear witness. We ate one of the witnesses at our wedding feast. She fed me crackling and I licked the grease off her fingers.”

He hears a shy giggle coming from Margaery. “Well, that’s quite a particular wedding.”

“It was.” Tyrion smiled as he said it. “I settled us in an abandoned cottage near the Sunset Sea, and we lived as man and wife for a fortnight. That is, until the septon sobered up, and the first thing he did was to tell my father. Like always, I deceived him, but probably more than ever this time. I wonder what happened to the septon. I wouldn’t be surprised if my father had him killed. After all, once he was dead, there was no one who could confirm I was ever married. My father’s men found us quickly. There aren’t many dwarves with a lot of money nearby. And they brought us back here.”

At this point, Tyrion stopped. He didn’t want to go further. If he talked about the things that happened after that… He didn’t dare to look at his present wife. Her hand was still where it was before. “Continue, Tyrion. Tell me what happened.”

Her voice was soft, kind, not demanding, only asking. He didn’t want to tell her. He didn’t want. But he couldn’t lie to her, and he couldn’t hide it either. Tyrion harshly closed his eyes before he opened them again, still looking away from Margaery. “He forced Jaime to tell me the truth. Tysha was a whore. Jaime had planned everything. The road, the rapers, the girl, all of it. He thought it was time for me to have a woman. He even paid twice the price to have a maiden. He certainly never thought I would marry her. For him, it was only a way to make my first time enjoyable.”

He stopped again. Margaery’s hand was now clutching his. “And?”

She looked afraid. She was bloody right to be. Tyrion wished she didn’t want to know the rest. “My father sent Jaime away after his confessions and brought in Tysha. He gave her to his guards. They brought her to the barracks and he sent me there to watch. She was paid a silver coin for each man. By the end, she had so much silver that the coins were flipping through her fingers and rolling onto the floor.”

Margaery’s clutch on his hands was tighter than ever. He shot her a look from the side and saw both horror and stupor on her face. It lasted some time, but her grip slacked once more. “Tyrion… I’m sorry. I had no idea. I… I can’t believe it. I’m so sorry.”

They were without words. After a time that looked like an eternity, he felt a hand on his shoulder. His wife’s hand. He looked at her again, and all he could see was sorrow, pity, care. That was what he wanted in a wife, but he couldn’t withstand it. He jerked and looked away from her.

“Tyrion, I…” He didn’t let her finish.

“Don’t be sorry. You shouldn’t be. You should hate me.”

“Tyrion, your father is the one who did this. You had nothing to do with what happened to Tysha. It wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know what I did afterwards.” He faced her as he shouted. “After all his men were done with her, he sent me last. Forced me to pay her a golden dragon because I was a Lannister, and worth more. And I did it, just like the other men.”

His wife didn’t seem to react first, but then a horror even worse than the one she had shown before lighted her face. It wasn’t something Tyrion liked to see, but it was better than a pity he didn’t deserve. She stood up. If she had still a hand on his, she would probably have withdrawn it. She stayed there, still staring at him with horror. Now she surely saw the Imp.
“You can go back to Highgarden. You should. I won’t stop you. Anyway, I can’t.”

He looked on the ground after he said these words. He didn’t want Margaery to go, but he was sure she would. Who wouldn’t? He heard footsteps and lifted the eyes to see his wife slowly walking towards the exit of the godswood. She seemed to slide on the floor more than she walked on it. He kept his eyes on her until she was out of sight, back into the corridors of Casterly Rock. Then Tyrion dropped his gaze on the floor again. He had lost her. For the second time in his life, he lost his wife. For one of the rare times in his life, he cried. He cried for the woman he loved and who he would never see again.

Chapter End Notes

Quite an unhappy chapter, I have to concede. Wait until the next chapter. It will be uploaded in two days. It will begin where this chapter ended, and it will be told from Margaery's perspective.

Please review (feel free to criticize and insult if you like)
Margaery VII

Chapter Notes

So, the sequel to Tyrion V. Happy New Year everyone!

Bonne année! (pour tous ceux qui parlent français)

I would like you to remember something before you read this chapter. The last time we were in Margaery's head was three months before the action taking place in that chapter, and three months ago, Margaery had decided to give up on manipulating Tyrion. The way she perceives Tyrion may have changed quite a lot since that time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY VII

Her footsteps echoed on the walls as she walked away from the godswood. The echoes they made seemed to repeat the story she just heard. *Tysha was a whore.* There wasn’t anyone else in these corridors. The surroundings of the godswood were quite empty. Casterly Rock was almost too large for a castle, even for a rich and huge family like the Lannisters. Margaery was alone. *Jaime had planned everything.* She kept walking, her legs bringing her nowhere she knew.

*The road, the rapers, the girl, all of it.* Margaery arrived in places where there were more people. She thought servants bowed when she passed, but she wasn’t sure. She couldn’t focus on anything. She walked at a normal pace, but somehow her breathe was heavy. *He thought it was time for me to have a woman.* She ran into Megga who said something about Elinor kissing someone, but Margaery only walked away and said nothing. She needed air. She couldn’t stay inside. *He even paid twice the price to have a maiden.*

Margaery found herself before the Lion’s Bridge and was travelling it before she could think. That was where she and Tyrion had their first discussion together. She remembered something he told her at the time. *You don't know who I am, my lady. Your cousin Willas is a much better fellow than me.* She told him something afterwards, that he was better than he thought. *After all his men were done with her, he sent me last. Forced me to pay her a golden dragon because I was a Lannister, and worth more. And I did it, just like the other men.* Other words he wrote to her a very log time ago came back to her mind as well. *I am not a monster, at least not in the sense that I beat people, mistreat them, or even eat children according to some words circulating. I am not cruel like my father.*

*I am not cruel like my father.* The words repeated themselves in her head. *My father sent Jaime away after his confessions and brought in Tysha. He gave her to his guards. They brought her to the barracks and he sent me there to watch. She was paid a silver coin for each man. By the end, she had so much silver that the coins were flipping through her fingers and rolling onto the floor. There were too many things going through her mind for Margaery to reflect on any. She went through the bridge, then through the gardens on the northern hill and ended following a declining path all made of cobblestones.*
The pathway curved to the opposite direction thrice to lead with a gentle slope to a gazebo carved into Casterly Rock. It was under the level of the castle’s main floor, facing the Sunset Sea and offering a splendid view on it. Tyrion had brought her here during their first week of marriage, and it had become one of Margaery’s favourite places in her new home. She came here with her friends sometimes, but it wasn’t their favourite one since they received wind gusts. The gazebo was opened to the Sea and there was almost nothing to protect yourself from the wind it would bring, unless you stayed in the back of the place. The gazebo was so large that if you remained in the back of it, you could hear the wind, but wouldn’t feel it. Most of the time, that was what Margaery did. She came here with Tyrion, or alone when she needed to think, and now she needed to think more than ever. It didn’t happen often.

This time however, she didn’t stay away from the wind. She came to it, and stood right behind the guard-rail in marble. Wind blew in her face and all across her body. The gown she wore wasn’t made for this, and despite her casual assertion that Tyrell blood ran warm, she shivered. It would have been better if she wore clothes in the style of the Westerlands. She chased these thoughts away. The wind, the gowns and her warm blood could all go to the Seven Hells for now.

She tried to remember and organize everything she just learnt. Tyrion’s first wife was named Tysha. He believed she was a wheelwright’s orphan, but she turned out to be a whore his brother hired for him. He married her secretly, without witnesses, and with a drunken septon to officiate the ceremony. A drunken septon he paid. They only lived together for two weeks. His father discovered the marriage and found them. He brought them here, and Tyrion learnt the truth about his wife. And then…

Margaery could still scarce believe it. Lord Tywin Lannister had the wife of his son raped, who knew by how many men, and he forced his son to watch it, and even worse he forced Tyrion to rape her afterwards. Margaery thought about her own father, or even about her grandmother, and she couldn’t imagine them doing something like that to their children, or to anyone truth be told. Tywin Lannister had been known for his ruthlessness, but this… His own son…

She remembered her wedding night as if it was yesterday. Tyrion had offered her to not consummate their marriage immediately, and when the time had come to do it, he had seemed more than hesitant. Margaery hadn’t understood back then. He was attracted to her. She could see it in the way he looked at her this night, and once they began, there had been no doubts left. Margaery tried to imagine her husband raping a woman, and she couldn’t. She knew that ever since Tyrion became Lord of Casterly Rock, every man who forced himself on a girl in the castle, whoever she was, a scullion or a lady, was severely punished with whipping, labor in the mines and gelding. Tyrion’s behaviour with her was everything but one of a man forcing his wife to bed him. He didn’t make love to her when she didn’t want to, though it rarely happened up to now.

Still, Tyrion said he raped his wife. It had to be true. Why would he lie to her about this? She could see no reason for him to create this whole story. His father had forced him to do so. The idea of a father doing this to his son was quite new to Margaery, but it had to be the truth. The alternative, that Tyrion was lying, was simply impossible. Unless, of course, he told the truth, but not all the truth. What if he raped his wife without his father commanding it? He just discovered that his wife, the young girl he loved, was a whore. Could he want to make her pay? Was Tyrion capable of that? She saw him sentence people to die, or to work in mines, and ordered people to be gelded when they were guilty of rape. He ordered less often for people to have their hands cut. The common punishment for thievery with Tyrion was forced labor in the mines, and he also offered people to go to the Wall most of the time. He said criminals were of more use at the Wall or in the mines than as beggars short of one hand. But she never saw him order a woman to be raped, or even someone to suffer under torture when he was recognized guilty. Tyrion was no worse than her own father or any other lord in these matters. From a certain perspective, he was kinder than many lords.
No, he couldn’t have raped the girl from his own volition. It had to be like he said. His father forced him to rape her. Tywin Lannister. The man whose crushing of the Reyne-Tarbeck rebellion ended with the slaughter of all members of these families, including the women and children. The man who sacked King’s Landing at the end of the last war, and who ordered Ser Gregor Clegane, the man they call the Mountain, to slaughter the Targaryen children. One was only a baby, still in the cradle. The man whose cruelty was made into a song. *The Rains of Castamere.* Margaery had heard it play often since she arrived, but she never thought… She closed her eyes. She understood so many things now. Why Tyrion’s first marriage was almost unknown, why no one talked about it, why he didn’t want to talk about it…

She realized she had grown numb because of the wind. She walked away from the handrail and sat in the back. She was shivering, both from the cold and from the shock of what she heard in the godswood. She should have stayed with Tyrion, but it was obvious he wanted to be alone. You can go back to Highgarden. You should. He probably expected her to leave, but Margaery wouldn’t do that. She couldn’t. She was the Lady of Casterly Rock. She had managed to do very well in her new position, and she liked it here. She had become friends with almost all Tyrion’s cousins, and she even got along well with Lady Genna and Ser Kevan. Casterly Rock was her home now. She was the Lady of the Westerlands. Her place was here. And also… She didn’t want to abandon Tyrion. He was a good man, and a good husband too. They had their disagreements, of course, but during the last months, things had gone very well. Margaery had stopped trying to manipulate him. Instead, she really tried to help him to rule the Westerlands, and to reinforce both House Lannister and House Tyrell, and to strengthen their alliance. Her family had started to negotiate with the Hightowers and the Redwynes about the reduction of duties on trade, and things were progressing. She had given up on trying to get Tyrion to do everything she wanted, and their relationship had never been better. Until this morning.

When Tyrion told her she was no better than a whore, it had affected her more than she thought it could. It wasn’t the fact that she was compared to a whore that caused her to feel so bad or to be angry… No, that was something else. The problem was… Tyrion was the one to say it. He spoke as if their marriage was purely made for political reasons, and that she accepted to marry him only because he was Lord of Casterly Rock. He wasn’t entirely wrong. Of course, Margaery would never have wanted to marry him had he not been Lord of the Westerlands, but… The truth was… She didn’t remain with him only because of his titles, power and riches. Not only for that. She liked Tyrion. She enjoyed spending time with him. She even… There was more to their marriage than material and political interests, and there was more to the sharing of their bed at night than lust. Margaery had begun to feel things… Things she never felt before.

A thought crossed her mind. Tyrion said he didn’t know what happened to Tysha afterwards. He didn’t know if she was alive, or dead. If she was alive… She may have been a whore, but she was married to Tyrion by a septon. Their marriage was legal on religious grounds, and they consummated it. What if the girl…? Margaery feared the worst. Tysha may come back one day if she was alive, and if she revealed everything, then her marriage to Tyrion was in danger, and the alliance between her family and House Lannister as well, before it could even start to be strong or useful. On the other side, the marriage had been celebrated by a drunken septon, without witnesses, and Tyrion lied to the septon and even paid him. The man may even be dead. Tyrion, the septon and Tysha were the only witnesses who could confirm the wedding took place, and the septon was drunk when it happened. His words would certainly not be taken for granted, and who would believe a whore over the Lord of Casterly Rock when she would claim she was his rightful wife? Tyrion wouldn’t give her up, along with his alliance to House Tyrell, for a whore. There was no strong proof that this marriage actually took place, and there were so many things they could oppose to its legitimacy that it wouldn’t pose a threat. Margaery breathed steadier.

Margaery noticed the sun was setting on the horizon. She remembered witnessing some with Tyrion,
from their bedroom, from here and from the Golden Tower. She hoped there would be many more. But before that, she would need to help Tyrion face his past. It was obvious he regretted the things he did, and Margaery couldn’t blame him for that, but he wasn’t responsible. His father forced him to do it. Right now, Margaery was glad that Tywin Lannister was dead, and not because it allowed her to become Lady of Casterly Rock.

“My lady.” Margaery turned her head on the left to see Mira standing at the entrance of the gazebo.

“What is it, Mira?” Margaery asked.

“I’ve been looking for you. We were waiting to prepare you for dinner, but you didn’t come.”

Margaery realized how late it was. The sun was about to disappear on the horizon. “I forgot. But… I think that won’t be necessary, Mira. I’m not even sure there will be a dinner.”

“My lady?”

“Go see Sera, and tell her I won’t need your help for this evening. Have an evening off you both.”

“Thank you, my lady,” replied her handmaiden in an unsure way. She seemed to not know what to think of it. Margaery always had her handmaidens prepare her for the day, for dinner, for the night and for any special event that could happen during the day.

Mira didn’t leave however. “Is there something else, Mira?”

“Well, my lady, I thought you might want to know. I have gone to the godswood two hours ago, and I saw Lord Tyrion there. He was… crying. I thought you would want to know this.”

“Thank you, Mira.” That wasn’t a surprise for Margaery, but she didn’t tell her friend. She understood why Tyrion never talked about the horrible things that happened to his first wife, and she didn’t want to tell the others, not even Mira. Tyrion told it to her, and only to her. Her handmaiden started to turn away, but Margaery called her back. “Mira, come and sit. I would like to talk with you for a moment.”

“Sera will be waiting for us, my lady,” Mira pointed out.

Margaery dismissed it. “Let her wait a little. It won’t kill her.” Obediently, Mira came and sat besides her mistress. “Do you like Casterly Rock, Mira?”

“Yes, my lady. It’s a good place.”

“Have you talked with Ser Daven since the last time?”

Mira smiled shyly. “My lady, I don’t believe Ser Daven has any interest in me.”

“Well, when he visited Highgarden he asked you to come back with him, and he seems more than amiable with you.”

“He’s like that with most of the people, my lady. And I think he might only have proposed me this last year so I could see the castle, and then describe you how wonderful it was when I would come back. Ser Daven doesn’t give me more attention than to anyone else.”

Margaery was mostly teasing her handmaiden, truth be told, but Mira was also denying things a little. Her friend was very humble and didn’t really consider the possibility of men looking at her. She was on the brink of her fifteenth name day now, and it should surprise no one that some men were
interested in her, but Mira didn’t give them any particular attention in return. Ser Daven seemed to appreciate Mira more than Margaery’s cousins and her other handmaidens. She once surprised them talking about her brother Rodrik, who was a great swordsman in the North. Still, Margaery knew it was unlikely that something would happen between Ser Daven and Mira. Her northern handmaiden would never let herself get involved in a relationship or an affair with anyone, and right now Ser Stafford was discussing a betrothal between his son Daven and Desmera Redwyne, Margaery’s cousin through her mother Mina Tyrell, her father’s sister, who was married to Lord Paxter Redwyne. Ser Daven Lannister wouldn’t drop a Redwyne for Mira, and Tyrion wouldn’t allow that either. This betrothal would reinforce the bonds between the Westerlands and the Reach. Anyway, Ser Daven’s interest in Mira seemed to come essentially from the fact he could discuss with her about the ways Northerners fight. While most of the girls would only marvel at how brave the knights were and how handsome they were in their armors during a tourney, Mira was actually more interested in their strategies and would be more interested by how they won. The same thing could be said about the sparring practices. Ser Daven was a practical man, quite like Garlan, so it was no surprise he appreciated much more to speak with Mira than with Sera or Megga or Elinor. Things didn’t go farther between them.

“Don’t you have someone in mind? Surely you must,” Margaery insisted, trying to figure out how far it could go to have Mira blush.

“My lady, I’m just not interested in someone right now. And to be honest, would it be wise for me to run after a man who I may not marry?”

Margaery smiled sadly. With this behavior, she was afraid Mira would still be an unwed handmaiden at fifty, or never have some fun before she married. “When you see someone who you think could be a good husband for you, and that your family would accept, tell me and I’ll arrange everything. I regret you didn’t accept my suggestion about Willas when I made it.”

Mira cast her eyes on the floor for a second. “I cannot marry someone from a paramount family. At least not from the main branch. You know it, my lady.”

Margaery slightly changed of subject. “What about Sera? Does she have someone in mind?”

Mira hesitated. “Yes. She has.”

“Tell me who it is,” Margaery said, taking a conspiracy expression. This discussion turned her mind away from dreadful thoughts.

“Sera wants to keep it secret, my lady.”

“Very well. That will be our secret to the three of us.”

Mira gave in. “Ser Lucion.”

“Ser Lucion Lannister. Well, I may have to discuss arrangements with Ser Damion then.”

“It’s nothing serious for now, my lady. This is more flirting than anything else. But if it ever comes to that, you’ll have to be very convincing. Ser Lucion is Ser Damion’s only son.”

“I know,” Margaery agreed. It was a chance no one knew about Sera’s bastardy, or else Margaery would never find a husband for her.

Margaery looked to the sea. The sun had disappeared, but some of his light still poured in the sky. It would be dark soon. They ought to go back to the castle, but Margaery didn’t want to go yet.
“Do you miss Ironrath sometimes, Mira?” she asked.

“A lot, my lady, in fact. I miss my parents, my brothers, Talia, the ironwood grove behind our home. I miss the North. I like the south, don’t get me wrong, both the Reach and the Westerlands, Highgarden and Casterly Rock, but I miss the North. I would like to see it again.”

Yearning pierced Mira’s voice. “What would you do if I gave you the authorization to go back to Ironrath? If I told you to go back there to see your family?”

There was uncertainty in Mira’s eyes. “Well, do you still have need of me, my lady?”

Margaery shrugged. “Well, I could find another handmaiden, though I would miss you deeply. From the day you arrived in Highgarden, I’ve thought of you more as a friend than as my handmaiden. A dear friend, in fact. I wouldn’t want to see you go.”

“Well, do you still have need of me, my lady?”

Then I won’t.”

“You’re a real friend, Mira, you know.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Tyrion would miss Margaery deeply too if she ever was to leave Casterly Rock and return to Highgarden like he suggested to her this morning. He loved her. She knew it. How hard it must have been for him to tell her the truth. How could his father do such a thing?

“Mira, tell me, has your father ever been cruel to you or your sister or your brothers?” Margaery asked without thinking.

Mira seemed taken aback by the question. She wasn’t expecting it, and Margaery looked to have taken it out of nowhere, but like always, her handmaiden answered like it was expected of her.

“No, my lady. Hard, sometimes. But cruel? Never. There have been times he was angry after us when we did something wrong, but he was never cruel with us. He is called Gregor the Good, and believe me IT IS because he is good. He could be hard, but when he was it was when we were in the wrong, just like with his smallfolk.”

Margaery nodded. “You’ve grown in a good family, Mira. You’re lucky. Not everyone has this chance.” She thought about Tyrion.

Mira didn’t seem to realize Margaery was speaking about her husband. She was looking straight before her, her gaze lost far away. “Not that much. You know what happened to my brother Asher.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry. I almost forgot.”

“He’s been forced into exile, and all that because he fell in love with the wrong woman. He did nothing wrong. He only loved her, and from what I know, Gwyn loved him too. If there hadn’t been this long story of bloodshed between the Whitehills and the Forresters... I remember when Asher told my father that he planned to marry Gwyn. My father had just organized a betrothal for Rodrik, and now he was trying to organize one for Asher too. He told my brother that he could never marry Gwyn because she was a Whitehill. Asher got so angry, and afterwards, when my father discovered they met in secret... What an argument they had. It’s one of the few times I saw my father so angry. He told Asher he would start a war, and Asher didn’t want to hear anything. He only wanted to marry Gwyn, and he was ready to start a war for that. And one day, when he went to see her one more time, there were four Whitehill soldiers waiting for him. We don’t know exactly what happened, but Asher killed them all, and my father was forced to exile him to prevent a war with the
Whitehills. I heard my mother shouting at my father the night before Asher left. It had never happened before. My father didn’t show it, but he was destroyed by this. He needed months to behave normally again, but I’m sure he will never recover completely from this.”

Margaery listened to Mira’s tale. She wondered what her own father would have done if he had faced such a situation. Perhaps he would have started a war instead, and her mother too. Maybe her grandmother would have been of a different opinion. Then she thought about Tywin Lannister. What would he have done? *He gave her to his guards. They brought her to the barracks and he sent me there to watch.* Lord Tywin hadn’t seemed to care a lot for his children. Maybe he would have accused the Whitehills of trying to kill his son and would have gone to war, and they would have met the same fate than the Reynes, the Tarbecks and the Targaryens.

“Do you know if Asher is well right now?” asked Margaery.

“He sends us news from time to time, when he can. At least, I know he did before I left Ironrath. In his last letter, he sent me a coin from Yunkai. It was only a few days before I left.”

They stayed silent. Light could barely be perceived at the horizon now. They should leave. Margaery voiced her thoughts and Mira followed her. They met a guard up the pathway who gave them a torch. Mira took it and they returned to the southern hill. They were walking towards Margaery’s apartments. Before they could reach it, Sera came running in their direction.

“My lady. Lady Margaery,” she yelled. “I was so afraid. I thought something had happened to you.” She turned her gaze to Mira accusingly. “Where have you been for all this time?”

Margaery answered before Mira could. “It’s my fault, Sera. I began to talk with Mira and I didn’t see the time going on. I’m the one who delayed us. Anyway, I don’t need you for tonight. Your day is over.”

“But, my lady, you didn’t even eat.”

“I’ll ask a servant to bring me some food if I ever feel the need of it. Now go. Both of you.”

Sera exchanged a look with Mira, and she complied without further questions. Margaery walked in the direction of the chambers she shared with Tyrion. She hoped he would be there. They had to talk about many things. However, she stopped halfway. There was something she wanted to fully understand, and she wasn’t sure Tyrion would be the best one to explain her. She turned on her heels and went to someone else’s chambers. The handmaiden looked quite surprised to see her at this hour. She hadn’t been invited, or summoned since in this case it didn’t make much difference.

“Lady Frey is busy right now, my lady. She is with someone else,” Lady Jeyne tried to explain her. When she had arrived last month, Jeyne Westerling had been chosen to act as handmaiden for Lady Genna Frey. She was still new, and it was a chance Genna wasn’t there to hear her being called Lady Frey.

“I don’t care. Just open the door and I will deal with Lady Genna and the people behind. If she ever has anything to reproach to you, tell her you obeyed to the orders of the Lady of Casterly Rock and the Westerlands.”

“She is with Ser Kevan, my lady,” the young girl tried.

“Open the door. This is an order from your lady.”

The Westerling girl finally opened the door and let Margaery go in. Tyrion told her the Westerlings had hoped to marry their daughter to him after he became Lord of Casterly Rock. Margaery was
happy it didn’t happen, and she thought the girl was too young yet to be in Tyrion’s bed, though when she thought about it, now she had to be around the same age than Tysha when Tyrion married her. She wondered if Tyrion would have been able to consummate the marriage if he had married Jeyne Westerling instead of her. Remembering his behaviour on their wedding night, Margaery thought not.

She entered the room to find Ser Kevan and Lady Genna discussing about something concerning King’s Landing, but she couldn’t catch the precise matter since Genna stopped to speak the moment she came in. Ser Kevan stood up to welcome her. Lady Genna didn’t follow her brother.

“Genna, I need to speak with you. Ser Kevan, you too, since you’re here,” Margaery said.

“At this hour?” wondered Genna. “Well, this must a be a matter of importance.”

“It is.”

“As you wish, my lady. How can we be of service to you?” asked Kevan.

Margaery could have taken a seat, but she didn’t. She thought it was best if she remained standing. “Can you tell me why your brother had Tyrion’s wife raped by his guards, why he forced Tyrion to watch them do it, and why he forced Tyrion to rape her as well?” she asked bluntly.

She watched their reaction closely. Ser Kevan looked stunned, but Genna didn’t seem very moved. She was the first one to react. “How did you learn it?” She didn’t deny it, and if she was surprised, she didn’t show it.

“Tyrion told me a few hours ago?”

Genna turned to her brother. “I suppose this explains why Tyrion wasn’t in a good mood when you saw him.”

“Not in a good mood? That’s not the words I would use to describe his state,” Margaery scoffed. “So, why?”

Ser Kevan broke the silence that followed. “My lady, you must understand something. The girl was…”

“A whore. I know. I also know that she was hired by Ser Jaime, that Tyrion believed she was a wheelwright’s orphan until his brother revealed him the truth two weeks after the wedding, and that her name was Tysha. Is there anything else I should know?”

“No. But you have to understand, my lady, that the girl only married Tyrion because he was a Lannister. All she hoped for was to use him so she could live in wealth.”

It remembered Margaery of the way Tyrion talked to her this morning. Many whores I visited said the same. Maybe I don’t pay you, but you’re not that different from them. After all, you would never have married me if it didn’t mean you would become the richest woman in Westeros. That’s the only reason why we’re wed. She felt strange that his uncle was saying this in front of her. The knight kept speaking.

“Our own father, Lord Tytos Lannister, took a candlemaker’s daughter as his mistress when our lady mother died. He made her sit beside him in the Great Hall, she accompanied him in public events, she wore our mother’s jewels and gowns. She grew so influential that it was said no one could petition before our father without her help. Our house was being laughed at. Our bannermen japed about toothless lions, they borrowed money without caring to give it back. Even this woman, who
was scarcely one step above a whore, stole from him. So when our father died and that Tywin became the lord, he put an end to all this.”

Margaery wasn’t very impressed by this. Tytos Lannister didn’t seem worse than her father, but Lord Mace Tyrell had advisors and her grandmother. Perhaps Lord Tytos only lacked these. “Did he have your father’s mistress raped by his guards too?” she asked mockingly.

“No.” Genna was the one to speak up this time. “Tywin found another way, more efficient, to destroy her influence. He had her stripped naked and paraded her through Lannisport to the docks. That ended her power.”

“Our brother wasn’t a cruel man,” added Ser Kevan after his sister. “He did it to put an end to her influence and to restore the power and the dignity of our house. Yes, she walked the streets like a whore, but no man laid a hand of her.”

“No man laid a hand on her?” Despite herself, Margaery felt anger boiling in her. “That’s the excuse you find for your brother’s cruelty? A woman he forced to walk naked through the streets wasn’t touched by any man, and this excuses the fact he forced his son to rape his wife?!”

“I know that Lord Tywin may seem a hard man to you, but he was no harder than he’s had to be. He only did what was necessary for House Lannister. He was a just man.”

“What was necessary in having his daughter-in-law raped by his guards before his son? Where was the justice in that? I don’t call it justice. I call it cruelty. Especially when it’s done to your own son. Would you do that to your own children, ser?”

Margaery’s voice had raised with outrage. That hadn’t been her intention to yell. She only wanted answers to know all the details of the story, but now that she faced Ser Kevan’s behaviour to defend his brother after what he did, that was all she could do. Genna intervened at this moment.

“Kevan, Margaery is right. What Tywin did to Tyrion this day was cruel and unnecessary. And to answer you, my dear, about the reasons Tywin had to do it? Well, it’s simply because he hated Tyrion, and Tywin enjoyed to mistreat him.”

“Genna, what are you…”

“No, Kevan, this time you’ll listen.” Lady Genna made her brother shut up in a very similar way to the one Margaery’s grandmother used with her father or her mother. “Tywin hated Tyrion. He hated him from the day he was born. He loved to humiliate Tyrion. Why do you think he put him in charge of the sewers if not to mock him?”

“Tyrion proved to be very capable in this task,” argued Genna’s brother.

“Af. If our father had named Tywin to this position, you would say this was unworthy of him, but since Tywin took the decision, you approve it. Do you approve Tywin’s decision to not be there when his wife was dying?”

“He was there.”

“Not when she gave her last breath.”

“He had pressing matters to attend to, an important feud between the Serrets and the Leffords to settle.”

“That’s the excuse he gave you, Kevan. The real reason is quite different. Tywin wanted to kill
Tyrion the very moment he was born, when he realized that Tyrion was a dwarf and that Joanna would soon die. He wanted to drown him into the sea. The only reason why he didn’t do it is because Joanna begged him to keep Tyrion alive. Tywin couldn’t refuse, this was the last thing Joanna ever asked of him, but he never forgave Joanna for asking this. He decided to make her pay this by not being present in her last moments.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“Because Joanna told me. Unlike Tywin, I was there when she died, and if you had been present, and not by our brother’s side, then you would have heard the same things from her.”

Ser Kevan stared in shock at his sister. Genna turned to Margaery. “Please forgive us. You shouldn’t assist to a quarrel between brother and sister.” She turned her attention to Ser Kevan again. “You should leave, Kevan. I believe I am much better placed to enlighten our lady than you are.”

Slowly, the knight looked at Margaery. “Do I have your leave, my lady?”

“You have,” she replied dryly. He had more than her leave. Ser Kevan walked away from his sister’s apartments and Margaery found herself alone with Genna. It was a good thing he was gone, or else she didn’t know what she could have done. His stupidity when defending his brother’s actions made Margaery’s father look like the brightest man in the world.

“You must pardon my brother. What he said about our father was true. It affected all of us, but Tywin and Kevan more than everyone else. Life has been hard for him. Tywin brought back House Lannister on his feet, but all that thanks to himself. All my brothers lived in his shadow, and that shadow Tywin cast was long and black. Each of them had to struggle to find a little sun. Kevan saw how things stood early on, so he made himself a place by Tywin’s side. And he came to admire and almost worship our brother, always finding something to justify his actions, even the worst ones.”

“So it is true? What Tyrion told me?” Margaery asked angrily.

“It is. Tywin did have the girl raped, he did force Tyrion to watch it, and he forced Tyrion to rape her.”

Margaery couldn’t retain a scoff. “What kind of father does that to his own son?”

“None. And that’s the problem. Tywin never saw himself as Tyrion’s father. Whenever he looked at Tyrion, all he saw was the dwarf who killed the woman he loved.”

“Tyrion didn’t kill his mother. He didn’t choose to kill her when he was born.”

“Of course not. My own mother died from the complications that followed the birth of my youngest brother, and Tywin never hated Gerion for that, nor anyone. But Tywin loved Joanna, and when she died, the best part of him disappeared. I saw it dying slowly even before Joanna left, but her death was the final blow. The only time I can recall Tywin addressing Tyrion as his son was when he was dying. Perhaps in his last hours he finally realized that Tyrion was the heir he needed, not Jaime, though I doubt it. Tywin always saw Jaime like his heir, even after he was named on the Kingsguard, despite the fact it was obvious Jaime wasn’t meant to be Lord of the Rock. Once I told Tywin that Tyrion was his son and that Jaime was not, and he would not speak to me for half a year. Men are such thundering great fools. Even the sort who come along once in a thousand years.”

“Quite right. There’s probably not even a father who comes each two thousand years who would do something like that to his son.”

Genna sighed. “I assure you this wasn’t the only atrocity Tywin made.”
“I know. There are the Targaryen children. And I have heard The Rains of Castamere more than enough since I arrived. Your brother’s cruelty was made into a song.”

“It was,” recognized Genna, regret in her voice. “I loved my brother, but I can’t pretend that I approved of all he did, or much enjoyed the company of the man that he became.”

At least Genna recognized the wrongs of her brother. The same couldn’t be told about Ser Kevan.

“Genna, do you love Tyrion?”

Genna looked at her strangely. “After Joanna died, I tried to play the role she couldn’t play anymore. I tried to be there for her children. For Jaime, for Tyrion, for Cersei, but I’m afraid I failed. Tywin’s shadow left no sun for his brothers, but it didn’t leave any for his children either, and not much more for me. Tyrion grew lonely. And after this affair with the girl, he began to visit brothels, to drink, and to gamble. I don’t approve how Tyrion used to live, but if Tywin had been a better father to his children, maybe Tyrion wouldn’t have lived like a profligate.”

“Probably not. Why did no one do anything? No one tried to stop this from happening? No one spoke against a gang rape?”

“Tywin wasn’t the sort of man to listen to other’s advice. I learnt what he did only once all was done, and Kevan, if he ever knew about this, would never have opposed Tywin. Tyrion himself did nothing. His father gave him an order, and he obeyed. Tywin would reward you if you did as he asked, but if you refused, then he would make you pay, and thrice.”

Genna’s voice was a mix of regret and exasperation. Again, she remembered Margaery of her grandmother. “Well, I suppose I heard everything I needed. Now I know better what kind of man your brother was.”

She turned on her heels, but Genna called her. “Margaery. You’ve been a good influence on Tyrion, you know. Please make sure it continues.”

Margaery faced Genna again. “I will.” Then a thought came to her mind. “By the way, Genna, from now on, I don’t want to ever hear The Rains of Castamere again. If I hear someone singing it in my presence, or that someone sang it inside these walls, I will banish him from the Westerlands. And if I hear that someone asked for the song to be played, I banish him from Casterly Rock. Forever. Is that clear enough?”

Genna looked at her strangely. “As you wish. I will warn everyone.”

“No. I’m only warning you for now. Make sure your singer knows it, or else you’ll have to find another one. I’ll make sure myself that everyone else is warned.”

“You know that this song reminds people of the fate that awaits them if they ever rebel. It keeps our bannermen in line.”

“Maybe, but your brother needed it to spread fear. That’s how he ruled. With fear. I do not intend to rule with fear. Instead of making the people fear me and Tyrion, I will make them love us. It will be much more efficient. People may still rebel against their rulers when they fear them, but they will never rebel against rulers they love.”

Margaery walked away, furious. Now she knew for a certainty that Tyrion hadn’t been lying. She didn’t believe he did, but who knew. She had to be sure, and now she was. She wondered is she shouldn’t order the name of Tywin Lannister to never be said again, but perhaps it would be too much. Tywin Lannister had been Tyrion’s father, and his titles came from his father. Margaery
couldn’t entirely erase the man’s memory. Still, she wouldn’t have his song played again in her presence, or anywhere else in Casterly Rock. She didn’t think Tyrion would mind.

Margaery remembered how Tyrion was a few hours ago when they spoke. She never saw someone so utterly ruined. He had any right to be. She could still barely understand how all this could happen. She couldn’t imagine a member of her own family acting like Tywin Lannister did. She remembered something she heard one day about Randyll Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill. He was apparently very hard on his eldest son and heir because he couldn’t fight, but Margaery had never heard that Lord Randyll could act so viciously. According to his daughter Talla, he would have his son beaten by master-at-arms in the practice grounds while they tried to teach him how to fight, but never would he do something like the things Tywin Lannister did against Tyrion. The man they called the Old Lion disgusted Margaery.

She arrived before the massive golden doors of their apartments. Two guards stood by its sides like always. One served the Lannisters, the other one served the Tyrells.

“Is Lord Tyrion here?” she asked.

“Yes, my lady,” answered the man serving her family.

Margaery took a great inspiration and walked in. She opened the door carefully and closed it carefully. She stayed in the entrance for a long time, wondering what she should say. She had to console people before, but never in a situation like this one, and she couldn’t fail here. Tyrion wasn’t in the living room. She found him into their bedroom, sitting at a table, his back turned on her, several jugs of wine near him, most of them empty. She closed her eyes. She hoped he wouldn’t be too drunk and that Tyrion’s legendary resistance to wine would be proven again tonight.

“I suppose you expected me to be gone,” she said, waiting for a reaction. Her husband took all his time to answer.

“That wouldn’t have surprised me.” His voice was hoarse, but he didn’t seem drunk from what Margaery could judge.

“You took advantage to drink again?”

“Everything’s better with some wine in the belly.” If Tyrion noticed the half-jape she made, he didn’t show it.

“Well, here I am.”

“Why?” He still stared in the opposite direction, his nape facing her.

She walked toward Tyrion and got around to face him. He didn’t look at her, but she looked at him. “Why should I leave? Because your father was a horrible man? A monster?”

“I have this in common with him.”

Margaery sighed. “Tyrion! You’re not a monster. It’s your father who had that poor girl raped, not you.”

“But I did it all the same. I never thought a single second about disobeying my father, like always. And before… I just stayed there, watching. I could have tried to help her, but I didn’t. I just watched. I could have tried to save her… But I didn’t. Not because I was afraid. Because I felt betrayed. I just watched.”
His voice had decreased to a whisper. She approached him and laid a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t jerk away like he did previously in the day. She took some comfort in that. He wasn’t turning her down. “Your father is dead now. It doesn’t have to happen again.”

“It will never happen again. I would rather die than see something like this again.” His voice had turned hard. Margaery didn’t doubt he meant it.

“Well, I have no reason to leave then. You are a much better man than you believe.”

Tyrion slowly moved his head to look at her for the first time since she entered. “You’re not going to leave?”

She dropped on her knees and looked at Tyrion straight in his eyes. “How could I? Have you forgotten? I’m your wife. We said the words. I am yours, and you are mine.”

Tyrion burst into tears and buried his face into her shoulder. Margaery wrapped her arms around his neck. She meant the words she said. She was his, and he was hers.

“I love you, you know,” Tyrion said. She closed her eyes as she hid her face into his hair.

“I know,” she simply replied.

She wished she could say more, but she couldn’t. Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

I suppose this is a better way to end year 2016 than the previous chapter, or a good way to begin year 2017 depending on your time zone. I hope you enjoyed it, whether it was to end a year or to begin a new one. I hope you’ll like the next chapter even more.

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery (again)
Margaery VIII

Chapter Notes

I consider this chapter to be the first I upload in this Year 2017. For some people, it was the previous chapter that was the first one of the year, but on my side of the Atlantic, it was uploaded before midnight. I believe this chapter makes for a particularly good opening for 2017, while the previous one ended 2016 pretty well. Tyrion's last chapter wasn't well made to end a year.

I hope you'll enjoy this chapter. It marks a very important moment in the story. I leave you to discover what this is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY VIII

Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands.

She put down her signature at the end of the letter. It was the last one, and it was intended for Lady Elyana Sarwyck, daughter of Raynald Sarwyck, Lord of Riverspring. Margaery had spent most of the afternoon writing to all the ladies in the Westerlands, in prevision of their journey across the kingdom.

She and Tyrion had decided they should make their presence known through all the Westerlands, and the best way for that was to make a tour of it. They would visit every noble family in the Westerlands during the next months. For Margaery, this would be an opportunity to get closer to the people all over the Westerlands, and to create links with the other noble families. Everyone would know who was the new Lady of the Westerlands this way. They wouldn’t know her if she remained inside Casterly Rock and didn’t go farther than Lannisport.

That would also be an opportunity for Tyrion to solve a few problems with lords, including Lord Lefford, who still failed to pay some taxes. Of course, Tyrion also wanted to show her the Westerlands in more detail. He had almost made her visit all Casterly Rock. Almost. There were still certain places she had not yet seen. She would wait for their return to see them. In the meantime, she would get to know the Westerlands better.

Margaery handed the letter to Mira who folded it, wrote the address, and put the sigil of House Lannister in red wax on it. The letter for Lady Sarwyck was added to the pile at the right corner of her desk. They mostly said the same things, with a few variants. Margaery wrote to all of them that she would be very happy to meet them in person in their home, and that she hoped she and her lord husband would prove to be admirable guests to them. She also said she was eager to know them better. It was a tiresome task to write approximately the same words dozens of time, but this was necessary. Margaery thought it would be more pleasant to meet these ladies than to write to them.

“Mira, go to the stables with these. Tell the riders to bring them to the addresses written on them,” Margaery told her friend.
“Yes, my lady.”

Mira took the letters while Margaery leaned in her chair, relieved this task was over. They would leave tomorrow, and the end of the afternoon was already approaching. She wanted to have some time for herself before they left next morning. She noticed Mira wasn’t leaving. She had made half the way towards the door, but didn’t seem about to complete the other half.

“Is there something wrong, Mira?”

Her handmaiden slowly turned to face her. “My lady, if I may, what do you intend to do about Sera?”

Margaery had almost forgotten about it. She sighed. “Fetch her. I need to talk with her.”

Mira curtsied and left. That wasn’t a discussion Margaery was looking forward to, but it had to be done. She hated to do these things, but she wasn’t about to let someone ruin all the efforts she invested during the past few months.

She waited for Sera to come and looked around her. She was given this solar early after her wedding. It was the one used by the Ladies of Casterly Rock for the last two hundred years. It had been a little dusty the first time she came into it. It remained unoccupied for over twenty years after all. Now, with the changes Margaery brought to the room, it was a perfect place to work for the Lady of the Westerlands. She had the banner of House Tyrell hung to the wall, several vases containing flowers on the tables all around, along with many jewels she brought with her from Highgarden, and many more that were given to her by Tyrion. There were also about four smaller desks around the bigger one that belonged to her, used by scribes. Most of the time, Margaery’s scribes were her handmaidens, or even her cousins. The scribe’s desks were made of wood, though even if it was the most expensive wood to grow in Westeros, they were nothing when compared to the desk half made of gold she had for her personal use. After six months, the luxury she was surrounded by no longer troubled her in any way, and she began to feel it was normal to be surrounded so much by gold, silver, precious stones and other riches.

One of the jewels that was displayed was the one she had the day she married Tyrion. It had the form of a rose, a ruby on one side, a sapphire on the other one. Margaery walked to the table where it was and took the double pendant in her hand. It had belonged to Tyrion’s mother, when she was still alive. Genna told her that this one was made especially for the Lady Joanna on her husband’s order. Margaery had a hard time imagining Lord Tywin Lannister offering such a gift to his wife when she thought about the ordeal he submitted his son to, but if Tyrion’s father had deeply and sincerely loved his wife, perhaps it could explain why he hated his son so much for his wife’s death.

Six months. Six months since she was married to Tyrion, and about a year since she read the letter in which he offered her to stop all discussions of marriage if she wanted. How much had happened since. Margaery was glad she answered that she wanted to marry him. If she was asked the same question today, she would give the same answer, though this time the answer would be more sincere. She loved her new life with Tyrion, and she wouldn’t let Sera ruin it.

With care, she put the pendant back on the table and returned behind her desk. She looked through the window. She could see Lannisport from there. The construction of the hospice she had planned recently would begin while she would be touring the Westerlands. She wouldn’t be present for the beginning of the works.

There was a knock on the door. “Lady Sera Durwell,” announced one of her guards.

“Let her in,” she replied loudly.
Margaery kept looking outside as she heard the door opening, then closing. She turned around to look at her friend. Sera had her eyes cast down as she stood in the center of the solar. At least, she regretted what she did, but she did it all the same. Margaery couldn’t close her eyes on this. She looked around to make sure no one was there to hear them and that the door was well closed before she spoke.

“I suppose you know why I summoned you.”

“Yes, my lady,” Sera replied.

“Good. Sit.” Sera complied and sat. Margaery didn’t. She stood still. “How do you think I feel?”

“Angry?”

“No. Disappointed, yes. Maybe annoyed, but not angry. I thought you would know better, Sera. What did you have in mind?”

“Nothing happened, my lady.”

“But something would have happened, if Mira hadn’t walked in. You’re lucky she did, and that it was her who did it, and not someone else, or the rumor would be spreading through the castle as we speak. What were you thinking about? Laying with Lucion Lannister in a larder?”

“We thought no one would find us there.”

“Well, you were wrong.” Margaery paused. “Sera, do you realize how important it is for many men that their wife is a virgin when they marry? Your marriage prospects are already limited. What do you think they will be if you lose your maidenhead, or if you’re found with a young man? If rumours began to spread that you are not virtuous?”

“But I’m not the only one to do that, my lady” Sera complained. “Almost everyone in Highgarden does it. You yourself…”

Margaery put a stop to her justifications. “We won’t talk about these things. Not here. We are no longer in Highgarden, Sera. This is Casterly Rock. Things are different here. Especially for you. And there’s a difference between having a go beneath the sheets with a squire from a minor house or a stable boy, and laying with a cousin of the Warden of the West.”

A long silence followed before Sera replied. “He… He said he wanted to marry me.”

“Did he talk about it to his father?”

“No. No, he said he would, but he didn’t. Not yet.”

Margaery sighed, both in exasperation and in relief. “Look, Sera. Ser Damion Lannister holds an important position at Casterly Rock. He is a cousin of Lord Tyrion, and plays an important role in the administration of the Rock. Lucion is his only son. Did you really expect him to marry his son to you? He is a Lannister. He wouldn’t marry his only son and heir to a girl from a minor house of the Reach, even less from a house that’s been extinct for two hundred years.”

“But I thought that if you talked…”

“Ser Damion will not listen to me. He would probably feel insulted if I was to propose him a marriage between you and Lucion.”
“But if you convinced Lord Tyrion to speak to him…”

“I will not convince Tyrion on this matter. He would listen to me, but he wouldn’t approve. He wouldn’t accept to force his cousin to marry his son to someone who’s not highborn enough. I do not control Tyrion, Sera. I have his ear, he listens to me, but he doesn’t do everything I tell him. I don’t control him.” And I don’t want to control him. “You must see the truth in your situation, Sera. You cannot marry Lucion. I may be able to arrange a marriage for you one day, but not this one, and don’t expect me to arrange you a marriage if you behave in this way, or even to keep you at my service.”

Sera panicked. “No, please, my lady. Don’t send me back to Highgarden.”

“I may have to. Do you realize how hard it’s been for me to gain the trust of my husband? How difficult it was to establish a good relationship with him? That sort of things could ruin everything I’ve done in the last months to gain the power and the influence I have now. My position is fragile, and so is the alliance between my family and the Lannisters. I cannot allow a scandal to threaten it.”

Sera was close to tears. Margaery felt bad and evil for talking so rudely to her friend, but she had no choice. She had done too much to gain the respect and some trust from the Lannisters, not to mention her relationship with Tyrion. An affair between her handmaiden and a cousin of her husband could destroy all of it, or at least a part of it. She couldn’t allow it.

“When do I leave?” Sera asked.

“Tomorrow on the morning. I want you to go to my rooms now, and to prepare everything for the journey. You will leave Casterly Rock with us.”

Sera was stunned and looked utterly surprised. “You mean… You’re not sending me back to Highgarden?”

Margaery smiled sadly. “Not yet. We can all make mistakes. Aside from me, you, Mira and Lucion, no one knows about this. I made sure that Lucion would never talk about it, and Mira will never let a word escape about the whole thing. You’re lucky. But I don’t want this to happen again. Next time, you may not have the same chance, and it may not be Mira who will find you. If this happens again, I’ll send you back to Highgarden. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my lady. I promise. It won’t happen again.” Sera seemed quite relieved.

“Do you swear that nothing happened?”

“I swear it, my lady. Nothing happened.”

“Well, in this case, go on. Carry on your duties.”

She dismissed Sera with these words. The brown-haired girl left her chair and began to walk to the door, but Margaery stopped her in the way. “Sera, consider this too. You were born out of the bounds of marriage, because your mother did something similar to what you were about to do yesterday. You know what it is to grow in this condition, and you’ve been lucky that my grandmother and I have wanted to take care of you. Do you really want to take the risk of giving this life, maybe a worse one, to a child?”

Sera turned, uncertainty, then shame on her face. She shook her head. “No, my lady.”

“Remember this the next time you want to hide somewhere with a boy.”
Sera nodded and left. It was done. Margaery hoped she didn’t make a mistake. Sera was far less
careful and took things much less seriously than Mira. She could cause problems, but Margaery
didn’t want to send her away. Sera deserved a chance. However, if she could pose a real threat to
Margaery’s position, then she would have no choice but to expel Sera from her service. That wasn’t
a prospect she cherished.

Margaery sat down and put a hand on her forehead. Someone entered, but Margaery didn’t look up
immediately. When she did, Mira was there.

“Excuse me, my lady. If you want to rest, I can come back later,” Mira started.

“No.” Margaery straightened in her seat. “I suppose you want to know about Sera.”

“Well, she told me she would stay for the time being.”

“Yes, but I would like you to keep an eye on her. Try to stop her from doing any other folly. With
some hope, this accident will all be forgotten when we will come back in a few months, and both Ser
Lucion and Sera will not think about it again. Did you send the letters?”

“Yes, my lady. The riders have already left. But there’s been a letter that arrived for you from the
harbor. The captain of the ship asked me to deliver it to you.” Mira handed her the letter in question.

“It seems to come from Lady Rhea Florent.”

“Lord Leyton’s fourth wife. Well, let’s see what this is about.”

Margaery looked at the seal of House Hightower. When she thought about it, she believed she
should take a personal seal instead of the seal of House Lannister. Perhaps have a seal made that
represented a lion and a flower together, to put in evidence the alliance between her family and
Tyrion’s. At least, she should seal her letters with green wax if she kept the seal of House Lannister.
She broke the seal, unrolled the letter, and began to read it in silence.

To Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands,

May the Gods bless you and Lord Tyrion, great Lord of Casterly Rock and great Lord of the
Westerlands. I want to thank you for your generous offer concerning the orphanage I’m about to
build in Oldtown. Many orphanages in our city are about to collapse, and your financial help to
build new ones will allow hundreds if not thousands of parentless children to have a roof. You don’t
know how grateful I am for your support. I’ve met your mother once, and I can see without meeting
you in person that you take much after her. I promise you that I will be in your debt forever, and I
hope you come to see the works for yourself when they’re done.

Happiness and health to both you and your lord husband,

Rhea Florent, Lady of the Hightower

A smile crossed Margaery’s face, and an inaudible laugh escaped her throat. Things were going as
planned. She had an ally inside the Hightower now. Lord Paxter Redwyne was ready to agree, her
own family already agreed, and with the support of all families in the Westerlands who had a harbor,
along with the help of Lord Leyton’s wife and her mother’s assistance, it wouldn’t be long before the
Voice of Oldtown agreed. Soon, Tyrion’s plan would be executed: a common low-tariff zone
between the Westerlands and the Reach. Tyrion was already calling it the South-Western Free Trade
Agreement, though it may still be early to give it a name. It was still far from signed.

“Good news, my lady?” Mira asked.
“Yes, indeed.”

Margaery was smiling. This future agreement was one of the bases on which she hoped to build a strong alliance between her family and House Lannister, and to strengthen her marriage with Tyrion as well. She had written many letters and sent more ravens than one could imagine to get her parents and her grandmother to help her in this, and she could see the pieces taking their places. The only way forward for her family was to reinforce their union with the Lannisters, and for that Margaery had to be her husband’s ally. That’s what she and Tyrion were. Allies. Well, they were more than allies, but allies all the same.

“I’ll go visit the maze. Would you accompany me?” Margaery asked to her handmaiden.

“Yes, my lady.”

Margaery was wearing a red gown in the Reach fashion today, so Mira wrapped her shoulders with a green shawl before they left. They walked away together from her solar and travelled through the halls and corridors of the Rock. Six months that Margaery spent here, and despite her wish to see Highgarden again, Casterly Rock already felt like home. People bowed on her passage, servants, guards and knights all alike. She and Mira were going to the maze Margaery was having prepared on the northern hill. In normal times, Margaery would have brought all her cousins along with her handmaidens and the young ladies of Casterly Rock so they could enjoy the end of the afternoon together, but today she wanted some solitude. Hence the reason she headed there alone with Mira.

They reached the Lion’s Bridge. Margaery remembered this was the place where she had her first conversation with Tyrion. They had laughed together, spoken about the history of the Rock and the bridge linking its two separate hills, talked about Willas and her grandmother, and she had played the perfect lady happy to be with her betrothed. She had done so for most of their marriage, but now she tried not to anymore. Ever since this day last month when she learned the truth about Tysha, Margaery tried to not act like she did before. She knew Tyrion didn’t like it, and she thought she knew better why now. There were times when she would do it instinctively, but right when it happened Tyrion’s face would darken and she would remember she wasn’t to act with him anymore. All the same, things were much better between them, or so she thought. At least, everything concerning her personal impression of Tyrion was far better than before. She now wished she had been entirely honest with him from the beginning, ever since this first time on the bridge, but how would she know she could trust him at the time? Now she knew, and she wouldn’t make the same mistakes twice.

She turned to Mira as they were no farther than half the bridge. “I heard you received a letter from Willas,” Margaery said with a wicked smile.

Mira was obviously taken aback, though she maintained her composure quite well. “I received it two weeks ago, my lady.”

Some pale red appeared on her handmaiden’s cheeks. “What did it say?” Margaery asked. She liked to tease Mira. Sera did like it too, though Mira always remained impassive. This time, however, she did not.

“Well… I… He asked if… He asked if I could come back to Highgarden.”

“He did?”

“He wanted me to ask you this favor.”

Margaery thought fondly of her cousin’s request. He had written to her last month as well, asking the
same thing concerning Mira. Margaery had declined. Mira was her handmaiden, and she didn’t want her to leave her service. Now it seemed her cousin was trying again, though this time he wanted Mira to ask Margaery for her leave.

“So?” wondered Margaery aloud.

“Well, I don’t wish to leave, my lady, but I haven’t replied to Willas yet. I’m afraid it could hurt him.”

Margaery looked carefully at her friend. “Mira, do you love Willas? Honestly?”

The Northerner took her time to answer. “I’m sure he would make a good husband, my lady, and I’m quite fond of him, truth be told, but I don’t want to marry. Not yet. And I’m afraid I wouldn’t be a suitable wife for him.”

Margaery knew Mira was right, but on the other side, Willas wasn’t about to marry a suitable wife anytime soon. Furthermore, it was obvious that he was in love with Mira, though he would never admit it. He was far too shy for that. Maybe Mira was his best chance.

“You don’t have to marry immediately, Mira. Betrothals have their reasons to exist.” Margaery was implying that they could marry later.

“But, my lady, I come from a minor house…”

“Mira, it doesn’t matter.” She interrupted her friend, something she seldom did. “Willas will probably never find a suitable wife. He’s lame, and he doesn’t have much to inherit. He has no lands, no holdings, only a position at Highgarden that any Lord of Highgarden could take away from him anytime. We can’t be sure he will ever marry. He loves you, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Your family may not agree, my lady,” Mira replied after a moment.

“I can convince my uncle Garth, and my parents and my grandmother as well. We can even keep the betrothal secret. Don’t come and tell me your family would disapprove if you married a Tyrell.”

“No, I don’t think so. Still… It doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Do you love Willas?” Margaery asked her again.

Mira took a lot of time to answer. “I would come to love him, if we were married, my lady. I’m quite sure of that. But as I said, I don’t want to marry yet, and I don’t believe it would be in House Tyrell’s interest to make official a betrothal between one of their own and some northern girl.”

Margaery stopped and looked at her handmaiden. Mira was quite beautiful, and she would have made a perfect bride for Willas if she was more hightborn. Still, since Willas didn’t get any chance of marriage from a great family, Mira was far from a bad match. They did get along very well, and Willas would be very happy with her. Mira also loved Highgarden, and she did like Willas very much. She would be happy with him as well, but Mira’s sense of duty and honor made her hesitate.

“Willas is very fond of you, Mira. Just keep that in mind the next time you see him, for he will certainly not be married then,” Margaery declared. Then she added with a smile. “In the meantime, I don’t intend to let you leave my service.”

Mira took some time to react to the last remark, but then she smiled lightly and everything was forgotten. They resumed their walk. Margaery gave her instructions to make sure everything would be ready on the morning for their departure. They arrived at the maze, or what would be a maze one
day. The hedgerows had all been planted, but they would need a few years to grow enough for this
to be called an actual maze. In normal times, gardeners would be working to maintain the growing
hedges, but Margaery had ordered that no one would be there today. The future maze would be hers,
and hers alone for this day. She dismissed Mira and walked into it. The hedgerows only reached her
hips for now, but she liked to wander in this growing labyrinth all the same. It reminded her of
Highgarden, and it made her love Casterly Rock even more. She felt at home, thanks to Tyrion.
Without him, Genna and Ser Kevan would have had their way and this garden would never have
come out.

She saw a fountain that was under construction. There were five fountains already before the maze
was begun, and Margaery would have five more added. This was one of the new ones. When it
would be over, it would represent Garth Greenhand, the mythical High King of the Reach. She kept
walking forward until she found an open spot with a table, a few deck chairs and a fountain where
lotus flowers floated. The sun was on his declining course, though still quite high in the sky. It
wasn’t burning, nor was it cold. She sat on one of the chairs and looked at the shining waters of the
fountain. Everything was calm here.

Margaery closed her eyes and sprawled in the chair, her face turned to the sky. She listened to the
soothing sound of the weak wind and the quiet chirping of birds. If she listened well, she thought she
heard the faint noise of waves crashing against the base of Casterly Rock, far away. She felt the sun
and the wind caressing her face and every part of her body that wasn’t covered. After a time, she
removed her shawl and let it drop on the grass, allowing her shoulders the same pleasure that her
arms and a part of her legs enjoyed. She breathed deeply and slowly, soothing her nerves, feeling the
duties and cares she had leave her mind and her body. She felt free of all worry, and she liked it.

She remained in that position for a long time, her eyes closed, unmoving, the extremities of her
fingers brushing the grass under her, until a soft voice came a few feet from her right. “You’re quite a
sight for sore eyes.”

Her husband’s voice brought a smile to her lips. She wondered for how long he had stood there in
silence. She hoped it had been a very long time. For the last month, Tyrion had showed more
restraint in their relationship. Margaery missed the long gazes he would give to her in the first months
of their marriage, and she regretted she had to reach for him more often now, instead of letting him
reach for her. Tyrion initiated things between them much less since he revealed the truth of his first
marriage, and she wished he was like before. But if he had stayed there, watching her… A warm
feeling grew in her belly.

“I hope I am. A rose who’s not a pretty sight isn’t a rose,” she said, her eyes still shut.

Tyrion laughed shortly with her. “You’re more than a pretty sight. You’re a vision.”

“I thought I gave orders to the guards to let no one get in there.”

“Do you really think you can order my men to keep me away from you?” he asked playfully.

His voice was closer now. She heard something crack. Tyrion had sat in a chair next to her. She felt
his hand seizing her own laying on the arm of the chair. She intertwined her fingers with his and
began to rub the back of his own hand with her thumb. Tyrion did a similar movement, though his
other hand joined in taking hold of her own. He played with the ring of diamond she had at her
middle finger. She heard one day that there was a vein that started from this finger and went right to
the heart, hence the reason the marriage ring was passed onto this particular place. She had never
really cared about this kind of details. For her, it was more superstition than anything else, only good
for childhood romance, when you were not aware of the real world, but here she had the impression
to actually feel a strange energy travelling from her hand to her heart, speeding up its pulse. She liked
it. That was something entirely new to her, and she liked it.

“Six months since I gave you this ring,” Tyrion said, probably more to himself than to her.

“Six wonderful months,” Margaery specified.

“Were they? For you?”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “They were.”

She smiled at him, sincerely, without any backthought. Tyrion looked happier than she ever saw him, and that made the warm feeling in her belly grow bigger. They just stood there, she laying on her back, he sitting at her side, holding hands, looking at each other.

“Have I made you happy?” she asked him.

“You have. More than you believe. More than I ever believed someone could make me happy.”

The warm feeling grew again and started to spread. He kept looking at her, but his eyes began to wander all over her body. There was an opening in the skirt that displayed one of her legs, and of course Tyrion’s eyes went to it, but also to her arms and shoulders, uncovered, before they waited a long time on her neckline. Margaery closed her eyes again.

“I had it made last week,” she told him. “Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

It was the first time Margaery had ordered a gown made in the style of the Reach with the colors of House Lannister. For sure it attracted her husband’s attention. His hand that wasn’t intertwined with hers began to wander on her arm, caressing it slowly, brushing her skin. At the same time, she felt his eyes scanning every part of her. Her breathing quickened. Soon his hand was wandering all over her body, from her cheek to her ankle. The warm feeling kept growing, spreading all over her body and not limited anymore to her chest. She was more aware than ever of every sensation, of the sun, the wind, her husband’s fingers and his eyes caressing her skin, of the fabric of her clothes against her flesh. She could hear Tyrion’s quick breath as well.

Then she felt him moving, and before she could think about moving or opening her eyes, all her instincts being slowed down in that very moment, Tyrion’s lips were on hers. They were sweet, and tasted of wine, like they always did. She liked that taste on his lips. It had become very familiar to her, but she felt it even more right now. They released each other’s hand. Tyrion’s was now using both his hands to caress her body. Not that it bothered her very much. She was doing the same with him. Her hands passed on his face, through his hair, on his chest, then in lower places. Heat was spreading all over her, almost with violence, threatening to explode. Their kiss went from sweet at the beginning to passionate, and very soon, she was removing his doublet and he was removing the upper part of her gown.

They were in the Golden Tower. She lied on her tummy, trying to catch her breath. People may believe that after you had to catch it so often in the last hours, you were getting better at it, but you were not. You were only getting used to it, not better at doing it. She kept her eyes shut. The linen under her felt good on her skin, though not as good as her husband’s touch. The same thing could be said about her hair falling on her back. She lazily opened her eyes and looked at the stars outside. They looked brighter than she ever saw them before. The moon wasn’t even at its quarter. Slowly, she turned on her back and looked in the other direction.

Tyrion was still recovering his breath, just like her. He was also sweating, and she was too. They
hadn’t left each other since the end of the afternoon, when he joined her in the garden. The first time they did it had been an explosion of pleasure she had never experienced, except maybe for their wedding night, though right now she couldn’t dare to compare it to anything. She had screamed so loud that Tyrion wondered if the people of Lannisport had heard their lady. They had both laughed uncontrollably to his jape. Then they had done it a second time before they put their clothes on again… only to walk quickly to the Golden Tower, the very place where they spent their wedding night and their first week of marriage, where they resumed their conjugal activities. Margaery couldn’t remember with precision how many times they did it, but it was a lot of times, and they did it in all the ways someone could imagine or not. Now here they were, together, after what could be the hundredth time as far as she knew. They were both resolved enough for that to be possible.

Tyrion opened his eyes. He seemed to have a harder time to recover than her this time. A little pride made its way into Margaery’s mind. He smiled at her and she returned it, sincerely again. They had nothing to hide from each other.

“I wonder how much time I will last,” Tyrion said jokingly.

Margaery laughed, sat in the bed, then moved to be on top of him. “All the night I hope. I still have great plans for us.” She leaned and kissed him. Tyrion still had some hard time to breath, and their kiss didn’t help him. She released him from this torture, though this may only be a way to submit him to another one. The way his hands rubbed her hips were proof that he wasn’t worn out yet, and Margaery wasn’t either. After the short respite that she allowed him, she resumed the torture and kissed him again with her full mouth. Tyrion grunted and moaned in her mouth, which meant he liked it.

“Maybe… we’ll be so tired… tomorrow… on the morning… that we cannot leave… We could stay in bed… for the day… and leave next day,” she suggested while her tongue danced with his.

“I don’t think… we can,” he replied.

“Don’t you want it?” she asked seductively the time of a breath.

“I want it… but I can’t do it.”

She knew he was right. They had planned this journey long ago, and everything was ready for departure on the morrow. Still, she punished him. She broke their embrace and kept her upper body straight tall before him, pushing his hands away from her hips. He tried to bring them back, only to find them slap, Margaery smiling wickedly at the same time. Tyrion knew what this meant. He wasn’t allowed to touch her as long as she didn’t allow it. That was the worst punishment he could receive. Be forced to look at his wife, all naked, without the possibility to touch her body with anything else than his eyes. That was the best way, and the most amusing one as well, to torture him. When she thought he had enough of it, after a few minutes, she kissed him again, granting him the right to lay hands on her, which he did immediately in a very soft way.

She interrupted their kiss for a moment, and he used it to speak. “I love you, Margaery. I never thought I could love someone so much… my lovely wife.”

Their eyes were locked together. Margaery knew that Tyrion loved her. He had loved her for sure ever since their first month of marriage, probably since their first week, and maybe from the first day of their union, ever since they said the words. *I am his and he is mine,* she said back then. *I am hers and she is mine,* he had said. *From this day until the end on my days,* they had repeated together. Margaery thought about the words that were said on this day as she looked deeply into Tyrion’s eyes. Back then, they had only been a formality for her. That was only a ceremony that cemented the alliance between her family and Tyrion’s, and nothing more. She wasn’t really giving herself to
Tyrion at this time, not from her opinion. But now…

*Let it be known that Margaery of House Tyrell and Tyrion of House Lannister are one flesh, one soul, one heart.* She thought of these last words. *One flesh, one soul, one heart.* One flesh. She and Tyrion had been one flesh from the very beginning. That was the one thing in their life together that never posed a problem. Tyrion had proved to be quite experienced, maybe even more than Margaery expected, and after a week of marriage, she doubted she would ever want to lie down with another man. Only for their lovemaking at night… and at day… there were times she thought that it was enough a good reason alone to justify her marriage. The fact he didn’t lay with another woman all this time made this link much stronger between them.

They hadn’t been one soul however at that time, far from it. Margaery was thinking about using this marriage to strengthen her family’s position, and to use her influence on Tyrion to that end. She wasn’t exactly working against him, at least she hoped so, though now that she thought about it, she felt a little ashamed by the fact she tried to manipulate her husband. That wasn’t something she would have been ashamed before, but now she was, even if it was only a little. She had thought she could manipulate Tyrion and make him do whatever she wanted when the time would come, but she had been deceived in that hope. Tyrion was intelligent, very cunning, and quite clever. His reputation may have people believe he would be manipulated easily by any pair of breasts he would see, but that wasn’t the case. He had seen through her, just like the way he saw her fully at night.

So, Margaery had changed her ways with her husband. She couldn’t control him. She decided to work with him, to make of him an ally. She had seen it during these last months. Tyrion was always faithful and loyal to those who were faithful and loyal to him. If she was, he would be like this with her as well. Through this change of behaviour, she and Tyrion had become allies, and friends as well. Margaery had liked it. When you knew Tyrion, he was someone very good to spend time with, and you came to respect, value, and even admire him. Hence, they had become one soul, working together to the same ends, on the trade agreement for example.

As for being one heart… Margaery remembered how miserable Tyrion had been when he told her about Tysha. She still couldn’t understand Lord Tywin’s actions. No girl, no matter she was a whore, deserved to be mistreated that way, and no man deserved to see his own wife raped by other men under his own eyes. As for the other thing that his father forced him to do… With the explanations Genna and Tyrion gave, Margaery understood now why Tyrion visited brothels and drank so often, and also why he was suspicious of her. Not that he had been entirely wrong about it. She had tried to manipulate him. She would never attempt to manipulate him again. Never. She wanted him to be happy with her, and she wanted to be happy with him. She had been fond of him even before the revelation, and she had become fonder of him afterwards. She cared about him more than ever. Sometimes she felt she cared about him more than she cared about her mother, her father, and her brother. She wanted to be his wife. She wanted to be his *real* wife. *One flesh, one soul… one heart.* One heart.

“You said something this afternoon, when we fucked the first time,” Tyrion said all of a sudden. His face was serious despite the choice of words. “Did you mean it?”

Margaery remembered very well what she said at this moment. In fact, she screamed it more than she said it. It was the first time she said these words to him. She kept looking into his green eyes. Wonderful green eyes. They were only a few inches from each other’s face. Their noses were almost touching.

“I meant it,” she said softly, then she repeated the three small words she screamed this afternoon, though this time with a sweetness that was truer than any sweetness she ever displayed in her life. “I love you.”
Then she kissed him, tenderly, slowly, and he returned her kiss in the same way, a huge smile forming on his lips. A smile that her own lips copied. She heard the voice of the septon. One flesh, one soul, one heart, now and forever. Now and forever.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is in some way the equivalent of chapter 73 in "A Shadow and a Wolf", though far shorter. It took four times less many chapters and a chapter three times shorter to mostly arrive at the same result. However, if it was to write again, I may include a song or two.

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Tyrion looked at the green plains that stretched before him. He had already visited the Reach in the past, seen the Mander, Oldtown, the Hightower, the fertile lands full of wheat, barley, fruits and vegetables. And of course, he visited the brothels. Not this time, though. He was a married man, and his wife was all he needed and all he wanted. She wouldn’t like it anyway.

He turned his eyes away from the Reach to look at his wife. She was speaking with Cerenna. They had to stop not long after midday when a wheel of their carriage broke. Tyrion’s men were working to fix a new one. It would be arranged soon and they could be on their way to Old Oak.

The tour through the Westerlands had started six months ago. Tyrion and Margaery had left the Rock with a large retinue of two hundred people, including knights and their squires, servants, guards and family members. Of Margaery’s family, all her cousins who lived at Casterly Rock followed her. Of Tyrion’s family, there were Genna’s sons, Lyonel and Tywin, the latter being Tyrion’s personal squire, and his cousins Cerenna, Myrielle and Joy. His uncle Gerion’s daughter was particularly excited by this trip. She never really left the Rock ever since Tyrion’s favorite uncle had brought her in.

They had started to the west, towards Feasfires. On their way, they got through Kayce, but they didn’t stop there. Tyrion was afraid of what, or who, he could meet there, and Margaery hadn’t opposed the decision. From Feasfires, they had continued north and taken ships to reach Fair Isle where Lord Farman received them at Faircastle. After a few days on the island, they had gained the mainland again and resumed their way north up to the Banefort, the northeast castle of the Westerlands. On the way, they saw the ruins of Castamere and Tarbeck Hall, and stopped at the Crag. It was there that the first event of notice took place.

Tyrion had organized this journey with Margaery for several reasons. First, it was for the people of the Westerlands to see and know who their lord and lady were. Many among the smallfolk in the Westerlands, especially those in the northern regions, had never seen Tyrion, and even less Margaery since she came south by the Ocean Road. Their travel was made of public events, feasts and stays in their bannermen’s castles. They remained a day or two with each lord, up to a week when the lord in question was more important, like at Crakehall, Faircastle and the Golden Tooth. Feasts were thrown, toasts were made in their honor, the lords and ladies of the Westerlands renewed their pledge to Casterly Rock. They also visited markets, towns, farms, even mines. Margaery was very good at it, behaving with the smallfolk as easily as she dealt with the noble people. They hadn’t forgotten to bring enough gold, food, toys and everything necessary for her charity works. She easily handled the
ladies and their lords, gaining their respect, and sometimes their admiration. Some became lickspittles
following her everywhere from the first night they spent in their home.

However, this tour wasn’t only a question of public relations. Tyrion wanted to use this opportunity
to speak with his bannermen about their problems, see that they respected their duties towards House
Lannister and make sure they remained loyal. Tyrion wasn’t a fool like his grandfather to believe that
his bannermen would follow him blindly, without any afterthought, and he knew the memory of
Castamere wasn’t a complete guarantee against further rebellions, far less considering his wife had
forgotten to play the 
*Rains of Castamere* ever again. At Feastfries, Lord Prester committed the
mistake of ordering the song to his bard during the welcoming feast, and Margaery had immediately
interrupted the singer after the first line, giving the choice to the Lord of Feastfries between sending
his bard away for the duration of their stay, or to see the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock leave
with all their retinue right away. The choice hadn’t been hard, and they never saw the bard again.
The word spread, and no one dared to play the song again on their way. Tyrion had never been
bothered that much by this song, though it didn’t really make for a happy atmosphere, but if
Margaery didn’t want to hear it, he wouldn’t force it upon her.

At the Crag, he had the surprise of a private discussion with the Lady of the Crag, Sybell Westerling.
She produced a letter written to them by Tyrion’s sister, the queen. Cersei had offered them a large
amount of gold from the vaults of Casterly Rock, along with the promise of good marriages for all
the Westerling children, if they supported Cersei against Tyrion when the time would come. Lady
Westerling subtly hinted her hope to be rewarded one day for revealing this to her liege lord. Tyrion
had recognized Cersei’s writing, and he wasn’t quite surprised that his sister was preparing some
way or another to overthrow him. Tyrion had rewarded them by giving them back their eldest son
and promising a good marriage to their eldest daughter, Jeyne. However, he had taken their youngest
son, Rollam, as a ward instead of his brother and promised to organize a good marriage for House
Westerling’s heir if they could discover anything more about Cersei’s plans. They had much more to
gain by cooperating with Tyrion than with his sister. Cersei had almost no power in the Westerlands,
and what she had in the capital and the Crownlands wasn’t much, and far from enough to seize the
Westerlands. Whatever riches she had mostly came from the gold that Tyrion sent to her regularly,
which was nothing when compared to what Tyrion could offer himself.

From the Banefort, they had come back south, but turned east to Ashemerk, then to the Golden
Tooth. That was the most important, and the most delicate stop of all their journey. Lord Lefford
failed repeatedly lately to pay his taxes, and they remained at this castle bordering the Riverlands for
a week to settle all the necessary matters. While they stayed there, Margaery and Lady Alysanne
spent a lot of time together. The woman who could have been Lady of Casterly Rock, if Lord Tyrell
had refused Kevan’s proposition, confessed to Margaery that she was afraid her father may do
something foolish out of ambition. Tyrion already had three private discussions with Lord Lefford,
and each time the lord swept away the fact he failed to pay his taxes. He always found a way to
divert the discussion on another topic, as if that wasn’t important. During their first meeting, he even
told Tyrion where was the nearest brothel. Tyrion was glad that Margaery hadn’t been there to hear
this, and had wanted to execute his bannerman for suggesting he might still be visiting whores when
he was married, as if he couldn’t content himself with the most beautiful woman in the Seven
Kingdoms. As if he couldn’t content himself with a single woman.

At their fourth discussion, Tyrion had taken a direct approach, deducing there was something behind
Lady Alysanne’s worries. He had wondered aloud very soon in the conversation if Lord Lefford
hoped to get something if Tyrion died a way or another. Lord Lefford had been without words, but
when Tyrion voiced the supposition that a member of his family might reward Lord Lefford if he
helped to overthrow him, the eyes of the Lord of the Golden Tooth had become mad with terror.
Then Tyrion revealed to Leo Lefford that his daughter said he exchanged messages with Cersei, and
the terror on his face confirmed everything Tyrion suspected. He suggested that if Lord Lefford
denied his daughter’s allegations, then that would mean his daughter lied to the Lord of Casterly Rock, which could cause her many problems. Faced with the possibility to lose his only child and heir, the Lord of the Golden Tooth confessed that the queen had tried to involve him in a plot, just like she tried with the Westerlings, offering to marry his daughter Alysanne to Jaime once he would be Lord of Casterly Rock, if Lord Lefford supported Cersei when the time would come. Tyrion didn’t know if the lord stopped paying some taxes because he thought Tyrion wouldn’t be there for long, or because Tyrion denied the title of Lady of Casterly Rock to his daughter, or for both reasons. Still, he confessed he hid a plot against his liege lord, if he didn’t participate to it. That would have been enough to condemn the man to death, but Tyrion did better. He made Lord Lefford leave his castle to live in a mansion far away on his domains, while his daughter now assumed the leadership of House Lefford.

The next days had been spent in ensuring a peaceful transition between the father and the daughter. They had full cooperation from Lady Alysanne, who only asked that her father wouldn’t be mistreated and that he would be allowed to live. Once this was assured both by him and Margaery, there was no problem. The men working closely with Lord Lefford were removed from their positions at the Golden Tooth, and replaced. They received generous compensations for their “early and voluntary” departure, and Lady Lefford offered additional sums to a few who remained in post. However, at the eighth day, they received a raven from Casterly Rock. The message he carried changed everything.

Tyrion, Margaery and all the people following them had to leave immediately. They travelled all the way back to Casterly Rock, and after a short stay there that consisted only in one day and two nights, they left for Old Oak. In their absence, Margaery’s parents and their allies in Oldtown had managed to convince the Hightowers to enter the zone of low tariffs on trade. All major harbors in the Westerlands and the Reach had agreed. Even the Shield Islands had joined the lot. Tyrion didn’t expect, nor hope, that it would come to life so quickly. So now here they were, only a few miles away from Old Oak where the signature of the agreement would take place. The first real fruits of his family’s alliance with the Tyrells.

“My lord,” said Ty on his right. “The carriage is repaired. We’re ready to go.”

“Thank you, Ty.”

Tyrion walked back to the wheelhouse. His wife was no longer discussing with a cousin of his, but with her handmaiden, Lady Mira. Tyrion had come to like the girl. She remembered him of her father when he met him, both in appearance and in behaviour, though he thought she had more guile than the man she came from. She was also very knowledgeable, and discussions with her were never boring. The fact she was unquestionably loyal to Margaery did a lot to enhance the opinion Tyrion had of her.

“You know he’ll be there,” Margaery was saying as Tyrion approached.

“I know, my lady,” the northern lady replied.

“What will you do when he asks you?”

Lady Mira had her back turned to him, so Tyrion couldn’t see her expression, but she hesitated before she answered. “I don’t know.”

Margaery nodded with a sour expression on her face, but then she noticed Tyrion and her face lightened. It didn’t change like before, at the beginning of their marriage. This was real happiness, the true Margaery, the woman Tyrion loved.
“We’ll talk about this later,” said Margaery to Mira, moving her eyes to Tyrion. Mira Forrester looked behind her and saw that Tyrion was here. She curtsied and left to take place on a horse. Tyrion was alone with Margaery before the door of their wheelhouse.

Tyrion opened an arm to show she was to go inside first, and she smiled mockingly as she did so. Tyrion followed her inside and a servant closed the door behind them. “What were you talking about with Mira?” Tyrion asked. He had taken the habit of calling Margaery’s handmaidens and cousins only by their first name, since Margaery did it all the time.

“Oh. A raven came from Highgarden for her while we were away.”

“And?”

“It was from Willas. He will be at Old Oak, and he said that he would like to ask her something.”

Tyrion knew that all Margaery’s family would be there. He only hoped that he wouldn’t have to suffer too much from the boasting of her father, the sharp comments of her grandmother and her brother’s desire to chop his head. He also wondered how Margaery’s mother would behave around them. She seemed to have a better opinion of him when they left Casterly Rock last year, but he wasn’t sure she wouldn’t look disapprovingly if she ever saw Tyrion kiss her daughter in public, or even holding her hand. However, he didn’t mind meeting again Margaery’s cousins, Garlan and Willas, especially the latter. Tyrion and Willas had maintained a correspondence since the wedding, suggesting each other various works to read and exchanging opinions on that book and that other book. He remembered the last time they spoke… and the way he looked at Lady Mira. He thought he had a good idea about what he wanted to ask her.

“I suppose there will be another marriage very soon in your family.”

Margaery laughed, but not very convincingly. “That is, if Mira agrees.”

Tyrion frowned. “You think she might refuse?”

“She hesitates. She says it wouldn’t be appropriate for a Tyrell to marry her, because her family is not highborn enough. She also says she doesn’t want to marry immediately. She doesn’t want to leave my service.”

“I wouldn’t want to leave it me neither,” Tyrion japed. “How old is she?” he asked more seriously.

“Fifteen.”

“She is old enough to marry. Your cousin mustn’t be older than me.”

“He is twenty-one. No, that’s not a problem, but Mira doesn’t think this is appropriate.”

The wheelhouse began to move. Tyrion had to catch his balance a moment. “Well, if that wouldn’t be appropriate, I wonder what my first marriage was.”

Margaery’s facial expression showed she agreed, though she didn’t look happy at the mention of this. They had talked about his first marriage a few times in the last months, and Tyrion was almost able to speak about it normally with Margaery, but not with anyone else. Still, this was a memory he preferred to not talk about too much. He could mention it without problem, but not talk about it in details.

“Willas is not going to marry anytime soon. Mira should accept it. I’m sure her parents would agree. This is a much better match than they could envision for her. She would be marrying a Tyrell, after
all, and Willas loves her. Still, she can’t decide herself.” Margaery said with exasperation.

“Is it possible she could have someone else in mind?” asked Tyrion.

Margaery scoffed. “Mira? Someone in mind? When the Others will come back, yes. I never saw her take an interest in a man, nor in a woman for that matter before you ask. She is certainly going to marry who she has to, and nothing more.”

Life had certainly been boring for Lady Mira if she was never interested in someone. Though, Tyrion didn’t have a boring life, but a miserable one as well until he met Margaery. He thought about Tysha.

He cleared his throat. “Well, if Willas really wants her, convince her. That’s not as if some great house will complain about it.”

“I’ve been trying, but so far without results. Mira still refuses to say yes, or she says she’s not sure about it. But I’m sure she would be happy with Willas.”

“There are worse husbands.” Tyrion thought about Lysa Arryn married to a man more than thrice her age, Cersei married to Robert Baratheon, and Stannis’s wife, though the woman was no better than the man. The young man with a crippled leg who loved books, hawks and horses didn’t seem like a bad prospect for Lady Mira. He couldn’t be worse to her than Tyrion had been to Margaery, and she looked quite happy. Unless she faked all of it again and Tyrion was a fool to believe she loved him. He pushed these thoughts away and thought about a certain night six months ago. That was enough to convince him without doubt that his wife wasn’t lying when she said she loved him.

“Do you think you could try to convince her?” Tyrion was surprised by the request. “I failed, but perhaps if someone else tried, it could work.”

Tyrion thought about it. He had never advised anyone about marriage or love. His own experience didn’t make of him a recommendable advisor in these matters. However, it was Margaery who asked him. “I’ll try, but if she is as stubborn in this as she is when she serves you, I’m afraid I have an impossible task to face.”

“She’s a Northerner.” She shrugged and rolled her eyes, as if that was evident. “We cannot help with that. I would say she is only uncertain, so there is a chance you might succeed. If you don’t, I warn you that I’ll start looking among our bannermen to find Willas a wife.”

This meant she would look in the Westerlands. Tyrion had nothing against it, but he doubted Margaery would have more success with the Westerlands than with the Reach. Maybe some wouldn’t know about Lord Willas’s crippled leg.

Tyrion turned back his attention to his books while Margaery looked outside. They were in the Reach now, and that was the place where she grew up. She was obviously excited to be back home, and he was glad that she was.

“I wish we could go to Highgarden,” she said after a few minutes. “I would like to show you everything in my home. The white walls, the maze, the gardens, the courtyards, the waterfalls, the sept, the godswood with its three weirwood trees. We may swim in one of the many pools there.”

She had a wicked smile, and Tyrion knew what she was thinking about. “We will visit it one day. I promise. In the meantime, we still have the lakes beneath Casterly Rock.”

Margaery’s smile grew even more wicked, but she turned back her eyes towards the Reach all the same. Tyrion let her to her contemplation of her homeland. They would have time for that sort of
things later. Soon, a knight from House Algood came to tell them the castle was close. A few minutes later, they had gone through the two rows of oaks bordering the main gate and they were inside Old Oak.

Margaery’s family was there to welcome her. She hugged her father and her two cousins, while she kissed her mother and her grandmother on the cheeks. The Lord of Highgarden welcomed Tyrion profusely, while his wife acted properly with the appropriate greetings. Tyrion then shared a shake of hands with Willas and Garlan before he left his wife to her reunion with her family. Strangely, Ser Loras Tyrell wasn’t here. At the feast in the evening, Willas told him that his cousin was at Storm’s End and that Lady Olenna had judged better to not warn him about the gathering at Old Oak. For the first time, Tyrion was thankful to the Queen of Thorns. He left the feast early with Margaery, both wishing to rest after the months of travel they had, and he spent a beautiful night.

Margaery spent the next morning with her family as well. They had quite a big catch-up to make. Tyrion used the opportunity to see Lord Paxter Redwyne. Old Oak had become the greatest gathering of lords from the Reach and the Westerlands since his wedding with Margaery. The agreement involved every lord who had a harbor and more, which meant not only Tyrion’s and Margaery’s families, but the Lannisters of Lannisport, the Farmans of Fair Isle, the Presters of Feasfires, The Hightowers of Oldtown, the Redwynes of the Arbor, the Cuys of Sunhouse, the Blackbars of Bandallon, and many more. Even the Florents were present. Only the Hightowers hadn’t arrived yet.

“So, Lord Redwyne, I suppose that we agree,” Tyrion told him after half an hour of discussion.

“I think so, my lord,” confirmed the Lord of the Arbor.

“Good. We shall wait for Lady Desmera at Casterly Rock next year then.”

“That will do,” said the balding man who only had a few red hair remaining. “I’m sure Desmera will be very eager to meet Ser Daven.”

They shook hands and Lord Paxter left Tyrion’s apartments. The marriage between his cousin Daven and Lady Desmera Redwyne was arranged. This would only strengthen the alliance of Tyrion’s family with the Reach. Maybe he should try to betroth Cerenna or Myrielle or Lucion to a Hightower or a Tarly.

Tyrion left his rooms and walked to the library. He hoped he would find something interesting to read there. He doubted Old Oak’s library would match those they had at Casterly Rock. He went through the door and took a look at the many shelves before he selected a book on dragons he remembered reading a long time ago. *The Elder Scrolls of Skyrim*. Tyrion hid behind one of the shelves to read in peace. After an hour of quiet reading, he heard two people coming in. They couldn’t see him since he was hidden by the full shelves, but he heard what they said.

“What is the problem? Do you think your parents could disapprove because I am…”

“No, not at all.” Tyrion recognized the second voice to be his wife’s handmaiden. He had a good idea to who belonged the first.

“Then why?”

“I’m not sure. That’s all. Can I have some time to think about it?”

“Of course. Just… tell me your answer before you leave.”

“Very well. I’ll give you one in the next days, I promise.”
Tyron heard footsteps on the floor that faded away. Then someone sighed. Tyrion laid down his book and came out of the shelves. He wasn’t surprised to find Willas Tyrell sitting at a table with nothing to read, his stick on his knees. He had the look of someone worried.

“So, you asked her?” Willas turned his head quickly to see Tyrion. A smile appeared on his face.

“Lord Tyrion.”

“Call me Tyrion. We’re related, and friends, so it’s enough for that. Did you ask her?”

His face grew uncertain. “You know?”

“Margaery and I share a lot of things, and Lady Mira shares everything with my wife. Did you really think she wouldn’t tell me?” He looked at him with an amused smile. Willas sighed and Tyrion came to sit by his side. “So, did she accept?”

“No.”

“Did she refuse?”

“No.”

“You received the worst answer you could receive,” Tyrion resumed.

“I wish I had her answer now, but I want her to say yes, and I can’t be sure she will.”

He had the perfect face of the discouraged lad. Tyrion could sympathize with him. “I don’t see why she would refuse.”

“Because I’m a cripple.”

Tyrion pulled a face. “Lady Mira Forrester doesn’t strike like someone who cares very much about these details.”

Willas Tyrell sighed. “I hope not. I thought she didn’t, but now that I ask for her hand… I wish she could answer right away. I missed her while she’s was away. I missed her more than I thought I would during the wedding. And she’s more beautiful than ever.”

Tyrion could have said the last sentence about his own wife. He felt pity for the young man. He didn’t have the chance to have a marriage all arranged by his family with someone he would fall for. He didn’t have a big title, lands or a castle like Tyrion did.

“I’m sure she will accept.” He said that in the hope to comfort his wife’s cousin, but he didn’t really believe it himself.

“You are?” Willa asked, sounding unbelieving.

“I wouldn’t say that otherwise.” A lie.

That seemed to give back some optimism to Willas. “I’m glad to see you and Margaery all the same. She was missed in Highgarden too.”

“I have no doubt about it. We barely spent a few months out of the Rock and everyone there missed her. My wife has the ability to make herself loved by the others.”

Willas chuckled. “Yes, she’s very good at it. She likes to be loved.”
“So do I. “Do you know when the Hightowers are supposed to arrive?”

“Very soon. In a few days, this agreement will be signed. I can’t believe it. Only a year after your wedding. Margaery moved earth and sky for that. I didn’t expect that from her. She never showed much interest to matters like trade, or farming, or taxes. She knew the basics, of course, but her interests were more about politics, court intrigue, and improving the life of the people.”

“Maybe I had an influence on her,” Tyrion suggested.

“Well, whatever it was, it seems it was good. I spoke with her yesterday, and she almost looked happier than she was at Highgarden.”

“Really?” Tyrion didn’t doubt, except in a very few rare occasions now, that his wife was happy in the Westerlands, but happier than she had been at Highgarden? He never thought that could be possible.

“Well, she just saw us after a complete year,” Willas explained. That made more sense. “And… the way she talked about you… I never saw her like this. I never saw her talking about someone this way. She… She really holds you in high esteem, and more than that.”

Tyrion felt pride, and also relief, fill his mind and body. There was a small part of him that feared about what Margaery might tell to her family about him.

“Have you read all the books you borrowed from my libraries?” Tyrion asked his friend.

They spent the next hour talking like the two bookish boys the were. However, in the end, Tyrion took his leave and went to the battlements. He walked all along them. Tents had grown all around the castle. The Oakhearts were an important house, but not among the richest. Their castle was very satisfying for noble people of their standing, but it couldn’t hold so many high lords with their retinues. All the lords had their rooms inside the castle, but most of their men had to stay outside, except for the Tyrells and the Lannisters whose entire retinues were housed within the walls. Tyrion looked at the village of tents as he crossed the battlements and followed his way to the gardens. He needed a quick walk there.

As he progressed among bushes and flowers that were smaller and less beautiful than the ones at the Rock, even before the arrangements Margaery made, he caught sight of a very odd pair. One was old, full of wrinkles, the top of her head hidden by clothes as always, the other one was young, graceful, and despite the fact she wore clothes in the Reach fashion, it was obvious she wasn’t from the south. Lady Olenna Tyrell and Lady Mira Forrester, walking side by side. He heard his grandmother-in-law’s sharp voice far before he could see her.

“I’m happy that Margaery is going to give some fashion to this rock. Truth be told, the gardens were quite dull when we were there. But how will she make sure they are well taken care of while she’s away?”

“Lady Margaery gave specific orders to the gardeners before she left. They will make sure everything is in order,” replied placidly the northern handmaiden.

“I hope they are better than the gardeners we have in the Reach. They’re barely able to keep Highgarden in good state.”

“I found Highgarden quite marvelous when I was there, my lady.”

“You just proved the Northerners know nothing about gardening.” They appeared in the turn of a corner at this moment, Lady Mira showing no sign of reaction to the banter or insult, whatever you
could call that. “Truth be told, I envy you. When you grow up in simplicity, you have the chance to marvel at almost everything. I didn’t have it.”

They came across Tyrion at this moment. “My lady. My lady,” he said as civility.

Lady Mira curtsied like always. “Lord Tyrion.”

They had begun to resume their respective paths when the Queen of Thorns stopped. Her stand showed clearly she wouldn’t leave. “Ah, it’s you. I mistook you for a small boy.”

“You were half right. I am small. But with my age, I doubt we can still call me a boy.”

“With my own age, there are few I can’t call a boy or a girl. For that matter, I thought a man could make sure my granddaughter would be pregnant by now. I was hoping I could see my great-grandchildren before I died.”

All gratitude Tyrion had felt yesterday because she kept her grandson away vanished. “Maybe you should pray to the Mother. Or the Grandmother.”

She tipped the head, as if she thought about it. “Maybe that’s not a bad idea, though the gods rarely give us what we want.” Tyrion agreed with her. The old woman turned to the handmaiden. “I may have more chance praying for these gods you have in the North. The Old Gods may have some sympathy for an old woman like me. Do you pray often to them?”

“Every day, my lady. But I also pray to the New,” the girl answered.

“Every day as well?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I wonder how you make. When do you pray for them?”

“In the morning for the Seven, and in the evening for the Old Gods.”

“Well, I shall pray with you tonight then. With some luck, my granddaughter will be with child while we stay here. Come, child.”

The Queen of Thorns resumed her path and Lady Mira followed her after another curtsy. Tyrion remembered at this moment the discussion he had with Margaery yesterday. He called her. “Lady Mira. I would need a word with you.”

He thought he saw relief in her eyes. “Of course, my lord. Please forgive me, Lady Olenna.”

“You don’t have to ask for forgiveness. He’s the one making you abandon a poor old woman. We’ll see each other later.”

The Queen of Thorns left on these words and Tyrion was alone with Margaery’s handmaiden. “Am I wrong, or you wished to escape Lady Olenna?” he asked her.

“We had talked for a very long time,” she confessed. “And about a subject I didn’t really enjoy.”

“Oh.” They started to walk in the opposite direction. “May I ask what was the subject?”

“It was a private matter.” She said nothing more. Tyrion had a good idea what the private matter was.
“I suppose the private matter was the proposition Willas Tyrell made in the library this morning.” She
looked at him with round eyes. She seldom had a reaction like this. She often looked taciturn. “I was
reading behind one of the shelves and I heard,” he explained with a smile pleading innocence. “And
Margaery told me about the letters he sent to you.”

Mira sighed. “I’m sorry to trouble with my problems, my lord.”

Tyrion shook his head. “Not at all. The truth is, she asked me to talk to you about this, but I’m quite
sure her grandmother gave you more than enough for the next days.”

“She did, my lord,” she said after a moment of hesitation. A thin and discreet smile appeared on her
lips, as if she was afraid of it.

“Well, I think you already heard all the arguments in favor of this, so I won’t bother you all again
with that, but may I know what Lady Olenna thought of this?” He wasn’t sure if the Queen of
Thorns would look favorably to a marriage between a Tyrell and a Northerner, furthermore one from
a minor house.

“She said she didn’t mind if I married her grandson, because Willas is unlikely to marry anyone
highborn enough for him. She believes it’s still better if he’s wed to me than to never marry.”

“I can’t disagree with her.” Margaery’s grandmother may be insufferable, but she was no fool. It
seemed the wits of Olenna Tyrell skipped a generation when her eldest son was born and only
resurfaced with her granddaughter.

“I still believe it’s not fair,” she said on a gloomy tone. Tyrion didn’t understand why she was so
reluctant to marry the young man. Aside his lame leg, there was nothing bad to say about Willas
Tyrell, and he was quite a good prospect for a girl of the North.

“Why do you really not want to marry Willas Tyrell, my lady?” Tyrion asked.

A moment passed. “I do not wish to marry yet.”

Tyrion shrugged. “There is something we call betrothals, my lady. You can be engaged with him for
some time, even for a long time, before you marry him. Saying yes doesn’t mean to marry
immediately. Not all the time.”

“No.” That’s all she said, but she looked thoughtful. Tyrion let her to her reflections as they walked
through the gardens in silence.

Three days later, Ser Baelor Hightower, who was Margaery’s uncle since her mother was his sister,
arrived at Old Oak, and the ceremony for the signature of the trade agreement could take place. Still,
they needed two days to make everything ready. At the last minute, in the evening of the day
preceding the signature, a new unexpected guest arrived: Lady Alysanne Lefford. Through the
discussion Tyrion and Margaery had with her, they learned she had come to show her support to
House Lannister and reinforce her position at the Golden Tooth by this display of loyalty. Her father
was well settled, some would say well guarded, in a mansion high into the hills of their lands, and the
Golden Tooth was firmly into the hands of his daughter. Margaery apologized during the
conversation for almost exiling Lord Lefford, but Lady Alysanne thanked them instead for not
making him a prisoner at Casterly Rock or worse. She also said she wasn’t unhappy about her
father’s new situation. He could have put their house at great risk and she enjoyed ruling. Tyrion
kept in mind this wasn’t a woman to take lightly.

In the morning that followed, Tyrion had a private discussion with the Lady of the Golden Tooth to
be more sure of her loyalty. In the course of the conversation, he apologized, half-jokingly half seriously, for not allowing her to be Lady of the Westerlands. She laughed loudly when he said that and revealed her father had always tried to arrange the marriage that would benefit the most to him, without consulting her. She said she didn’t regret the turn that the events took, an that she got along quite well with his wife. She also said she was glad for him and that he looked much better than when they met many years ago.

In the afternoon, the ceremony to sign the Trade Agreement of Old Oak took place. For Tyrion and Margaery, this agreement was a way to show the new alliance between the Reach and the Westerlands to the rest of Westeros. This agreement consisted in the reduction of duties and tariffs on trade by sea. The paramount lords of the Reach and the Westerlands, the Lannisters and the Tyrells, would progressively erase all duties they levied on sea trade over the next five years. The minor lords, like the Hightowers or the Farmans, would have seven years to lower their own duties by half from their actual level. The agreement also prohibited any duty, tax or tariff to be charged specifically on the goods transiting between the Reach and the Westerlands. Tyrion wished he could extend the agreement to the trade by road, but that would have meant too much negotiation with too many lords who would believe their liege lords were depriving them from a considerable source of income. It was already difficult to convince the lords who had a harbor, so to convince them and those within the lands? For now, they had to do with it, but Tyrion would come back later once the initial deal would be accepted and well established.

The Great Hall of Old Oak was the place where the ceremony happened. It was barely big enough for everyone and the lords and ladies were squeezed all together. They had chosen Old Oak because it was near the line separating the Westerlands from the Reach. Tyrion had agreed for the signature of the agreement to take place in the Reach. It would satisfy Lord Tyrell’s ego, and strengthen the impression that was given to the lords of the Reach that the Lannisters and the Tyrells were strong allies. They had more problems with their bannermen than Tyrion. He had conceded this to his wife.

The agreement was written on two long scrolls laid at the center of the table on the dais. Once the first formalities were fulfilled, the herald started to call for each present lord. “Warryn Beesbury, Lord of Honeyholt.”

Lord Beesbury came forth, making his way with difficulty through the crowd of lords and ladies who were present. He sat on the chair before the two large scrolls, took the quill, dipped it into the inkwell and put his signature on the first document. Then he dipped the quill again and did the same for the second parchment. He poured some wax on both scrolls and applied his seal on it. Then he rose and left the chair empty.


These were all lords of the Reach. The lords of the Westerlands would come later. They arrived at the most important houses. “Lord Alester Florent, Lord of Brightwater. Lord Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor, Grand Amiral and Lord Admiral of the Sunset Sea. Ser Baelor Hightower, eldest son and heir to Leyton Hightower, Lord of the Hightower, Lord of the Port, Voice of Oldtown,
Defender of the Citadel and Beacon of the South.”

Lord Leyton’s son was the last lord of the Reach to put his signature on the scrolls. The herald started to call the lords of the Westerlands, and the same process resumed for them.


Tyrion had to prepare now. It wouldn’t be long. “Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, Defender of the Marches, High Marshal of the Reach, Lord Paramount of the Mander and Warden of the South.”

Tyrion’s father-in-law walked forward and sat to sign the two documents. He toppled the inkwell by accident. He was the third to do so. Tyrion hoped there would still be something to read on the documents when this would be over. As soon as the Lord of Highgarden raised from the seat, Tyrion walked to it. The herald called for him as he advanced. “Lord Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West.”

When Tyrion sat, he saw that both scrolls were tainted with spots and trays of ink. They were lucky they could still read the terms of the agreement. Most of the signatures were unreadable. He wondered if some of these lords knew to write. He put his signature and his seal on the bottom right side of each parchment along with his seal, under his bannermen’s signatures. Lord Tyrell’s signature and seal were at the same place, but on the left side, his bannermen’s signatures over him as well. There was one line, further down, still empty. It wouldn’t be for long. Tyrion left the chair and stood behind it with Lord Tyrell.

“Lady Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands.”

His beautiful wife come forth. She went easily through the crowd to the opposite of everyone else before her. He had to admit she had the appearance of a goddess, draped in a gown where red, green, silver and gold cohabited in perfect harmony, where symbols of lions, roses, mountains, trees, gems and leaves formed a perfect set. People stood aside to let her pass. She sat gracefully, giving her father a warm smile, then honoring her husband with one so warming that he thought he would melt for a moment. Perfectly, without a single mistake, she signed on the last line, below and between her father’s and Tyrion’s signatures. Then she put her own seal.

There were two different waxes used to sign the treaty. The red wax was used by the lords and ladies of the Westerlands, the green one by those of the Reach, except for the Fossoways of the red apple branch who used the red wax to distinguish them from the Fossoways of the green apple. Margaery put some green wax on the parchment, then carefully added red wax to the right of it. The two types of wax touched, but didn’t mix. Margaery applied her seal. When she pulled it away, a green rose and a red lion appeared together in the same circle, next to her signature.

Margaery stood up, proud and beautiful, between her father and her husband. Then she spoke. “This is a great day, for Casterly Rock, for Highgarden, for Lannisport, for Oldtown, for Fair Isle, for the Arbor, for the Golden Tooth, for the Shield Islands, and for every city, town, castle, village, and every people living in the Westerlands and the Reach. From now on, the Reach and the Westerlands only make one. There is no frontier anymore.”

People cheered and applauded loudly. Tyrion felt a hand sliding in his left one. He looked on his left and saw Margaery smirking at him, while not turning her face. He returned it. That was the real
beginning of the alliance between the Westerlands and the Reach. And it was only a beginning.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting out of Casterly Rock from now on. In the next ten chapters, there will only be one chapter where the action will take place at the Rock. The action will now go to other places all around the Seven Kingdoms, to begin with the Westerlands and the Reach, then King's Landing, and of course, the North. Jon, Sansa and the Starks are coming, and we'll get to see Jaime and Cersei very soon.

Please review

Next Chapter: Margaery (someone receives an answer)
Margaery IX

Chapter Notes

This chapter begins where the previous one left us, the same day. The previous chapter was more about the political side of Old Oak. This chapter is more about the sentimental side.

By the way, some people have complained that I gave too much space to Mira in the previous chapter. I agree that she occupies a large space of the action at Old Oak. Almost half this chapter is also about her and Willas, but there is a reason to it. Without telling too much, because that would be too much of a huge spoiler, let’s say that Mira/Willas will have a great impact in the War of the Five Kings when we will reach this stage of the fic. That’s why she occupied such an important place in this chapter and the one preceding. It was to settle this aspect that will play an important role later. This chapter is the last one where she almost occupies half the space.

There are two songs that are mentioned in this chapter:
- "Dawn of Love" by BrunuhVille (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFS0pxiqUNw)
- "Rise of the Fallen" by BrunuhVille (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASovaQq2uhQ)

Margaery IX

Margaery was dancing with Gawen Sarwyck, the son of Lord Raynald Sarwyck. He wasn’t a bad dancer, but not an extraordinary one. She cast a quick glance to the high table where she saw her husband speaking with Lord Farman. At least he wasn’t drinking… too much. They changed partners and Margaery found herself with Lord Redwyne. The people kept going from one partner to the other until she found herself with Garlan.

“So, not too sad you can’t dance with your husband?” he asked her, worry on his face.

“No.” She looked again at Tyrion. Now he was speaking with her father. “He may not be tall, or unable to ride a horse, or even to fight in battle, but I love him all the same.”

“So I see.” He smiled at her. “I’m happy for you. I’m glad you’re getting along well with him.”

“Getting along well? I love him.” Margaery would never have thought she could say that about a man a year ago, and yet now she did.

“Yes, you do. I think he deserves your love. Men like Renly or Loras may be valiant and handsome, but Lord Tyrion makes for a better husband. He is bigger than he seems, I think.”

Margaery couldn’t agree more. Tyrion may be short, and he may look like a drunken whoremonger for many, but all those who underestimated him paid a heavy price and had to repent very quickly.
They continued to dance. Margaery almost danced with every lord of both the Westerlands and The Reach, including her own father. All the lords except her husband. It didn’t matter. They would dance later, in a much more exciting way.

Margaery left the dance floor and poured herself some wine. It was from Appleton, and it was very sweet. Sweeter than the ones in Casterly Rock, even when they came from the Reach. She was home again. She wouldn’t be there for long, but it was better than nothing. She may tell herself that Casterly Rock was her home now and that the Westerlands were her lands, but it didn’t change the facts. She was a Tyrell from Highgarden, and she would always be a Tyrell.

Lady Alysanne Lefford appeared next to her. “Taking a pause?”

“I am,” Margaery confirmed. “I love to dance, but sometimes we have to stop.” The Lady of the Golden Tooth nodded.

“There are many lords and knights here,” she commented.

“Looking for a husband?” asked the Lady of Casterly Rock.

“Not precisely.”

“You’ll have to marry one day or another.”

“I know, but now that my father is far away, I can take my time. I’m not pressed.” She smiled to Margaery.

“You know, my brother is still unwed.”

“Unwed, yes, but if the Faith allowed more than marriages between man and woman, I don’t think he would be.”

Margaery smiled, not allowing anything to surface. “There are only rumors.”

“Yes, of course. Still, there is always some truth behind rumors.” She looked at Margaery knowingly. Lady Lefford knew very well about Loras’s preferences, but Margaery couldn’t admit it in public. She had to keep the facade, even if everyone knew the truth.

“Still, he has to marry. In order to produce an heir.”

“Yes,” Lady Alysanne agreed. “He needs to marry. One day. And I need to marry. One day.” She smiled. She knew what Margaery was trying to do. “I will think about it. And don’t worry. Your brother’s nocturnal activities are nothing to me. They won’t matter when I take my decision.”

“I don’t see what you’re talking about. I made no proposition,” countered Margaery. “Anyway I can’t, but my father might. One day.”

They both smiled to each other. Lady Alysanne walked away, going back to dance. Margaery was glad Tyrion was married to her and not to this woman. She wondered if Tyrion knew. She stayed there, watching the people dancing for a moment, but Megga and Alla soon joined her. They had stopped to dance as well. Then Willas burst in their inner circle.

“Margaery. We must talk. Now. It’s urgent, it can’t wait.”

She was caught short by this, but managed to excuse herself to Megga and Alla just before Willas almost pulled her by the arm. When they were a few dozens of feet away, she stopped him. She
never remembered Willas pulling someone like this. She didn’t think his leg could allow it.

“Willas, what’s going on?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Margaery. I just… I needed to talk with you. I can barely believe it.” She realized that Willas was smiling and almost laughing, his entire face enlightened like she never saw it before. “Mira said yes. She accepted.”

Everything seemed suddenly silent all of a sudden around her. Then she heard a music starting. She recognized it. She heard it before, back when she still lived at Highgarden. *Dawn of Love*. Willas was getting married with Mira. She had accepted to marry him.

Margaery felt her lips form a smile. “Oh, Willas. I’m so happy for you.” Willas couldn’t hide his joy and hugged her tightly before she could finish her sentence. The last word left her throat with difficulty.

Willas was almost laughing hysterically. Margaery didn’t remember seeing him so happy in a very long time. “She… She just told me,” he said.

“She really agreed? She really accepted your proposal?”

“Yes, she did. I can still barely believe it.”

Margaery had to admit it wasn’t easy for her to believe it without any doubt. Mira had seemed so close to refusing. Cursed be her northern honor.

“She told me she would stay in your service for some time yet, but we will marry,” Willas resumed. “She’ll come back to Highgarden next year. We’re betrothed. We’re betrothed.”

This meant Margaery would only have Mira with her for another year. It caused her a certain pang in the heart, even if she was more than happy for Willas. Finally, he would marry. Loras was the only one left to marry.

“I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.” Willas kept saying it.

“Maybe you should go and spend some time with her,” Margaery suggested.

“Yes, you’re right. You’re right.”

He walked away and almost fell when his stick skidded on the floor. It was good to see him in this state, but Margaery hoped it wouldn’t cause an accident. With some chance, and if Mira was wise enough to keep him in line, Willas wouldn’t try to dance like he did at Margaery’s wedding. With the rhythm of the song actually playing, *Rise of the Fallen*, it could only end in disaster for her cousin.

Margaery went back to dance, and she was glad to see that Willas didn’t try to join them. After a few more songs, however, she returned to the dais where Tyrion was, as she expected, drinking. She sat by his side.

“Care if I join you?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

He poured her a generous cup and they both drank deeply. Margaery remembered the few drinking contests they made through last year. They always made it in privacy, away from everyone’s eyes, and Tyrion always won. Margaery regretted she couldn’t remember everything that happened during
the night on the morning that followed. They emptied their cup and Tyrion filled them again, brushing her hand in the process.

“A toast. To your cousin’s marriage,” Tyrion said as he raised his cup.

“You know about it?”

“Willas is walking all around the place to tell everyone. In fact, he told it to me before he told you. I was closer to him when Mira gave him her answer.”

“You talked to her?”

“I did,” he answered with a smile. She couldn’t get Tyrion to do everything she wanted, but he would do some of them. After all, her loved her.

“Thank you.” She meant it. “To Willas’s marriage.” She raised her cup and they drank again. “You’re quite good at convincing people.”

Tyrion shrugged. He pulled a false smug smile on his face. “Much less than you. I didn’t tell her much. Your grandmother may have done more work than me.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She took another sip. “Thank you. I love you.” She kissed him strongly on the lips, though shortly. They would have time for lingering kisses later. “We will stay a little longer. I want to spend more time with my family, and I would like to show you some of the Reach.”

“As you wish, my lady. But before the moon is full, we must go back on the road. We have a tour of the Westerlands to complete. We have to visit Crakehall, Cornfield, Riverspring, Silverhill, Deep Den, Hornvale, and maybe to make one last stop at the Golden Tooth before we go back to Lannisport and then to Casterly Rock.”

Margaery sighed. This journey was far from over. She wondered how the gardeners were doing with the maze back on the northern hill. She saw Mira near one of the tables where food was laid, discussing with Sera. Margaery smiled sadly while looking at her friend. She would be a Tyrell before she could realize it.

“Just promise me we won’t stop at Clegane’s Keep,” she said.

“I promise, my dear. I have no great wish to meet Gregor Clegane, and I don’t believe the stay would be enjoyable.”

Margaery didn’t think she would enjoy it either. She had no desire to meet the man who was known for murdering children, and who was even rumored to have killed his father, his sister and the two wives he had. Servants vanished without explanation in his keep, as well as some villagers living nearby. It was said that even the dogs feared to enter the hall. Margaery wasn’t surprised such a man was kept near to him by Tywin Lannister.

She and Tyrion kept talking and drinking for the rest of the feast. She thought about announcing Willas’s betrothal for a moment, but decided it would be better to tell everyone in the morning. That was before she began to feel her senses weaken and to grow numb. She had enough spirit to leave the feast before it went too far. She was afraid she didn’t count the number of cups she and Tyrion took. Everything was fine as long as they were in the Hall, but when they left and started to head for their rooms, she found it was harder than she thought to walk straight. Tyrion took her hand and she found it easier to keep going forward with his help.

When they finally entered their rooms, she walked immediately to the bed and let herself fall on her
back. The world was spinning all around her. She laughed uncontrollably. Someone had laughed in a similar way not long ago.

She stated a fact. “I’m drunk.”

“I am too,” replied her husband.

He laid on his chest next to her. She thought he wasn’t tipsy like he should, though his eyes weren’t awaken like they usually were. He was looking at her. After some time, he decided he had enough to look at her and approached. He buried his face in her neck and she felt his lips wandering to her collarbone. With his mouth, he tossed away some of her gown to reveal her shoulders, then went back to her neck. Margaery sighed and breathed deeply. Her world looked less spinning.

“I love you,” he said, his tongue travelling on her skin. Giggles escaped from her mouth.

“I love you,” she said, just like she did two or three hours ago.

Her hands wandered through his blond hair, feeling the wicks escape in the space between her fingers. He trailed his mouth up to her chin and took her mouth in his own. Their tongues danced together, and soon they were stripping each other from their clothes, and their bodies danced together as well.

Later, they were both lying in the bed under the sheets. She could feel the pulse of his heart as well as her own while his right hand tried to run through her entangled hair, making it more entangled with each passage. Mira and Sera would have work to do on the morning. Her head was resting on his chest, her arms up with his head between them. Tyrion certainly thought that was a miracle his big head could stay between her arms. She giggled at the thought.

“What’s so funny, my queen?”

The smile she had on her face grew larger. She may not be the queen, like she dreamed before she was wed, but she was Tyrion’s queen. He had started to call her that in their intimate moments a few days ago, and Margaery loved that nickname. If she couldn’t be the queen, she could be Tyrion’s queen, and for her that was already a lot.

“Nothing. Willas is getting married,” she offered as an explanation.

“That’s funny, it’s true. Not as funny as the thought of me being married, but that’s funny.”

She straightened up and leaned over him, her eyes meeting his. She put a wicked smile on her face. “It’s true that it is funny. Especially at night, for me.”

She closed the distance and kissed him. They did it for quite some time, but in the end she returned to her initial position with her head on his chest.

“My brother is the last one who’s not married,” she said after some more time.

“It won’t be easy to find him a girl he wants to marry, let alone to bed. All the women in Westeros are missing what he likes the most.”

Margaery had to laugh at the banter. She really was drunk, and not only wine drunk. “We’ll find someone,” she said absentmindedly.

“I’m sure my queen has someone in mind.”
The smile grew up on her face again. “You know her quite well.”

They said nothing more for the rest of the night. She thought Tyrion fell asleep before her. His hand remained in her hair, the top of her head still nestled in the curve of his neck. He said no name in his sleep. Margaery slept peacefully.

She woke up in a very pleasant and surprising way on the morning. After all this time with her husband, she thought she wouldn’t be caught off guard by this, but she was. They probably needed an hour after she woke up to both get out of bed. Once they would be back at the Rock, Margaery swore the first thing they do would be to spend a whole day together in bed. However, that was impossible for the time being and they had to get out. She pulled on a red dressing gown just in time when Mira came in. Tyrion was behind a screen, getting himself changed for the day. Mira may hide it very well, but Margaery knew she didn’t feel comfortable when she found her and Tyrion naked in the morning, especially when Tyrion was the naked one. Sera had been performing clumsy performances when it was her who came in their bedroom during the first weeks of their marriage, but now she smiled wickedly when she didn’t giggle to find Margaery and Tyrion together.

“Good morning, my lady,” Mira said while she laid the food on their table.

“Good morning, Mira,” Margaery replied to her friend.

Her handmaiden collected the sheets and left the room. Mira may be betrothed, but she hadn’t changed. She would perform her duties like always. Margaery went to the table and took some grapes, then a pear. She had missed it. The delicious and fresh fruits of her homeland. She had some brought at Casterly Rock on a regular basis, but they weren’t as fresh as when you ate them in the Reach. Tyrion joined her and took some bread with cheese. There were some eggs as well which Margaery picked just like him.

“I suppose you’ll spend time with your family this morning,” he said.

“I will. What about you? You could come.”

“No. I believe I’ll use the day to get to know your father’s bannermen a little better.”

“Don’t try to snatch them away from my family,” she warned him.

“I have to maintain good relationships with our trade partners. And you made friends among my bannermen. Why shouldn’t I make some among your family’s?”

They smiled at each other. Despite loving him, Margaery remained loyal to her family and defended the Tyrells’ interests, as Tyrion did for the Lannisters. It didn’t cause much problem, since most of the time she and Tyrion were working together for their families’ mutual interests, but when these interests conflicted, they would have innocent talk like this. They wouldn’t work against their own family, but they wouldn’t fight against each other either. She wasn’t going to let politics ruin her relationship with Tyrion.

They were talking about the rest of their journey in the Westerlands when Mira came back to retrieve the tray and their leftovers.

“Where is Sera?” Margaery asked while she collected plates and bowls.

“She’s preparing your gown, my lady,” Mira answered.

“By the way, Lady Mira, congratulations,” Tyrion said all of a sudden.
Mira stopped a moment. Some discreet red appeared on her cheeks while she smiled as discreetly. “Thank you, my lord.”

“I hope this doesn’t mean that you’ll leave Lady Margaery’s service.”

Mira straightened at this moment, and let the tray on the table for a moment. She looked at Margaery. “My lady, I wanted to tell you about it. I told Willas that I would remain in your service for another year. I hope this doesn’t pose you any problem.”

“Not at all. Willas already told me about it. But I may keep you for some more time. Don’t worry about it,” she added quickly before Mira could say something. “You won’t have to explain anything to Willas. I’ll deal with him.”

“Very well, my lady. Thank you.” Mira curtsied to Margaery and her husband, then left with the tray and its content.

Margaery cleared her throat. “Now, unless you want to be there when I get changed, I suggest you should leave.”

“Do you really think I don’t want to stay to see you change?” replied her husband with a smirk. Margaery mimicked it and leaned to kiss her husband at length.

“We’ll see each other later. Go and make some friends among my father’s men.”

Tyrion kissed her again before he left. Mira and Sera arrived a few minutes later with her gown. It was green with symbols of oaks on it. The last time she wore it was when they stopped at Old Oak on their way to Casterly Rock from Highgarden. At the time, she wasn’t Lady of Casterly Rock yet.

Margaery went to the gardens of Old Oak, who of course were ruled by oaks. They didn’t equal the gardens of Highgarden or Casterly Rock, but they were quite beautiful all the same. Margaery spent some good time during the morning in it with her family. Her mother, Alla, Megga, Elinor and Leonette, who Garlan had brought with him, were all there, along with Cerenna, Myrielle and Joy. Her grandmother was present as well. When midday came, Willas, Garlan and her father joined them to eat all together. Margaery loved to see all her family after such a long time.

Their time together turned a little less joyful when her father asked to Willas before everyone if the rumors that he was betrothed to a handmaiden were true. All conversations stopped and everyone looked at Willas, who only confirmed it and revealed he was betrothed to Lady Mira Forrester. Margaery had no doubt many already knew, but there was a complete silence all the same after he said it openly. As always, Margaery’s grandmother was the first to break the silence.

“Well, at least one of my grandsons will have a wife with some wits and brain.”

Margaery barely contained a laugh. It was a chance that Mira wasn’t serving them today. Sera was, on the other hand, and she walked away quickly when she heard this, probably hoping to avoid the delicate discussion that may follow.

It didn’t prove necessary in the end. Garlan congratulated his brother the first, and his wife did the same, though she looked less sure than her husband. Margaery’s mother hid her reservations well, but not enough for her daughter to not see through it. Lady Olenna Tyrell often said that her granddaughter was better than she had ever been, and Lady Olenna was far better than her daughter-in-law. The others’ reactions were mixed, except for Joy who looked excited as if it was her birthday and asked when she would get married as well.

When the meal was over, Margaery was taken away by her mother who wished to tell her a few
words. They walked some time until Lady Alerie believed they were out of reach for ears.

“Is it true? Willas is going to marry your handmaiden?”

Margaery confirmed it. “Yes, Mother. Next year, probably, or maybe some time later, but they will marry.”

“I wonder what Garth will say about it. Willas is his eldest son after all.”

Margaery sighed. “Willas wasn’t going to marry. His father should be happy about it. Mira is certainly one of the very few women ready to marry his son. She may be a handmaiden, but she is highborn. Her father is a lord, and she is a lady.”

“She comes from a minor house. From the North,” her mother opposed.

“She is still highborn. The Forresters may not be a powerful family, but they are quite rich with the trade of ironwood. Mira’s family can offer a very decent dowry, especially for their standing. She knows the life of the south and our ways, and after many years spent in Highgarden and Casterly Rock, I’m don’t think we can call her a Northerner anymore. At least not entirely. Anyway, Uncle Garth cannot complain. He tried to find Willas a bride for years, and he failed. He should be happy about it. After all, that’s not as if Willas was betrothed to a wheelwright’s daughter.”

“I know, but I’m also sure that Garth won’t be happy about this. He wanted a good marriage for Willas, an appropriate one. Do you really believe this girl will make a good wife for him?”

“She will be a perfect wife. You know she will. She lived at Highgarden for two years, and she got even better in the last year at Casterly Rock. I would rather see Willas married to someone a little under his station than not married at all and go celibate for the rest of his life. If we wanted him to stay alone forever, we should have sent him to the Citadel or the Starry Sept.”

Lady Alerie Tyrell sighed just like her daughter did not long ago. “Willas will have to deal with his father when he gets home.”

“Could you help him? He loves Mira. He really wants to marry her. You don’t know how much this represents for him.” She looked at her mother with pleading eyes, to make her understand this was really what Willas wanted.

“Allright, I will. I’ll get myself and Mace to convince Garth to abandon any objection he might have.”

“Get Grandmother to support him as well. If she does, Uncle Garth will say nothing.”

They arrived at a corner with a bench made of marble and sat on it. The sky was high in the sky. Margaery was glad to find the warm climate of the Reach after so much time.

“Margaery, there’s something I would like to ask you.” She looked at her mother, who was looking at her like all mothers looked at their children. “Are you happy?”

Margaery giggled. “Of course, I’m happy. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“It’s only… I have the impression something is wrong.”

Margaery frowned. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“Well, we see you a year after we left you in the Westerlands, and… I don’t know. You have
nothing negative to say about your husband, or about your new life, or your new home. I… I have the impression sometimes… I must be wrong, but there are times where I’m afraid you didn’t miss us.”

Margaery felt sorry for her mother. “Mother. I missed you every day.” That wasn’t exactly true. The last months, she hadn’t thought so much about her family. She missed them every time she thought about them and Highgarden, but she didn’t think about them all the time, nor every day for that matter. There was so much to do at Casterly Rock, and she had Tyrion now. He occupied a huge place in her thoughts, as much as in her heart.

“I’m sure of that.” Her mother was close to tears. “I’m a silly old woman who doesn’t want her children to grow. But are you really happy there? I know you told me so but… with all these rumors about him…”

Margaery out a hand on her mother’s. “Mother, Tyrion is a very good man. He loves me, he takes care of me, he is very kind, gentle, generous, and behaves very well. Yes, he visited brothels, he drank and he gambled, but he stopped the moment we married, and even before. Now he’s just drinking, and far less than the rumors say.” Most of the time. “He is a good man, Mother. A just man.” Not long ago, they had discovered there were overseers in the mines of the Rock who stole the people working there and had them whipped for no reason, and Tyrion had the overseers removed from their functions, pay back the workers and gave them a week to recover from their wounds and mistreatments. “He gives me everything I need and everything I want. He’s not at all like the people would have us believe. I love him.”

Her mother looked like someone has just struck her in the stomach. Her eyes widened. “You love him?”

“I do.”

Her mother kept staring at her for a long time. Finally, she managed to speak. “You have changed.” Another long moment passed, and then her mother smiled and took her cheek in the palm of her hand. “I’m proud of the woman you became, Margaery. And your father is, too. We are so proud of you.”

Margaery remained there for a long time, her face in her mother’s hand, tears threatening to break. They were tears of joy. After some time, her mother released her cheek.

“We should go back to the others. They will wonder where we are,” Lady Alerie Tyrell said.

As they walked back to where their family and friends were, Margaery asked her mother a question that hunted her mind for some time now.

“Mother, how much time were you and Father married before I was born?”

Her mother looked surprised by the question. “Oh. About three years, I would say. And then we waited for a year after your birth before I was pregnant again. Why? Are you expecting?”

“No, I don’t think so. My last moonblood took place last week. The thing is I find strange that I’m not with child already.”

Her mother seemed thoughtful. “Well, this is a great mystery. Lomys was never able to predict with certitude when I would give birth. You were born a week before his expectations, and Loras three days late. I’ve been afraid myself at the beginning of my marriage, but then you arrived. I wouldn’t worry too much if I were you. There’s nothing strange to marriages without children for the first few
“Maybe, but you see, Tyrion and I do it quite often.” Her mother looked scandalized, but Margaery kept talking and ignored her reaction. “I don’t find it believable that I’m not with child by a pure coincidence. With the way we do it, we should already have a baby. I want children, and I need children. We need an heir for Casterly Rock.” Especially with the problems Tyrion’s sister tried to cause recently with the Westerlings and the Leffords.

“I’m sure you’ll have children very soon, my dear. Just give it some time.”

Since they had reached the spot where all the Tyrells were gathered, they didn’t talk further about it. Margaery went to sew with the other ladies. The Tyrells were sewing roses while the Lannisters were sewing lions, except for Joy who tried clumsily to make a picture of Tyrion. People barely held their laughs when she proudly showed them. As a red rose took shape between her fingers, Margaery noticed from the corner of her eye Mira walking with Willas not far away. She was smiling. Unlike Margaery, when Mira smiled, it was never fake.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Jaime (we jump in the time for one year, sorry Tativi)
Here we are, a Jaime chapter after so long. It happens one year after the events in the previous chapter. To Tativi, I swear, this is the last time gap of this sort in this story.

The sun wasn’t very high in the sky. They were in the middle of the morning. There were no clouds to be seen, so it was a very clear and sunny day. Jaime Lannister knew that at the other side of the city, outside the walls, between the Kingsroad and Blackwater Bay, men were preparing the ground for the tournament of Joffrey’s name day. However, from where he stood, he couldn’t see anything of the preparations, and truth be told he didn’t care. Cersei was only talking about it, always complaining they didn’t make enough for Joffrey’s sixteenth name day, requiring something more each day to make it greater.

Joffrey wasn’t better. He spent his time bragging all around the Red Keep that he was a man now, and said to everyone he would participate to the tourney and defeat anyone who would dare to challenge him. The thought almost made Jaime laugh. Even if Joffrey did have the courage to take part to his tourney, Cersei would never allow him. She would never allow her son to put himself into danger.

There were times Jaime wondered if Joffrey really was his seed. He made him think more of Robert than himself. However, he knew Cersei never allowed Robert to put a child into her. Her children were all his. If so, then Joffrey had to come from him. Cersei should let him fight, go into the world, see it with his own eyes, not keep him inside the Red Keep with her, where he was surrounded by servants, courtiers and sycophants who kept praising him at every turn. He didn’t see much reason to organize a tourney for this pampered boy’s name day.

It didn’t matter. Joffrey was Cersei’s son, and if she wanted to organize the greatest tourney in history for him, that was her choice, and her right. Robert and Jon Arryn couldn’t deny her, no matter the Hand’s repeated comments about the increasing cost of the event. They only had to ask Littlefinger to rub more coins together and more than enough would appear to pay for the expenses. And if that wasn’t enough, they only had to borrow money from Tyrion like they borrowed from their father long ago.

Tyrion. His little brother. It had been two years now since the last time he saw him. That was when their father had died. How things had changed since. Well, things had not changed that much. Robert kept drinking and whoring, Jaime and his sworn brothers kept defending him, and Jon Arryn kept the whole Realm going on and picking up the pieces his friend left behind him. His father’s death hadn’t changed the world. People kept living, eating, drinking, fucking, working, fighting, squabbling and dying like before. The sun kept rising in the east and setting in the west, rain kept falling on certain days while it didn’t on other days, and everything went on just like before.

It was Cersei who had changed most of all. She had always been vindictive, rash, impetuous, but
after their father’s death, things had gone worse. Jaime suspected that had something to do with the fact she couldn’t get everything she wanted anymore. Their father’s name, gold and power had always been there to protect her, and to serve her interests. As soon as the name of Tywin Lannister came out, that was enough to make anyone do as she willed. Now, Tywin Lannister was dead. His name was no cause for fear anymore. Cersei still had more than enough gold, and the red cloaks as well, and she was the queen, but Jaime realized that their father’s name really was the thing that gave them the most power. People were mocking House Lannister now. Not openly, in front of him or Cersei, but in secret, or when only in the king’s presence. They would never have dared to do so when their father was alive. They said the Lannisters were ruled by a toothless little lion and an innocent rose. Littlefinger said that brothels would be more profitable than ever with all the gold of Casterly Rock at Tyrion’s disposal. Jaime was called Kingslayer more than ever. Cersei took it quite bad. She drank more wine than ever, sometimes in the morning, as soon as she woke up. She was more vengeful than ever, and more protective over her children than anyone could imagine.

People could laugh, but Jaime knew the laughing would stop one day, and maybe sooner than he thought. They were laughing of them because House Lannister was ruled by the Imp. If they weren’t careful, they would find out very soon that Tyrion could be as dangerous as their father. Jaime didn’t know much about ruling, but from what he knew, Tyrion was ruling the Westerlands quite well. He heard something about a treaty that brought the Westerlands and the Reach much closer, and that their cousin Daven was going to marry some lady from the Reach very soon. Tyrion was making alliances. Robert and Jon Arryn, and Littlefinger and Varys, and Stannis and Renly, they were all wrong when they thought Tyrion would be easy to deal with. In a coat of gold, or a coat of red, a lion still has claws. Tyrion may be small, but the small lion had claws. Jaime couldn’t wait to see the day where Tyrion would plant his claws into all of them, the Starks, the Baratheons, the Arryns, the Tullys, the Martells…

In the meantime, Jaime couldn’t wait to see his little brother again. He looked far away at the horizon, but he couldn’t distinguish anything yet. They were supposed to arrive today. Tyrion had written to him and Cersei a few months ago to tell them he would come to King’s Landing for Joffrey’s name day. Cersei hadn’t showed much enthusiasm at the prospect. If only she and Tyrion could set aside their quarrels. Jaime hoped foolishly that they could reconcile this time and forget about the incident the last time they saw each other, but it was very unlikely to happen. Cersei would never reconcile with Tyrion, not when he would bring his wife with him.

For two years, Tyrion’s letters had been talking about his wife. Margaery Tyrell occupied at least half the space of each letter Tyrion sent to Jaime, when she didn’t occupy all the space. It wasn’t difficult for Jaime to see, even without seeing him, that his little brother was in love with his rose. Cersei had been furious when she learnt that the marriage had taken place. Apparently, she had tried to stop that marriage from happening, going as far as to plot with Robert and Jon Arryn to give Margaery Tyrell to Renly Baratheon. However, it looked like the Tyrells had decided they didn’t care for the king’s wishes, and they had gone to Casterly Rock all the same. The wedding had taken place, and now there was a new Lady of Casterly Rock.

Jaime had never met Margaery Tyrell, but he found it cruel and unfair that Cersei, Robert and the small council had tried to sabotage Tyrion’s marriage. Tyrion had told him he wouldn’t marry an unwilling bride. If the Tyrells went to Casterly Rock, then the girl had probably agreed, or at least her family had approved. Tyrion only wanted a nice wife, somebody to love and who would love him back, something more than just a whore with half a brain. The Tyrell girl had been his chance. That was the reason why Jaime was so enraged when he heard that Cersei wanted to force the girl into another marriage, with her brother’s boyfriend. He had been relieved when he heard that they were wed. Cersei, on the contrary, had a rage like she never had in years. She had looked more beautiful than ever too.
Jaime wondered how the Rose of Highgarden looked like. He tried to remember the girl Tyrion had loved once, but he couldn’t really recall how she looked like with precision. Jaime was happy that Tyrion had found himself another wife, and not any random girl. The Rose of Highgarden! Jaime was eager to see his brother back, and to meet his sister-in-law. He wanted to see the young woman who made Tyrion so happy in these last two years. Cersei could say what she wanted, Jaime wouldn’t ignore someone who made his little brother happy, not after what their father did to that poor girl about ten years ago and how she died. Tyrion had loved his wife, and Jaime would never consider as an enemy a woman that Tyrion loved and who loved Tyrion (according to Tyrion himself). But he knew it was useless to argue about this with Cersei.

From the battlements over the Lion Gate, the Goldroad stretched far away. There was still no sign of Tyrion or any banner of House Lannister. They could be here anytime. There were twenty men in Lannister armor, twenty red cloaks, who waited with Jaime for their liege lord. They were leaning on the walls, or sitting on the grass and playing dice. They were there to escort their lord and his wife through the streets of King’s Landing, and also to welcome him. Jaime wished Cersei had accepted to be there to welcome their brother, but she would have none of it. She wouldn’t even allow Tommen and Myrcella to be present when their uncle would arrive. Jaime knew how fond of Tyrion were Cersei’s youngest children. As for Joffrey, he wasn’t even sure he would notice it if Tyrion or Jaime died tomorrow.

Jaime saw a point appearing on the horizon. He couldn’t distinguish the colour first. Then he had the impression it was red. His heart bumped all of sudden, but when he looked more attentively, it looked greener. He looked away to the city, a huge pile of buildings too great and too many for the space they had. Whenever a fire started, the city was in danger. If someone started multiple fires simultaneously at the right places… Burn them all! The words echoed through his head. Jaime looked back to the road.

When he brought his attention to the point he saw previously, he realized it wasn’t green, or red. It was green and red. Jaime tried to take a better look and thought he saw a column. Why did they have green banners along with red banners? It dawned on Jaime. Tyrion’s wife was a Tyrell. It was them. They had come. Jaime ran down the stairs of the gate and went through the people going in and out of the city.

“All right, men. They’re coming. Everyone in position.”

The red cloaks immediately stopped whatever they were doing and took place behind Jaime, forming two lines. They put their helmets on their heads. Jaime kept his own off. He couldn’t see from there as far as he could from the top of the gate, but after some time he perceived a long line of horse, escorting a huge wheelhouse. When they were close enough, he distinguished their banners. A golden rose on a green field, and a golden lion on a crimson field. They were here. They were coming. They had quite a long line of guards accompanying them. Jaime guessed there were about two hundred riders and men on foot, whether they wore green or red armor, plus many carts following them. The first men reached the gate before the wheelhouse. Some dismounted. One of them removed his helmet and Jaime discovered the face of his cousin, Daven.

“Jaime!” he roared. “All in white and shining gold!”

“Glad to see you, coz. I didn’t expect you to come.” Daven had never been someone for tourneys, so Jaime doubted that was why he came.

“You brother forced me. To meet my betrothed.”

Jaime frowned. “Your betrothed?”
“Yes. Lady Desmera Redwyne.”

“Desmera?” Jaime laughed. So that was the girl from the Reach Daven was supposed to marry. “How well do you like freckles?”

“It’s no fault of mine. My father had been discussing with Paxter Redwyne for some time, and your brother arranged everything at Old Oak last year. I must take part to your nephew’s tourney and meet her by the same occasion. Her father is bringing her here. When we’ll ride back to Casterly Rock once this is all over, she’ll be with us. And we will get married.”

“Well, Tyrion knows how to be convincing.”

“Especially when his wife is Lord Tyrell’s daughter. Paxter Redwyne couldn’t refuse the Lord of the Westerlands when his liege lord is his father-in-law.”

“How is she? My new sister-in-law?”

Daven looked behind. The huge wheelhouse made of gold, green and red had stopped. Servants were running all around. “You’ll find out soon,” his cousin replied. “But be careful. She might look like a rose, but she has thorns,” Daven added as he walked away among the escort.

A young boy came with a stool to place it under the carriage, then stood aside. Jaime thought his looks were familiar to him. The wheelhouse’s door opened and a small frame got out of it. Jaime’s little brother had not changed in the least since they last met. No taller, no smaller, no uglier, he was exactly like Jaime remembered. Well, not entirely. There was something he thought that had changed. He didn’t move or walk the same way. His stance seemed different. Tyrion’s eyes went immediately to his brother. He smiled immediately and walked directly to Jaime with his short legs.

“Hello, big brother.”

“Hello, little brother.”

They shook hands. It wouldn’t have bothered Jaime if they hugged, but in a public place like this one, when people were coming in and out of the city, not to mention the guards at the gate, the red cloaks and all the retinue Tyrion had brought with him, it wouldn’t do anymore in this place than him kissing Cersei on the lips in front of everyone.

“We’ve missed you, Tyrion,” Jaime said.

“You? I have no doubt. Though for the others, I doubt it. But I assume life here must be dull when you don’t enjoy brothels and wine,” Tyrion replied.

“If those are the only things of interests in King’s Landing, then I imagine the people missed your wits and japes more than everything.” The person who just spoke was a young woman with thick and curly brown hair, green eyes and a round face. She walked in Jaime’s direction and Tyrion stepped aside to let her come. “Ser Jaime, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

She had to be around eighteen, no more. She wore a green light dress that seemed fitting for a warmer climate than King’s Landing. She had a sweet smile that surprised Jaime more than it disarmed him.

“Jaime, I present you my wife, Margaery.” Tyrion looked at her in wonderment as he introduced her.

That was her. The new Lady of Casterly Rock. The Rose of Highgarden. Seeing how she was dressed, with only transparent fabric ribbons loosely wrapped to cover her arms and her dress
hugging tightly against her forms, Jaime understood that his little brother fell in love with her. She was beautiful, though not as beautiful as Cersei. Still, Jaime’s sister wouldn’t like to see her, he was quite sure of that.

“The pleasure is mine, my lady.” Jaime tried to see any resemblance with the girl Tyrion had married years ago, but he couldn’t. “I was eager to meet you. Tyrion only talks about you in his letters.”

“Really?” She took a surprised air, but it looked quite feigned to Jaime. She looked at his little brother.

“What else would I tell him?” Tyrion asked her. She didn’t answer and only smiled at him, Tyrion returning it.

“So, she is the Rose of Highgarden?” asked Jaime to his brother.

“Of course. Who did you think she was? The Queen of Thorns?”

The young woman let a short laugh escape her throat. “I don’t think so. She’s much too old for that.” Jaime replied before he could think about it.

Margaery looked at him with a neutral expression, but after a second she burst into laughs. “There’s no doubt now, you are Tyrion’s brother.” Jaime noticed that Tyrion had looked at him in utter surprise when the jape had come out. Relief had succeeded, but he wasn’t looking at Jaime without reproach now. “I suppose we should head to the Red Keep. Unless we want to stay here all day and slow down everyone coming this way.”

She was right. People and carts were moving more slowly due to their presence at the Lion Gate. Hundreds of people couldn’t stop on the road without slowing down the others using it. “Of course,” he said. “The streets are too narrow for the wheelhouse to come through, but we have a litter.”

“I’ll take the litter. You both have surely a lot of things to tell each other. Unless you believe you can’t survive a few minutes without me.” Lady Margaery said the last words for Tyrion.

“I don’t know. I suppose we’ll find out when we arrive at the Red Keep. Organize good funerals if I can’t.”

She laughed again and walked to the litter with a few other girls. Jaime recognized his cousins Joy and Cerenna among them, unless it was Joy and Myrielle. He could never differentiate the twins. As she walked past Jaime, he noticed the way Tyrion was looking at her. His little brother was in love, obviously. Well, that was good enough for Jaime. Tyrion deserved some happiness in his life, and if he was happy with his wife, everything was all right for Jaime. The boy who brought the stool not long ago brought a big mare that Jaime recognized immediately.

“So, you received my present? I was afraid it wouldn’t reach you.” Jaime was afraid that Cersei might stop it.

“It’s a very good mount, Jaime. Thank you.”

As Jaime saddled, his attention went back to the boy helping Tyrion to mount. He knew who looked like it. “Are you a Frey?” Jaime asked.

The boy looked up at Jaime. “Yes, ser. We saw each other the last time you came at Casterly Rock. I’m Ser Emmon’s son.”

“Come on, Jaime,” said Tyrion at this moment. “He bears our father’s name.”
Jaime’s eyes widened. “Tywin Frey! I thought you were still in the cradle.”

“I will be ten by the next moon,” retorted the boy, insulted.

“I’ve been ten, me too. Everyone is ten if they don’t die before. That’s nothing to be proud of.”

“Be kind with him, Jaime,” Tyrion interrupted again. “He’s my squire. Now let’s go on and reach the Red Keep before the tourney begins.”

Since the tourney would start next week, that said a lot. They rode through the Lion Gate, more than two hundred people, on horse, on foot or in a litter for Tyrion’s wife. Tyrion and Jaime weren’t far from it, but far enough to speak without any fear to be heard, in the front of the column.

“So, happy with your new wife?” Jaime asked his brother.

Tyrion looked at him as if he said the most stupid thing there was. “Of course, I am. Do you think I wrote all those letters to fool you? Of course, I’m happy.”

“How is she like? Daven told me she has thorns.”

Tyrion nodded. “She has. She takes after her grandmother on this.”

“Well, I don’t envy you then. She must be insufferable.”

“Be careful, Jaime. You’re talking about my wife, and your lady. Would you like it if I spoke ill of our sister in your presence?”

Jaime looked at his brother with a warning on his face. That wasn’t the place to say such things. Jaime only met a similar expression from Tyrion. He wasn’t joking. Jaime surrendered. “I’m sorry, Tyrion. How is she, really?”

Tyrion looked away. “How to say that, Jaime? She’s beautiful, wonderful, intelligent, clever, kind… She’s perfect. There are still moments where I’m afraid I will wake up all of a sudden to realize that these last two years were only a dream.”

“In this case, I hope the dream will continue for a long time.”

“I don’t want this to be a dream, Jaime. I want this to be true. She loves me.” Tyrion was serious. He wasn’t japing like he often did.

“Are you sure?”

“I am, strange as it is.” Tyrion laughed. “You should see all the things she’s doing in Casterly Rock and Lannisport. She’s completely rearranging the northern hill, and all the works she’s doing in the city is changing its face.”

Cersei wouldn’t like to hear it. Jaime wasn’t sure what to make of that. Tyrion was a dwarf, Jaime knew that. He had no illusion concerning Tyrion’s chances to find love one day. Women never looked at him. Still, there was one who had loved him. Was it possible that this young woman loved him now? Could the woman in the litter behind them love Tyrion for real?

“What about you? Do you love her?”

“I do.” Tyrion looked at him with a smile Jaime never saw on his brother’s face. Jaime couldn’t be sure about Lady Margaery’s feelings, but his brother loved her. Jaime would have to make sure this wouldn’t end like the last time.
A heavy rain had fallen two days ago, so the streets of the capital were muddy, and the alleys were even worse. Tyrion’s wife was wrong when she asked him if he could survive a few minutes without her. She should have asked for hours, because that’s what they needed to reach the Reed Keep. Some people didn’t dare to move past them with the horrible state of the ways. However, it was Tyrion’s wife who delayed them the most. She stopped their escort not far from Flea Bottom and went to visit an orphanage. Tyrion accompanied her. They came back some time later, children following them. Lady Margaery was the center of most of their attention, but they seemed to like Tyrion, even if that may only be because they found him funny, being a dwarf. Because of that, Tyrion and his wife were all dirty when they arrived at the Red Keep to be welcomed by Ser Barristan Selmy and Renly Baratheon. Robert’s youngest brother was very courteous towards Margaery. That was no surprise considering the special relationship he had with her brother. Renly laughed out loud when he saw them covered with dust and mud, but Ser Barristan remained unmoved and welcomed them as if they were at an official event.

Once Tyrion and his wife were settled and changed, they went to the Great Hall where Robert Baratheon would receive for the first time their pledge in person. Tyrion had already pledged himself to Robert by raven, but not in his presence yet, in King’s Landing. Jaime accompanied his brother and his new sister-in-law to the king, to have the surprise to find his sister sitting by her husband’s side.

Cersei was richly dressed, more beautiful than ever, with a complicated headdress. She sat like a real queen, while Robert was drinking in a gigantic cup and asking for more wine from their cousin Lancel. Jaime wondered what his sister was doing here. She was avoiding her husband as much as she could, and there was no obligation for her to here today.

Robert stopped and somehow seemed to realize there were people standing before him. He glanced at them, then burst into laughs. Jaime looked at his brother and his wife, and he had to admit they were quite an odd pair. Though when he looked at Cersei and the fat king sitting at her side, he couldn’t see much better.

“So, that’s it. The Lord of Casterly Rock. The Imp.” He burst in laughing again, and drank once more. Jaime looked at his brother once more, who didn’t seem to enjoy the jape very much. Jaime had the impression to see his father again. “So, Kingslayer. How do you feel now? Seeing what your brother has and you could have? Do you think your father would like it?”

“I suppose he would like it as much as you enjoy being married to my sister,” retorted Tyrion. That was where the resemblance between Tyrion and their father stopped. Tywin Lannister would only have stared icily to the man laughing at him and everyone would have known that the person making fun of the Lord of Casterly Rock would pay for it one day.

For a second, the king didn’t react, but then he laughed again. “Well, at least he knows how to make jokes. That will make a funny lord. We need it here.”

If anyone wasn’t laughing in the Great Hall right now, it was Cersei. She looked furiously at Tyrion, with the same icy stare like their father’s that Tyrion displayed a moment ago. Margaery Tyrell didn’t look unmoved by anything happening around. It was a chance that the courtiers weren’t there. Only the kingsguards would be witnesses of the scene.

“Your Grace,” Tyrion began, “I have come to renew my pledge to you as your…”

“Yes, yes, I know. No need to go through all of it. That’s boring.” Robert Baratheon dealt with everything at court as he always did. He looked at Margaery. “I suppose this is the new Lady Lannister?”
Lady Margaery walked forward to the steps of the dais, though she didn’t climb them. “Your Grace, it is an honor to meet you.”

“Yes, I’m sure of that. My brother once showed me a little statue of you. I don’t know why he did. It didn’t look like you at all. The man who did this didn’t make a good job.”

“Maybe the sculptor never saw me?”

Robert didn’t seem to care about the supposition. With his heavy weight, he stood up from the Iron Throne. “I welcome you to King’s Landing, and wish you a good stay.”

He walked out without another word, followed by Ser Barristan and Ser Arys. The only people left in the Throne Room were Tyrion, his wife, Cersei, Jaime and two of his fellow kingsguards. Lady Margaery didn’t look bothered by the king’s departure either. She looked at Cersei who still sat beside the Iron Throne.

“Your Grace.” Margaery Tyrell curtsied. Jaime wondered all of a sudden if there had been a single time when she hadn’t smiled since they met. “It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you.”

“It is a pleasure to meet, for me too,” Jaime’s sister replied.

Cersei left her seat and walked down the steps. Then she stood before Margaery, a frozen expression with a false smile on her face. Jaime knew that Cersei was everything but happy about the young woman’s presence in the capital. He remembered the number of glasses that were broken when Cersei heard Tyrion was wed.

“So, here is the young woman who married my brother,” Cersei added.

Her smile was false. Jaime saw that Tyrion’s wife kept smiling despite the uncomfortable circumstances. Cersei was taller than her, and so close that her position was threatening. They could have kissed. She observed Margaery, who kept smiling as if nothing was amiss. Cersei’s smile suddenly left her face. She looked in utter hatred at Tyrion’s wife.

“Welcome to King’s Landing. We’ll have more time to discuss at dinner. I invite you and my brothers to dine with me and my children.”

“It will be our pleasure, your Grace,” replied the girl, all smile.

“Yes, I suppose it will be.”

Then Cersei just walked away, or more precisely stormed outside the room with the two other kingsguards. The Great Hall wasn’t silent for a very long time after she left.

“Sorry. You just met my lovely big sister,” Tyrion said to his wife in an apologetic way.

“Yes, I think I noticed.” There was some mockery in her voice.

“Better go to our rooms and rest. This dinner tonight will be an ordeal.”

“Go forward. I’ll walk with your brother. We’ll get to know each other better this way.”

“As you wish, my lady. Jaime, if anything happens to my wife while you’re walking her, remember that a Lannister always pays his debts.”

“Don’t worry, Tyrion. I’ll keep an eye on her,” Jaime assured.
On that threat that wasn’t really one, Tyrion left and Jaime found himself alone with his sister-in-law. She spoke as soon as Tyrion was away.

“Your sister and her husband have a very particular way to welcome their guests.”

“Don’t worry, the king is always like that. As for Cersei… she didn’t have an easy day. And she doesn’t get along quite well with Tyrion.”

“I know. Tyrion told me. And I know from Lord Renly that his Grace isn’t very interested in ruling.”

Robert isn’t interested at all by ruling. “We should walk.”

Jaime led the way and offered his arm to Lady Margaery, who took it without hesitation. “I suppose it mustn’t be easy. To have a brother and a sister who quarrel all the time.”

“No, it’s not, but I got used to it.”

“Why do they despise each other so much?”

“Well, that’s a long story. A very long story.” Jaime didn’t want to start a long development on the many possible reasons why Tyrion and Cersei hated each other. Sometimes he wanted to smash both their heads and force them to reconcile, even if that would only last a minute.

“Does it have anything to do with Lady Joanna’s death?” Jaime looked at her, taken aback. “I know about it, Ser Jaime.”

“Well, yes. Cersei hated Tyrion when he was born because our mother died that same day. And she never got over it.”

“What about you?”

Jaime sighed. “Tyrion is my brother. Yes, our mother died, but that’s not as if Tyrion had wanted it. He was a baby. He didn’t come into the world, deciding that he would kill our mother by the way.”

Lady Margaery’s face turned sad. “It must have been terrible for you all the same. To lose your mother. Both of you.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“I just wish your sister, the queen, could get past it. I have lived with Tyrion for two years now, and I have rarely seen someone so kind in my life.”

Jaime had no doubt he was kind with her. She was his wife, after all. “I have wished the same very often.”

A long moment with a huge silence followed, which Jaime’s sister-in-law broke in the end. “Do you think she could try something against your brother?”

Jaime sighed. “I hope not.”

“But could she?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. But she would never try to kill him if that’s what you’re worried about. We are family, after all.”

He said that while laughing, and the young lady joined him. She was really smiling and laughing all
the time. Jaime understood why Tyrion loved her, if she was always like that. She really was a rose, like the symbols on her gown reminded everyone. Jaime would be able to reassure Cersei. This girl was no threat at all. If that was the Rose of Highgarden, then Jaime was happy that Tyrion had married her. If she made him happy, and cared about him like she just showed, then Jaime was happy to welcome her into House Lannister.

“Still,” she resumed, “if she was to try something, if she tried to cause harm to Tyrion, what do you think you would do?”

Jaime stopped to look at the young woman. He would reassure her once and for all. “Cersei will never do anything against Tyrion. He is our brother. You don’t have to worry about it. And if she was to try anything against him, then I would stop her. I wouldn’t let her hurt him.”

Instead of relief, he saw confusion on her face. “You wouldn’t allow another member of your family to hurt your brother?”

“Never.” He would never allow that to happen. Never.

“Then in this case, where were you when Tysha was raped?”

Jaime couldn’t have been more stuck by surprise. He stopped to breath, his members were frozen and unable to move, his own mind couldn’t think clearly anymore. His eyes were kept by Margaery Tyrell’s hateful stare. He didn’t know how long it lasted. His head had gone numb. Tysha. She knew it. She was judging him. And unlike the people usually judging him, she didn’t judge him for being a kingslayer or an oathbreaker. She judged him for something horrible he really did. He couldn’t find an answer. Finally, she spoke again.

“Tyrion loves you, because you’re his brother. But myself, I do not see Jaime Lannister, the man who allowed his father to force Tyrion to rape his own wife, and who stepped aside while the girl was being raped by other men, under Tyrion’s eyes, as someone who deserves to be called the brother of my husband. Your sister has already tried to turn some of Tyrion’s bannermen against him. I hope this time you won’t remain idle. Because if you do, then I will be the one to stop Cersei, and I may not be merciful towards a woman who tried to overthrow me and Tyrion. I think I’ll walk the rest of the way by myself. Thank you, ser.”

She left him there, to ponder her words. As Jaime looked at Margaery Tyrell walking to his brother, he realized how wrong he had been about her. Cersei was capable of playing to bring people to do her biddings. She was capable of putting an act, to fool everyone. Margaery Tyrell wasn’t that different. She had fooled him with smiles and jokes. Daven was right. The rose had thorns.

Chapter End Notes

Jaime and Cersei just met the new Lady Lannister. It went well. :-D
Wait to see when Margaery meets Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen, along with Margaery's first real conversation with Cersei.

Please review

Next chapter: Cersei
Cersei III

Chapter Notes

The twentieth chapter of "A Rose and a Lion". And like someone said, this chapter shows the Clash of Titans next generation. After Genna and Olenna, prepare for Cersei and Margaery. This clash may be more subtle and less sharp than the original one.

Sadly, I will now return to my former schedule for "A Rose and a Lion" with an update once in two weeks. My break over "A Shadow and a Wolf" is coming to an end, and I will start to publish two chapters per week in this fic once again on February 1st (I will make sure this is February 1st or sooner for everyone, no matter the country they live in.) I wish I had more than twenty-four hours in a day to write everything I want.

There is a violent part at the end of the chapter. I put a warning at the place where it begins just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI III

“Mother? I asked you something. How is she?”

Cersei got out of her reverie. “There isn’t much to tell about her. I suppose we’ll know more after dinner, but she seems petty.”

“I don’t understand why I have to dine with them.”

“Because you’re my son, and I invited them. You’re a prince, and one day you’ll sit on the Iron Throne.”

“I thought kings commanded and did as they liked. Why am I forced to attend a dinner with the Imp and his wife?” Joffrey stopped to button his shirt.

“A good king knows he must do certain things, even if he hates to do them, in order to maintain his power and in order to defeat his enemies.”

Joffrey looked at Cersei, an uncertain look in his yes. “So, this… this Margaery that my uncle Tyrion married, and my uncle too, they are enemies?”

Cersei took her son’s hands into her own. “Everyone who isn’t us is an enemy.”

“Then why are we dining with them?”

“To learn about them. To know their weaknesses and to use them against them when the time comes. And to not give them the impression we are working against them, so they don’t see it coming when we’ll strike.”

Joffrey nodded. Cersei could see he wasn’t entirely sure, but he still had years before he would
become king. And if Robert killed himself through his whoring and drinking before that, then Cersei
would be there to lead her son in his first years as king, until he was ready.

Joffrey resumed to dress himself. “I don’t like the Imp. He’s ugly, small, he insults me, treats me as if
I was a child. I am a prince, the heir to the Iron Throne. He should show me respect.”

“He will show you respect in time,” Cersei assured him.

“Why not now?”

“He doesn’t realize what he’s doing. The day you become king, he will regret everything he did to
you. Maybe he’ll regret it before.”

“She must be small, that wife he has. I wonder how he managed to marry her. Who would like to
marry him?”

A whore. “She’s unimportant. Don’t bother about her. Your uncle is the real enemy.”

“You said everyone who wasn’t us is an enemy.”

“Yes, but some enemies are more dangerous than others. This Margaery is not dangerous. She’s only
a little girl who smiles like an imbecile, no matter what we say. I’m not even sure she would bother if
Tyrion died tomorrow. Maybe she wouldn’t even realize it.”

This Margaery Tyrell could well be called the Rose of Highgarden. True, she was pretty in her own
way. Cersei was sure Tyrion loved her. As soon as you put a pair of legs or a pair of breasts before
him, Tyrion would fall into them and not think about anything else. Maybe the girl loved him too.
She looked stupid enough for that. Cersei had never seen someone so simple, always smiling despite
the insults and vulgarities the king threw. The girl annoyed and infuriated Cersei, but not because of
her behaviour.

Casterly Rock should have belonged to Cersei. She should be Lady of Casterly Rock, like her
mother had been before her. Instead, it now belonged to this ugly little creature, and a rose was
sitting on the throne Cersei should occupy. Worse, she was wearing her mother’s jewels. Cersei
couldn’t support to see a necklace that belonged to her mother around someone else’s neck.

Ser Meryn Trant came in at this moment. “Your Grace, your brother to see you.”

“Let him in,” she answered, without caring to look back. Her twin entered the room and noticed
Joffrey’s presence.

“I need to talk alone with your mother, my prince” his father told him.

Joffrey looked at her. “Go to the dining room. I’ll join you soon with your brother and your sister.”
Joffrey left. He was reluctant to obey her sometimes. Cersei would have to correct it. Her son was to
obey no one, but he had to follow her advice. She turned her attention back to her brother. “What is
it?”

Jaime looked troubled. “Cersei, tell me… have you… have you tried to overthrow Tyrion?”

A silence followed. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Well, I just had a discussion with… with our sister-in-law, and she told me you tried to turn some
lords in the Westerlands against him.”
Jaime’s face was questioning, but uncertain too. Cersei smiled. “You believe her?”

“I want to know if you did it.”

*Of course, I did. This little monster is ruling the lands that should be ours, living in the castle that is our home. What did you expect me to do? To let him steal the Rock away from us?* She chose to say something else. “I didn’t.”

Jaime nodded, looking at the floor, as if trying to focus on something. “I see.”

“Do you believe her over me?”

Jaime looked at her, complete surprise on his face. “No, of course.”

“Then we know she’s a liar now.”

Jaime looked all around, as if he was looking for something. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? Are you suggesting she could be telling the truth? That I just lied to you?”

“No, of course not.” He shook his head.

“Then she lied.”

“Maybe she was just mistaking.”

“Mistaking? She just accused your sister of false crimes, and you say she might just be mistaking? You’re defending her?”

“Calm down, Cersei.” He came to sit next to her. He was handsome. “I know you don’t like her. I know you believe she shouldn’t be Lady of Casterly Rock…”

“Of course, she shouldn’t be,” Cersei shouted. “She just accused me of false crimes. She tried to turn you against me. She is a traitor. If our father was still alive, her head would already be on a spike.”

Her anger wasn’t really true, but she put as much as she could to make it believable. She had a good reason to be angry anyway. She had to bring Jaime on her side.

“Father is dead. Tyrion is Lord of Casterly Rock now, and Margaery Tyrell is his wife. Margaery Lannister now, in fact. That makes her the Lady of Casterly Rock, whether we like it or not,” Jaime explained to her carefully. She didn’t think her fury would be feigned for long. He dared to call that girl a Lannister.

“So, that’s it? You’re ready to accept a stinking rose on our mother’s throne, in her solar, in her bed? All that because she’s fucking Tyrion?”

Jaime shook his head. “What can we do Cersei? Tell this to Tyrion, and ask him to execute her? He’s married with her. You weren’t with me this morning when they arrived. You didn’t see how Tyrion looks at her. You didn’t hear how he speaks of her. You didn’t see how they behave with each other. He loves her.”

“Then perhaps it’s time to put an end to this love.”

Jaime seemed thoughtful for a moment, but again he shook his head. “No. I won’t ruin our brother’s marriage. Tyrion is happy with her and I won’t destroy it.”
“So, you’re willing to let a little bitch from Highgarden married with our wretched brother for the sake of his happiness? As she tried to turn his brother and his sister against each other?”

Jaime sighed. “I don’t believe Tyrion would listen to us anyway. If she tells him that you tried to turn some of his bannermen against him, who do you think he will believe? You, or her?” The question didn’t need an answer. Cersei knew very well who Tyrion would believe. “She will not stay here for long. She will return to Casterly Rock with Tyrion as soon as Joffrey’s name day will be over. Now we know we mustn’t believe what she says. We don’t have to fear her anymore. Once she is back in the Westerlands, she won’t be able to cause us any harm.”

Her brother knew nothing. Tyrion could hurt them and their children wherever he was. He had the power of Casterly Rock and the might of the Westerlands at his side, and the Reach too, though until now all it gave him was some treaty on trade they signed at Old Oak last year. Tyrion had everything to hurt them. Cersei still remembered the head of the steward he sent to her, and the pie. And if that little rose told Jaime that she tried to turn some lords and knights in the Westerlands against him… Who betrayed her? Lord Lefford? Lady Westerling? Ser Gregor Clegane? What about Lady Sarwyck? She stopped to send her reports a few months ago. Did she involve too many people? Someone betrayed her, for sure, but who?

“We wouldn’t be in that position if you had accepted to become Lord of Casterly Rock,” she reproached him. She seized the cup of wine she previously let on the table and drank some. Another one, empty, fell on the floor. There were too many on this table. It didn’t break since it was made of gold.

“If I had accepted, I would have to leave you here alone with Robert. I would have to spend the rest of my life sitting on a chair giving justice, counting stags and coppers, avoiding sycophants, and suffering Kevan and Genna telling me every day how a lord should behave. And I would have to marry. Is that what you want?”

“As Lord of Casterly Rock, you would be free to marry who you want, or to not marry at all.”

Jaime scoffed. “Our uncle and our aunt wouldn’t leave me alone until I marry a suitable woman and produce children named Lannister. I don’t want Casterly Rock. I don’t want a wife. I don’t want children. All I want is you.”

His eyes were burning with passion. He got up from his chair and kissed her with passion. Cersei wanted him, but first she needed to have something. “What about that girl? What will you do with that little bitch who tried to tear us apart?”

“If she ever tries again, I’ll kill her. And if need be, I’ll kill her father, her mother, her brother, all her family, until there’s nothing left of them, until you and I are the only people left in this world.”

That’s what Cersei needed to hear. Until everyone else, including Tyrion, was dead. She gave in and they made love with passion.

Later, Cersei was walking to the dining room. Jaime had left her apartments first. It was better if they weren’t seen coming together. They had to be careful. She wished she hadn’t invited her little brother with his wife to dinner, but it was expected of her. Maybe it would prove useful. She could try to find out more about Tyrion and this wife of his. If what Jaime said was true, if Tyrion really loved her, then she could use it against him. His cock and the cunt he put it into were his greatest weaknesses. She wondered how the rose’s cunt looked like after two years of perverted bedding by the little creature. The thought brought some joy back to her mind. If Tyrion had no children, then her children would have the Rock once he would be dead. She couldn’t wait for that to happen.
The dining room was far more crowded than she thought it would be. All her beautiful children, Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen were here, as was Jaime. However, they weren’t alone. Jaime was discussing with their cousin, Daven, when she entered. Joffrey was discussing with Cerenna and Myrielle, Daven’s sisters, and Myrcella was talking with Joy Hill. Tommen stood in the corner, one of his many cats with him.

“Ah, your Grace.” Daven bowed to her, and her other cousins curtsied. At least, they knew how to behave before a queen. “Glad to see you again, Cersei,” Ser Stafford’s son said.

“It’s a pleasure for me too, cousin.” She didn’t expect them. She thought they would remain at Casterly Rock. Well, that would make more family on her side, which was only better when she would want to drop the little rose aside.

“Daven is going to ride in the tourney,” said Cerenna with enthusiasm.

“I am,” her cousin confirmed.

“To seduce Desmera Redwyne,” added Jaime.


“Your brother arranged me a marriage with her. She will come back with me to Casterly Rock when it’s all over,” Ser Daven explained.

“I hope you’re happy with it.”

“I am.” He didn’t sound quite convinced. Maybe Cersei could use this.

“Where is our brother and his pretty wife?”

“Her name is Margaery.” It was Joy who shouted it.

“Mother,” said Myrcella, “Joy says my aunt is arranging a great garden at Casterly Rock. She says it’s bigger and more beautiful than everything else.”

“Well, we shall see. I’m not entirely sure the tastes of the Reach would be to your liking, Cella,” Cersei replied.

“It’s beautiful,” assured the bastard girl. “There are great hedgerows. They are growing every month. She’s had flowers and trees brought from everywhere. She says some come from Dorne, or even from a forest in the North. She has red, blue and yellow stones to make ways. There are…”

“I think we’ll be able to know more about it when Lady Margaery arrives.” Cersei interrupted her cousin. What was she doing here? A bastard? “Where is she, by the way?”

“They should be here in a few minutes, your Grace,” answered Cerenna. “That is, if they are done.”

Cerenna and Myrielle giggled together again. “You should stop. Ladies don’t giggle like that. Only children do,” said Joffrey. Cersei couldn’t have agreed more with him.

“I giggle sometimes, you know,” said Myrcella.

“That’s what I said.”

A servant came inside as Joffrey finished his sentence. “Lord Tyrion, and Lady Margaery,” she announced.
Her little brother came in first. “Please forgive us to be late, everyone. I hope we missed nothing important,” he declared.

“Uncle Tyrion!” That was Myrcella. She almost ran to him, though she remembered her lessons enough to slow down in the end, but her brother still seized her by the waist and spun her in a circle before he lowered her back on the floor.

“You’ve grown up even more. I won’t be able to lift you anymore soon,” he complained. He would do well to not hurt her daughter. “And you grow more beautiful too. You’re going to outshine your mother.” Myrcella giggled and reddened. Tommen had approached in the meantime, his cat still in his hands. “And you, still growing bigger. I’m not sure I could lift you now. Is that a newcomer?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s Ser Pounce,” answered Tommen.

“With such a name, he must be brave.” The Tyrell bitch who married Tyrion was here. Tommen and Myrcella looked up at her with round eyes, as if not believing what they were seeing.

Tyrion introduced her. “Tommen, Myrcella, this is your aunt. Margaery.”

She was smiling sweetly at them, but Tommen and Myrcella looked frozen. “I thought you would be smaller,” said Tommen.

She laughed at the comment and went on her knees. “Am I small enough like that?” Cersei’s two little children joined her in laughing, as Tyrion did, and Cersei heard other people laughing as well.

Cersei, however, didn’t laugh. She noticed proudly that Joffrey didn’t laugh either. While kneeling, the necklace Margaery Tyrell was wearing had swung, attracting Cersei’s attention to it. She was wearing it back in the Great Hall as well. The necklace was made in the shape of a flower. It was a ruby, but Cersei knew that it was a sapphire on the other side. She remembered her mother showing it to her one day, saying her father had it made especially for her, and now a little whore from Highgarden was wearing it.

Margaery had a conversation with Tommen and Myrcella. She saw her taking Tommen’s cat in her arms and patting it, and they spoke about names, needlework and animals. All this time, her attention remained focused on the necklace. She had no right to wear it. It belonged to their mother, to Jaime and her. Its rightful place wasn’t on some opportunist girl. She saw Margaery Tyrell pinch Tommen’s cheek and decided that was enough. Her children already loved too much their small uncle. She wouldn’t let that happen with his wife as well.

“I believe it’s time to get at table,” Cersei said aloud.

The young woman had the decency to get back on her feet and to curtsy. “Your Grace, forgive me. I just wanted to know my nephew and my niece better. You have charming children.” Yes, and they are mine, not yours. “I’m afraid I wasn’t introduced to your eldest son, however.”

Cersei smirked. She walked to stand at her son’s side. “This is my son, Joffrey.”

“Prince Joffrey. May I call you Joffrey? You’re my nephew after all.” The Tyrell girl turned her head to Joffrey and smiled sweetly at him, just like she did with the youngest children. Cersei hated this smile.

Joffrey was looking at her queerly. Then he turned to Tyrion “How did you manage to marry her? You must have brought her to the altar in chains.”
Tyrion looked furious. Cersei prepared herself to defend her son against the valonqar. “Joffrey, except for the criminals, is there anyone else in King’s Landing who carries chains?” The question came from Lady Margaery.

Joffrey answered in an uncertain way. “No.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting I am a criminal then.” She had such an innocent expression. This girl was annoying Cersei. Joffrey didn’t answer, so she did.

“No, he didn’t…”

“Then, I suggest we begin the dinner,” said Margaery Tyrell before Cersei could finish. Everyone agreed. Margaery walked to her place, and Tyrion sat by her side.

Cersei was fuming. She was the one to invite for this dinner, and someone else gave the orders. She watched Margaery Tyrell closely during all the time they were at table. The Rose of Highgarden led the conversation. She didn’t lack words. She talked about charity works, the gardens she was organizing at the Rock, the tour around the Westerlands she did recently with Tyrion, the Reach, her family, the castle where she grew up. Cersei also noticed the way she was close to Tyrion. They would feed each other from time to time, and kiss, and they held hands very often. Her little brother was obviously enthralled by this pretty rose.

Only Joffrey kept the necessary distance from his aunt. The word gave Cersei a great wish to spew her food, even when it was only thought. He even told her to call him Prince Joffrey after she called him only by his name once too often. Tommen and Myrcella showed too much enthusiasm to her, especially after Margaery had a new cat brought to Tommen, who she named Lady Kitty after Cersei’s son asked his aunt to give her a name. She said she would have a gift later for Joffrey and Myrcella. Cersei would have to watch out for Tommen and Myrcella while this so-called Lady of Casterly Rock was present.

As the night progressed, people left the table. However, in the end, as the last guests were leaving and Cersei got out of the dining room, the Tyrell girl managed to catch her alone. Cersei had sent her children to bed with their servants.

“Your Grace,” she called from behind in the corridor. Tyrion wasn’t with her.

“Lady Margaery.” Cersei forced a smile upon her lips. “What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping we could have a private discussion.”

“Not now. I’m busy and it’s late.” Cersei had no wish to talk to the woman who took what was hers by right. She kept walking, but the Tyrell followed her.

“Cersei, I understand you don’t want me or Tyrion to be here.” She dared to call the queen by her name. “I know you don’t get along well with my husband, for reasons that are your own, but I wish I could make it different. You have no reasons to hate each other.” I have every reason to hate him. Cersei looked at the girl. She wasn’t smiling like before, and her face had grown serious. Cersei thought that Margaery Tyrell might not be as simple as she had thought first, but she doubted she had much brain. “We are sisters, your Grace. I wish we could be friends. We should.”

She smiled as she said the last sentence. That girl was really stupid to consider she could be Cersei’s friend. Perhaps it was time to show her who she was dealing with. Cersei was the queen. She decided to play the game and pulled on a smile.

“Very well. Let us be friends.” For the time being.
Margaery took her arm around her own and they walked together. “I hope we can get to know each other better.”

“I hope so me too,” Cersei echoed. “Tell me a little about you. You strike me as a musical girl. You must have a lovely voice.”

Margaery laughed shortly. “I am a better dancer than singer, I’m afraid.”

“But you know the song The Rains of Castamere?”

“Of course. I have lived in Casterly Rock long enough to hear it several times.” Her answer looked a little dry to Cersei. That was good. She didn’t like the song.

“So you know the story of House Reyne of Castamere?”

“I do. I would be a terrible Lady of the Westerlands if I didn’t know their history.”

“House Reyne was a powerful family. Very wealthy. The second wealthiest in Westeros. Aren’t the Tyrells the second wealthiest family in Westeros now?”

“Indeed, my family is,” Margaery confirmed.

(Of course, ambitious climbers don’t want to stop on the second highest rung. If only you could take that final step, you’d see further than all the rest. You’d be alone with nothing but blue sky above you. So Lord Reyne built a castle as grand as Casterly Rock. He gave his wife diamonds larger than any my mother ever wore. And finally one day, he rebelled against my father. Do you know where House Reyne is now?”

“Gone.” That was the only word the rose spoke, with gloom.

Cersei turned her head to her and smirked. “Gone. A gentle word. Why not say slaughtered? Every man, woman and child put to the sword. I remember seeing their bodies hanging high above the gates of Casterly Rock. My father let them rot up there all summer. It was a long summer. And now the rains weep o’er their walls, and not a soul to hear.” Cersei freed her arm from Margaery and looked directly into her eyes. “If you ever call me sister or Cersei again, I’ll have you strangled in your sleep.”

Cersei walked away, not looking again at her brother’s wife. She would remember that. Before she made ten steps however, Margaery Tyrell called for her. “I’m afraid this is quite different from what I heard. The Reynes were never richer than the Tyrells. My family has been the second richest house in Westeros ever since Aegon Targaryen came. Castamere was never as high as Casterly Rock, and I doubt there were bodies to hang over the gates since the Reynes were all flooded in their mines by your lord father. And since the rebellion happened before you were born, before Lord Tywin was even married, I doubt you could have seen the bodies even if there had been any.”

When Cersei looked behind, the young woman was gone. Cersei resumed her path to her rooms. What really happened didn’t matter. She could make the truth she wanted, and that was all the truth that mattered. She was the queen. The time would come when only her truth would matter to everyone.

Cersei had spent her life waiting for the right moment to rule. Robert was digging his grave more deeply every day. He wouldn’t last long, and when he would die, her son would be king, and she would guide Joffrey on the right path. Of course, she wouldn’t have to wait if her father had left her Casterly Rock. She would have all the power she needs, and her children would be kings and Lords of the Westerlands. Instead, she was forced to watch that lecherous little creature take her father’s
lands, titles and castle, and making a little whore of the Reach sit by his side. The way she dressed was proof enough of how close to a whore Margaery Tyrell was.

That wouldn’t last long. Cersei wasn’t without resources. She had the red cloaks, Pycelle, Jaime, and her children. She had more than enough gold and power to bring all those she needed by her side when the time would be right. Her father’s death had left her without her main support, but she had been able to keep her influence all the same. She was the queen. She could still force Robert, his friend Jon Arryn and the small council into doing her will. They had no choice to listen to her. When Robert would die, Tyrion and his little wife would learn who had the real power. Cersei would take back everything that was hers and more.

WARNING : VIOLENT SECTION

Once she was back in her personal rooms, Cersei sent away Ser Meryn and asked for her brother to be her guard tonight. She needed Jaime by her side. She changed into light clothes for the night, eager to feel Jaime’s breath upon her skin. She poured herself a glass of wine and sipped while waiting for her brother. She heard the door open. She threw down her sleeping gown to reveal her body to the man she loved. When she turned around to face him, she found herself before the wrong brother.

“That’s not really an appropriate outfit to receive your brother, your Grace? Unless you’re a Targaryen, which you’re not.”

She had asked for Jaime. She was under shock for some time. “What are you doing here?”

“I need a serious discussion with my sister.”

He looked at her with anger, and Cersei returned it. “Get out! GET OUT!”

“OUT! NOW!”

She slapped him once, then twice, but when she tried to slap him a third time, Tyrion seized her arm and twisted it. Cersei felt the pain in her bones. He kept twisting it. She fell on her knees. She yelled, wanted to scream for help, felt the pain growing worse. She saw the eyes of her valonqar burning with fury. Was that the moment? And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands around your pale white throat and choke the life from you. The tears were coming to her eyes. The pain was too much. She couldn’t support it. Her arm was still being twisted by the little monster who murdered her mother. The time had come. Soon he would strangle her.

Tyrion let go off her arm and pushed her on the floor. Cersei cowered on the marble, the pain in her arm too great to move. She felt so vulnerable right now, all naked, on the floor, at the mercy of a monster. She looked up, and through the tears that filled her eyes, she could see the fury more alive than ever in her brother’s eyes. He was towering her, looking huge like a giant. That was the end. All he had to do was to bring his hands around her throat, and everything would be over.

“I will make things clear for you, Cersei. Up to now, I closed my eyes, I tried my best to ignore all the horrible things you’ve done to me and to forgive you. I decided to not retaliate when you tried to have me poisoned, and I didn’t take measures against you when I found out you tried to turn my bannermen against me. All this time, I tried to forgive you for Jaime, because he’s my brother as
much as yours. I love him like my brother, and he loves you, but I’m warning you. If you ever dare to touch Margaery, if you ever dare to hurt her in any way, or if you ever threaten her again, I will turn your life into a living hell. I will make you the most miserable person in the known world. I will cast you down, and take away from you everything you hold dear. Everything you want, I’ll make sure you never get it. I will tell Jaime about your attempts to murder me. I will call back the red cloaks to Casterly Rock. I will not send you a single copper coin for the rest of your life. I’ll have your eldest son sent to Storm’s End, so he may finally learn what it is to rule. I will betroth Myrcella to a good and powerful man who will take care of her, and send her to live with him. And I will foster Tommen to Casterly Rock. I will not let you spoil and destroy Tommen and Myrcella like you are spoiling and destroying Joffrey right now. You do try again to do something against my wife, and all this will come true. You will spend the rest of your life alone in King’s Landing, with a fat drunken king who disgraces you every day with every woman he meets, without gold, without guards, and with a brother who will know about all your horrible deeds. Do you understand?”

He kicked her and Cersei felt a huge pain on her ribs. She gasped and cried even more. “Do you understand?” When she didn’t answer, he repeated the movement. Cersei nodded as best as she could when he asked her again. “Good. Remember this while you fuck Jaime.”

She saw him leaving on these words. He closed the door violently behind him. Cersei’s entire body was painful and she remained there, lying on the floor all alone, for a very long time. She hadn’t been killed yet, but she was broken. I will cast you down, and take away from you everything you hold dear. Everything you want, I’ll make sure you never get it. Tyrion’s words turned around in her mind with other words. Words she heard long ago. You’ll be queen. For a time. Then comes another, younger, more beautiful, to cast you down and take all you hold dear. As she continued to cry and closed her eyes, Cersei saw the image of a young woman slowly taking shape before her. It was Margaery Tyrell.

Chapter End Notes

Concerning Tyrion’s reaction with Cersei at the end, maybe it is more in character with Tyrion from the books than with Tyrion from the show, but since Cersei just threatened the woman he loved, and slapped him a few times again, I believe this is a likely reaction he could have, given the circumstances.

Please review.

Next chapter: Tyrion
Back with Tyrion. Remember that nearly a year went on since the last time we were in Tyrion's head. Don't worry, Tavi, no more big time jump like that, I promise.

This chapter and the one that will follow will show us the influence Tyrion and Margaery are getting all over Westeros, and not only in the Westerland and the Reach.

Tyrion slowly opened his eyes, to see only brown right before him. His wife’s perfume filled his lungs. He didn’t remember which one that was. Margaery put a different essence every day. He buried his face in the curly and thick hair of his wife. The smell was comforting. He stayed there for a very long time, breathing his wife heavily, soothing his mind and his nerves.

One of his hands was on her waist. He remembered falling asleep in this position last night. He had wanted to be close to her at this moment, to be sure that nothing would happen to her. He also needed her presence in order to forget what he had done. Cersei had threatened to strangle Margaery in her sleep, but he shouldn’t have beaten her the way he did. The way he had twisted her arm was already enough to warn her, but Tyrion hadn’t thought at the time. He had been furious when Margaery had come back from dinner, a concerned look on her face, and told him about her conversation with Cersei. Tyrion had immediately left for Cersei’s chambers. What he told to Cersei was true. He would execute his threats if she ever dared to harm Margaery, but did he need to beat his sister? The woman his brother loved?

Tyrion closed what little distance there was between him and his wife. Her back was turned on him, but he was holding her with his right arm. He had been afraid that Cersei might really try to kill her last night, so he had wanted to be as close to her as he could. Now he only wanted to stay there and know she was safe. Cersei could do anything to him, but he would never allow her to even make a single scratch on Margaery’s soft skin, or to pull a single strand from her beautiful hair. He would start a war before he allowed Cersei to do that, if that was necessary.

He filled his lungs with her scent. She was so perfect. She had made him happy, and happy for real, not only for a few minutes like all the whores he visited before. He couldn’t imagine his life without her anymore. She was his most precious ally, his closest confident, the most wonderful woman he ever met, a very wise advisor, a great lover, and the woman who shared his life, night and day. One day, she might be the mother of his children, if they had any. Most of all, she was the woman he loved. And above everything else, even the fact he loved her, she loved him. He couldn’t doubt about it anymore. Everything that was false or feigned in her, at the beginning of their marriage, was gone. There was nothing left of it. She showed him who she really was in all circumstances, and kept her mask for the other people. That only made him love her even more. He felt his love for her growing every day.

He breathed one last time the smell her hair liberated, then sat in their bed. He looked at her closely.
If he had any fear that Cersei would actually strangle her while she was asleep, it was quickly dissipated when he saw her tummy slowly rising. She had reached her eighteenth name day not long before they left for Joffrey’s tourney. She was already beautiful when they married, and her beauty had only increased during her time in the Westerlands. *Growing strong.* In Margaery’s case, her influence had grown along with her beauty. The lords of the Westerlands, those of the Reach, the smallfolk… they all loved her. Her skills in politics and ruling were more than impressive. Tyrion had everything he could wish from this marriage. He had love and power at the same time. He couldn’t have asked for better. Well, not really, since there was still something missing to their union. He tried to not think about it and began to caress the flesh of her back.

He only brushed it, trailing the tips of his fingers along her white skin. His hand wandered to her hair as well, though they were so thick he could hardly let them slip between his fingers. He went to her shoulder, then her arm, and her back again. The threats he made towards a member of his family yesterday, the way he twisted Cersei’s arm, the way he made her feel pain as she laid on the floor… He did all that for her. Cersei may be of his blood, but she wasn’t sharing his life. She shared it with Jaime. Tyrion wondered if Cersei would tell their brother about his anger last evening.

He heard a light giggle coming from the other side of the bed. He was moving the palm of his hand on the side of her ribs now. Hours before, he had kicked another woman at the same place. Now the woman he loved was awaken. He kept caressing her soft skin until she stretched and turned to face him, lying on her back instead of her side.

“Had a good night?” she asked him.

“Yes. Thanks to you, my queen.” He leaned and kissed her on the lips. He remained close to her face afterwards, contemplating her. She looked at him, contentment and love on her face. He remembered being in the same position long ago with another woman, but the thought disappeared as quickly as it appeared. In the first years of their marriage, these memories came back very often in such circumstances, and they stayed for a long time. Now they left as soon as they came. She hadn’t been real, but Margaery was.

She smirked. “I think we should get up. Don’t we have a meeting with Jon Arryn?”

Indeed, they had. Tyrion got away and let her free to rise. He realized breakfast had already been brought. One of the handmaidens surely brought it while they were asleep. He climbed down the bed and put on a shirt and breeches. Margaery put on a dressing gown and went to the table.

“Are you still sure about what you intend to do?” she asked him while chewing an apple. She was very seductive this way.

“I am,” he confirmed.

“I’m not sure it’s the best way to have a first conversation with the Hand of the King.”

“Jon Arryn already knows me. We don’t need a pleasant conversation. I don’t believe he likes me very much anyway.” He joined her and poured himself some water. Margaery made sure he never had wine on the morning.

“Why?”

“Maybe because I’m a dwarf. Maybe because I’m a whoremonger, a drunken little lust-filled beast. Maybe because I’m the son of Tywin Lannister.”

He saw anger flare in the eyes of his wife. “If that’s so, I believe I should have a few good words
“Don’t worry. We cannot be loved by everyone, me less than everyone.”

“It’s still unfair. People judge you for the actions your father did, when you were among the victims of his actions. I can still understand that your brother is despised. He killed his king. He is hated for his own actions, but you did nothing.”

“You don’t know why Jaime really killed the Mad King. If you knew… That would be useless to reveal the truth. That would only bring more shame on House Lannister, and wouldn’t help much in giving me a good reputation.” How could someone think more highly of him if he learned that he raped a woman he married? And would the people see Jaime as a hero if he said to everyone what the Mad King wanted to do, after all this time?

“No more than revealing your sister’s attempts against your life.” Her eyes had grown hard. She didn’t forgive him that yet. “You should have told me. I would never have tried to approach Cersei if I had known she tried to poison you.”

“I didn’t want to trouble you with that.”

“Well, you failed. Instead, when I tried to see if I could get her to reconcile with you, she threatened to kill me. That’s something to try to overthrow someone of your family, but to kill him? To murder him? That’s entirely different.”

She was angry at him. Tyrion knew she was right. He had wanted to protect his family by hiding Cersei’s actions against him to his wife. He shouldn’t have. He put Margaery in danger by trying to protect his own blood. “I’m sorry. I should have told you,” he recognized.

“I hope the next time it happens, you’ll tell me. I know what it is to rule. I grew up in the Reach, where half the houses believe they have a stronger claim on Highgarden than my family. I’m no stranger to assassinations and plots. I can take it.”

“I know.” He didn’t doubt it. Margaery looked like a rose, but she had thorns, and she was stronger than anyone would say at first sight.

“I hope there’s not something else you’re hiding that I should know.”

“No. There isn’t.” Nothing she should know.

“Good.” She seemed to calm and drank some water from her own goblet. “Where did you go last night after I came back?”

“I went to see Cersei.” That was the truth.

“For what?” She looked concerned.

“I told her that if she ever threatened you again, I would destroy her. Take her children away, and let her to rot in King’s Landing all alone with Robert, without guards and without money.”

She looked at him for a moment, her expression neutral. “Do you think it’s wise?”

“My sister loves her children. That’s the only good thing I can say about her. To do nothing would have been worse. I won’t lay a hand on her, she’s still my sister, but I am her lord and I can make sure she obeys. She won’t take the risk to see Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella taken away from her. She will stay quiet.”
“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then I will have to carry out my threats. My father used to say that we must never make threats we’re not ready to execute. He was ruthless, but he wasn’t a fool. He knew how to use fear.”

Margaery nodded. She didn’t like to talk about Tywin Lannister. Tyrion decided to change of topic.

“What are you going to do of your day?”

“Well, I’ll have to see to the shipments. Some have arrived at the harbor. We must prepare everything for when the tourney will begin. And I wanted to know my nephews and my niece better.”

“I have no objection for Tommen and his sister, but you’ll soon find out that there’s nothing much to know about Joffrey, and nothing good.”

She made a face. “He could have welcomed me better at dinner.”

Tyrion agreed. His eldest nephew was a spoiled brat, stupid, vain, arrogant, and without a single notion of what his duties would be when he would be king. He had more of Robert than Jaime in him. Myrcella was kind and good, the most clever of the three children Cersei had, and she was well on her way to become a beautiful and dutiful princess. As for sweet Tommen, nothing bad could be said of him. There wasn’t a gentler soul in Westeros, completely foreign to all thoughts of violence or cruelty. The eldest son was too much like his mother, the youngest were everything she and their supposed father weren’t.

An hour later, Tyrion and Margaery were heading for the Tower of the Hand. Tyrion knew that the Hand of the King was often the real one to rule the Seven Kingdoms. The Hand was the main advisor of the king, sat on the Iron Throne when the king was absent or indisposed, assumed the powers of the Crown whenever the sovereign couldn’t or didn’t want to assume them. The maesters considered Orys Baratheon, a great friend of Aegon the Conqueror, and also rumored to be his bastard half-brother, the first Lord Paramount of the Stormlands after he killed the last of the Storm Kings, to have been the first Hand of the King. Through history, the Hands had often ruled more than kings, to a few exceptions. Hands of the King had been from all origins and from all regions of Westeros. There had been bastards among them, and even lowborn people. Some kings even acted as Hand before they gained access to the Iron Throne, such as Maegor I, commonly known as Maegor the Cruel.

The Hand of the King Tyrion loved and admired the most had been Septon Barth. Maybe it had to do with his work on dragons that Tyrion read greedily when he was a lad, but that wasn’t the only reason. Barth had been a friend of Jaehaerys I, a king whose reign had been a synonym of peace and prosperity. This king had loved books, and he became friend with Barth as he worked in the king’s library. The septon was later named Hand of the King, and the peace and prosperity the Seven Kingdoms knew under the Conciliator were in no small part due to the work of his Hand. They created a unified code of justice, making justice the same through all the Seven Kingdoms, and abolished the lord’s right to the first night under Queen Alysanne’s influence. Sewers, drains and wells were built all over King’s Landing to improve the people’s health. They also restored peace with the Faith after a conflict that lasted a century.

Of the other Hands of the King he had in high esteem, there was Viserys II Targaryen, who served as Hand for three kings, his brother and his two nephews, before he ascended on the Iron Throne himself, only to die a year later. He kept the Realm together while the kings he served brooded, warred and prayed. Baelor the Blessed might have been loved, but without his uncle, the Realm would have fallen apart under his rule. Viserys was in fact king for a much longer time, though he
didn’t wear a crown. The reforms he made in the short year of his reign were more than his nephew Baelor did in ten years, during which he ruined the royal treasury by distributing bread freely to the people, imprisoned his sisters in the Maidenvault, expelled thousands of women working as whores with their children from the capital, and burnt very valuable books like Barth’s *Unnatural History*, causing a vast lost of knowledge which would never be recovered. His uncle, by his reforms of the royal household and its functions, the reconstitution of the royal treasury, and his revisions on Jaehaerys’s code of laws, left a better legacy than the huge sept Baelor couldn’t see finished before he died.

There had been many more Hands of the King. There had been Targaryens, Baratheons, Tullys, Hightowers, Redwynes, even a Stark and a Manderly at the office, though no Tyrell and no Martell ever ascended to the position. As for the Lannisters, Tyland Lannister had only lasted two years in his functions before he died of a chill, and had done much more as Master of Ships and Master of Coin during the Dance of Dragons. He was expected to be a weak Hand under Aegon III, being gelded and blind, but no one could ever find out.

Tywin Lannister had left a much greater impression from his passage at the office. For twenty years, he ruled the Seven Kingdoms, and they prospered under his rule, but his increasingly difficult relation with the Mad King darkened his last years at the office. When Aerys II named Jaime on the Kingsguard, depriving Tyron’s father from the heir he had always wanted, Lord Tywin resigned. Tyrion’s lord father had been Hand of the King for twenty years. Four Hands succeeded to him in the two years that followed. Two were exiled, one was burned alive, and the other ended with a sword through his heart, a few minutes before the same sword killed the Mad King. Aerys didn’t survive two years without Tywin Lannister to rule his kingdoms, and the city was sacked by the man who ruled it for so long.

They arrived before the door giving access to the Hand’s solar. A knight from the Vale blocked their path.

“Who are you?” he asked them.

“Who do you think I am? How many dwarves are there in the Red Keep?” countered Tyrion.

“I am Lady Margaery Lannister, ser. My husband, Lord Tyrion, and I have an audience with the Lord Hand,” replied Margaery with more tact.

“Of course, my lady.” He walked in, trying hardly to hide his bewilderment. Most of the people had difficulty to believe it when they saw Tyrion and Margaery for the first time together. “Lord Lannister and Lady Lannister”, announced the knight.

Jon Arryn was the first of his house to ever occupy the office of Hand of the King. Considering the king he served, he did a rather good job over the last fifteen years. The long summer they had helped him a lot too, but the man had his merits, Tyrion had to concede it. He seemed to have grown older since the last time Tyrion saw him, about three years ago. His shoulders, that some said were broad in his youth, had collapsed even further. His blond hair had turned whiter than ever, he had circles all around his eyes, and both age and duties were obviously wearing him off. Still, he remained at his post, like a captain who would sink with his ship, though Tyrion wondered if he would live long enough to see the ship sink. He rose slowly to welcome them. Tyrion felt some pity for the old man, who had to suffer a drunken king and a horrible wife, and whose heir was a sickly child who Tyrion could hardly imagine to ever wield a sword, even less to learn how to use his mind. He didn’t know who was worse between Robin Arryn or Joffrey. He glanced at his wife, and considered himself lucky to spend his days with Margaery, and not with Lysa Arryn or Cersei.

“My lord. My lady. Welcome to King’s Landing. Please excuse me if I wasn’t there when you
arrived yesterday, but we were in the middle of a small council meeting, and we weren’t warned about your arrival.” Tyrion was quite disposed to accept the apologies. The man was sincere, and Tyrion doubted he could even lie.

“Thank you, Lord Arryn. We appreciate the thought very much,” offered Margaery.

“Please sit.” They accepted his invitation, and he slowly sat down in his chair as well, maintaining an appropriate posture. “The king is very pleased to see you in the capital for Prince Joffrey’s name day.”

“I couldn’t miss my nephew’s coming of age,” Tyrion replied with a hint of sarcasm. “This is a good opportunity for Lady Margaery to meet my brother, my sister and her children for the first time.”

“Indeed. Lady Arryn would be happy to meet you as well, Lady Lannister.”

“Of course,” said Margaery, all smiling as usual. “I will be very glad to meet her.” Tyrion doubted it. He wondered if Lysa Arryn was still feeding her son from her breast.

“I may announce you to her right now, while I stay with Lord Tyrion to discuss a few matters of state.”

“In fact, Lord Arryn, my lord husband and I both have to discuss with you about certain matters.”

The Hand of the King blinked. “As you wish, my lady.”

“You can consider that I’m talking in the name of my father’s house, Lord Arryn,” she added.

This time, he frowned. “Very well.”

Margaery looked at Tyrion, and they exchanged a knowing look. It was time. Tyrion straightened himself and looked straight into Jon Arryn’s eyes.

“Lord Arryn, Lady Margaery and I are quite concerned about the actual difficulties of the Crown.”

“I can assure you that our king is dealing with every problem with the utmost concern and care…”

“Lord Arryn, let us be honest with each other. We both know Robert doesn’t care about ruling and spends his days drinking wine and bedding every woman he chances to look upon. When he’s not, he is hunting in the Kingswood. The Seven Kingdoms may be at peace and prosper for the time being, thanks to the long summer we have, and thanks to your own work as Hand of the King, but this won’t last.”

“I can assure you we are well prepared for winter, Lord Tyrion.”

“Maybe, but I wonder how you’ll manage to pay for the extravagances of our king when winter comes and there are no more harvests and less trade to tax.”

“Lord Baelish managed to increase the revenues of the Crown to a great extent since he arrived, my lord. We are not in danger.”

“You are. Littlefinger may have multiplied by ten the revenues of the Crown, but your friend Robert increased its expenses a hundredfold in the meantime.”

Margaery joined the exchange at this moment, taking a concerned tone. “Lord Arryn, you borrowed money from us to organize my nephew’s tourney, and my father told me you borrowed from him as well. Lady Lefford is a dear friend of mine, and she told me she lent you a huge amount of gold six
months ago.”

Tyrion spoke again. “We all know that the Crown is going bankrupt. There is nothing left from the chests full of gold and silver that my lord father and the Mad King left behind them. Robert has spent all the Crown’s money, and now he’s spending money he doesn’t have. You began to borrow from my father long before he died. You are six million golden dragons in debt. Half of this debt is owed to Casterly Rock.”

“Another million is owed to my father, Lord Mace.”

“And you owe many smaller amounts to smaller houses. Two hundred thousands to the Golden Tooth, a hundred thousands to Silverhill, two hundred and fifty thousands to the Hightower, a hundred more thousands to the Arbor, fifty thousands to Brightwater, and so on. Of the six millions, five millions are owed to the Westerlands and the Reach. The million that’s left is owed to the Faith, the Iron Bank of Braavos, a few minor houses in the Riverlands and the Crownlands, and some trading cartels from across the Narrow Sea.”

A silence followed. Jon Arryn finally spoke. “I see you are well informed on the situation of the Crown, Lord Tyrion.”

“I like to know the people to who I lend my money. And I don’t like it when they increase the taxes and duties on trade, when we just lowered them.”

Jon Arryn needed some time to reply. “You have to understand the Crown needs money, my lord, as you just showed it, to repay its debts.”

“Lord Arryn,” began Margaery on an understanding tone, “the Trade Agreement of Old Oak was signed a year ago to encourage and increase trade in the Westerlands and the Reach. We lowered the duties on trade to increase the wealth of the people, and better their lives. With your recent decision, two months ago, to increase these same duties, you destroyed everything we worked on for months.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to understand…”

“We cannot allow this,” she cut him in the gentler way possible. “We convinced our bannermen, both in the Reach and in the Westerlands, to lower the duties they levied themselves. We didn’t do it to see the Crown steal their revenues. Furthermore, this creates a situation where our lands are more heavily taxed by the king than the others.”

“Remember what I just said,” added Tyrion. “You owe five millions to us and our bannermen. If we were all to ask for our money back, do you think you could manage it?”

A huge silence followed. The Hand of the King had been cornered. There was nothing he could do. He couldn’t take the risk of making of two kingdoms and all their lords the enemies of the Crown for a financial matter, especially when these two kingdoms were the richest of Westeros. He surrendered.

“I beg your forgiveness. Lord Baelish believed it was in our interest to increase duties on trade with our current situation.”

“So, Littlefinger is the one responsible for all of this?” asked Tyrion.

Jon Arryn didn’t seem pleased to see the Master of Coin called this way. “Lord Baelish’s work is to find money for the king. He only did his duty.”

“And it seems the king’s duty is to spend all the money his Master of Coin can find,” completed
Tyrion with mockery.

Lord Arryn replied on a calming tone. “We will bring the duties to their previous level immediately. We will also give you back all the excessive amounts we collected these last months.”

Tyrion put on a sufficient smile. “I’m afraid we cannot accept it.”

The Hand frowned. “My lord?”

“We didn’t come here to ask you to bring the duties back to their former level, Lord Arryn. We want your king to abrogate the duties on trade on our territories, both by sea, and by road.”

Jon Arryn’s eyes showed utter surprise. He had thought he could escape with simply lowering taxes to their former levels, but he wouldn’t. Tyrion knew that the Hand was too honorable to see this coming, and Jon Arryn underestimated him. In his eyes, Tyrion was still a drunk dwarf bedding harlots. He couldn’t be more wrong.

“My lord…” The Hand hesitated for a time, but managed to gain back his composure. “My lord, my lady, I’m afraid this is not something we can consent to. The Crown needs these revenues…”

“For what?” asked Tyrion. “For tourneys it doesn’t have the means to pay? For the many whores his Grace is visiting, or even bringing into his own bed day and night, disgracing my sister, the queen, publicly? For feasts that are meant to swell his belly more than it already is? For casks of wine from Dorne and the Arbor?”

The Lord Hand looked quite offended now. “My lord…”

Margaery intervened. “Lord Arryn, you must understand that we gave you generous loans, and the actual situation of the Crown’s finances are telling us that Highgarden and Casterly Rock don’t have much chance to ever see this gold again someday. We believe that you owe the people of the Westerlands and the Reach some compensation.”

“I understand your point of view, my lady, but we would be setting a dangerous situation by dispensing two kingdoms from a certain form of taxes while the others keep paying it.”

“How much have the North, the Stormlands and Dorne lent to the Crown?”

There was no answer at first, but it came. “I’m afraid the king must decline your request. This is something we cannot allow. House Lannister, House Tyrell and their bannermen will be refunded in time. The debts will be paid. You have my word.”

“I believe your word, Lord Arryn,” said Tyrion, “but I’m unsure concerning the king’s word. He didn’t prove he was capable of paying his debts recently. And I hope that you understand the consequences of your king’s refusal.”

Lord Arryn looked at Tyrion straight in the eyes. “Are you threatening us, Lord Tyrion?”

“No.” Tyrion settled more comfortably into his chair, giving himself a nonchalant air. “This is no threat. I’m not telling you I will go to war, Lord Arryn. I like peace, and the people like it too. Taxes that burden all the population of our kingdoms, struggling to survive and to prepare for winter, are no good reasons enough to start a war. Unlike the kidnapping of a betrothed and a lord’s execution.”

Tyrion saw with satisfaction anger on Lord Arryn’s face. “No, I am definitely not threatening you. I’m only warning you. We will never rebel against the Crown, but the Crown may find us less obedient and eager to serve in the future.”
Tyrion took a more serious expression and leaned to look straight into the eyes of the Hand. “If you refuse, you will not be able to borrow money anywhere in the Westerlands or the Reach. All houses will stop to grant you loans. I will also write personally to the cartels of Tyr and Lys, to the Iron Bank and the Sealord of Braavos, to the High Septon, and to the other lords through the Seven Kingdoms, to warn them of your actual financial difficulties. I will also tell them that thanks to our king’s administration, the frontiers of the Reach and the Westerlands will be closed. The Goldroad, the River Road and the Rose Road will no longer allow trade with the other kingdoms. The officers of the Crown sent to collect the Crown’s taxes on our territories will not be allowed to leave them anymore. They will be kept in our castles with all the rights and advantages that their rank gives them. I doubt that anyone will want to lend you money after this. And even if Littlefinger is capable of making a golden dragon appear by rubbing two together, I don’t believe he will be able to rub them quickly enough. Anyway, with the Rose Road closed, the Crown’s debts will be the least of your concerns when King’s Landing starves and the people start to rebel against the king.”

Jon Arryn supported Tyrion’s look, but Tyrion knew the Hand was afraid. Jon Arryn knew they couldn’t risk to put the Lannisters and the Tyrells against the Crown. He wasn’t stupid enough like Cersei to believe people would do as he asked because he was Hand of the King. He knew the Realm well enough to know that without the Westerlands and the Reach, Robert was lost.

“I will need to talk about it with the king,” Jon Arryn finally answered.

“Very well. I will be expecting a good answer before the tourney is over. By the way, to ensure that you respect the terms of our agreement, I believe it’s high time that a Lannister or a Tyrell sits on the small council. And with an office, not only as a simple advisor.”

“All the places on the small council are filled, my lord.”

“Then I expect you to find a vacancy soon.” Tyrion stood up and looked at his wife. “That’s all I had to say. I recall there are other matters you need to discuss privately with Lord Arryn, my dear.”

“Yes, indeed. And I still need to meet Lady Arryn afterwards,” Margaery replied.

“Very well. I’ll leave. Have a good day, Lord Arryn.”

Tyrion walked to the door and left the room. Margaery had other things to discuss with Jon Arryn, though these things were quite related with the topic they just talked about. Tyrion had just pushed the Hand of the King into a corner. Jon Arryn knew he had no choice but to do what Tyrion told him. The Crown depended too much on House Lannister and House Tyrell. Margaery’s task was now to make understand to Lord Arryn, in a softer way, that it was in his interest to accept the conditions that were presented. Margaery was very good at placing people on her side, and Tyrion had no doubt she would succeed with Jon Arryn. Tyrion would inspire fear to the man, while Margaery would inspire respect. This way they were assured to get what they wanted.

Tyrion went down the stairs and travelled through the castle to reach the apartments he shared with Margaery. Tyrion crossed the path of Lady Sera and asked her to bring him some wine. No doubt she would report it to Margaery later. On his way, he paid a visit to the Grand Maester and remembered him that he was Lord of Casterly Rock now, and not Cersei. The Red Keep was quite crowded with all the lords coming for Joffrey’s Tourney. Many would have to stay in tents erected all around the outside of the battlements, and every inn in the city was already filled. The whores were certainly very busy. The tourney was bad for the Crown’s finances, but very good for the Master of Coin’s finances. Only the greatest lords were housed into the Red Keep.

When Tyrion entered his rooms and closed the door behind, he found a hooded figure sitting on the bed he slept in with his wife only a few hours ago.
“Please forgive me, my lord. I hope that I’m not taking you by surprise,” the man said.

The man removed the hood and uncovered his head. It was bald, round like the face of a baby, and Tyrion could now smell the perfume from where he stood, many feet away.

“So it is true? I heard the Spider was everywhere at the same time, but I didn’t expect that he would be into my bed as well,” he said.

“Oh, please forgive me.” Varys, the Master of Whisperers, stood up. “I didn’t mean to offend you, my lord, or Lady Lannister. Some may believe that an eunuch sitting on a bed is bad for the fertility.”

It seemed Tyrion couldn’t escape it. Even eunuchs mocked him over his inability to get Margaery pregnant after two years of marriage. “What’s the reason of your presence, Lord Varys? I could have you executed for getting into mine and my wife’s rooms without our permission.”

“Oh, everyone wants to kill the Spider,” he said sadly.

“I don’t believe many will weep for you.”

“No, indeed. Except my little birds, they may miss me, but they will carry on, and I doubt they will weep.”

“Then state your business before I ask my men to throw you out.”

“I wouldn’t throw me out so soon, my lord. Not before I have told you about a few things I discovered. About your sister.”

Tyrion frowned. He was interested now. “Say what you want. If it’s not worthy, I may just have you killed.”

“Oh, I doubt the king will like it.”

“He won’t like it, but he may need some time to realize you disappeared if I hide your body. You disappear very often after all, Lord Varys.”

“I wouldn’t kill me if I were you. I am much more valuable alive than dead.”

Tyrion walked to a chair and sat. “Then prove it.”

The Spider took a scroll from his sleeve and handed it to Tyrion. “This is a full transcription of everything that was said during a meeting of the small council two years ago. I believe you will find the content very interesting.”

Tyrion read it. It was quite long, but overall, it was a discussion during a small council meeting, like the Spider pretended, where the king, Cersei, Jon Arryn and all the small council had tried to stop the marriage between Tyrion and Margaery to marry her to Renly Baratheon. Tyrion was boiling of rage as he read this, and when he was done, he looked at Varys, who seemed to be expecting a reaction.

“Why should I believe you? What tells me this isn’t pure invention?” Tyrion asked. The eunuch was sitting again, but in a chair now.

“Why would I lie about it?”

“To create a feud between me and my wife, and between our two families as well.”

Varys seemed unimpressed. “If the Tyrells ever received the offer to marry their daughter to Lord
Renly, then they didn’t accept it. Maybe the offer came after they left Highgarden for your wedding. It was sent not long before they left. At best, they refused the proposal. At worst, they never knew about it before you were wed.”

“To create strife between my sister and me,” Tyrion supposed again.

“Where before there was nothing but love.” He made Tyrion feel stupid with this, and he looked at him as to someone stupid. “The queen tried to prevent your marriage with Lady Margaery to make sure you would have no children and that she could give Casterly Rock to her own children, or even get it for herself. Perhaps she also wanted to stop you from gaining a significant and powerful ally against her.”

Tyrion had to admit it was plausible. Cersei didn’t want him to have the Rock, and he was sure she would rather have it for her children than for his. Her threats towards Margaery… Tyrion made a fist with his hand for a moment. “What did she do when she learnt about our marriage?”

“She was quite furious.” Tyrion had no doubt about it. “A few things were broken in her room. Your sister began to drink much more after your father died. His loss was very difficult for her.”

“I can imagine.” The loss of Casterly Rock was difficult for her.

“You should be careful with your sister, my lord. She is dangerous.”

As if I didn’t know. “You care a lot for me, Lord Varys. I wonder why?”

“Why? I would have no pleasure to see you die, my lord. In fact, I’m quite happy you succeeded your father. You ruled quite well for the last two years, along with Lady Lannister. You handle the Westerlands as well as your father did, and the people are much better and much happier with you as their lord. I cannot say I would have hoped for the same if the queen had had her way.”

“So, you care about the people?” asked Tyrion, skeptically.

“Of course, I do. The people had sixteen years of peace and plenty so far under the rule of Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn. I don’t wish for this to end. If your sister was to try to overthrow you, I’m afraid all that would be lost very quickly.” The eunuch stood up. “By the way, my lord, I would be careful with the Florents if I were Lord Tyrell. The Westerlands are not the only place where your sister sent ravens. I would watch closely the Iron Islands as well if I were you.”

Tyrion’s mind was turning. Varys bowed and proceeded to walk away, but Tyrion stopped him. “Why are you telling me this? You are sworn to serve the Crown, Lord Varys, and Cersei is the queen. Why tell me this?”

The eunuch turned to face Tyrion again. “I wish you to understand that I am far more valuable alive than dead. And maybe more reliable than the man who sent the ravens your sister ordered him to.”

Tyrion already knew Pycelle had sent the ravens his sister wrote to a few houses in the Westerlands, including to Gregor Clegane. He discovered it when he interrogated the old man a few minutes ago. However, Tyrion ignored that Cersei had written to Brightwater and Pyke. Though it wasn’t surprising when he thought about it. She could tempt Balon Greyjoy with plunder and kingship for joining her, and the Florents by offering them Highgarden. He had to be more careful, and to search Cersei’s enemies better.

“However, Lord Tyrion, you are wrong. I do not serve the Crown.”

Tyrion wasn’t sure what to make of it. “Who do you serve then?”
“The Realm, my lord. Someone must. And I believe it is in the best interest of the Realm that you and Lady Margaery remain Lord and Lady of Casterly Rock as long as you can.”

“Who else has my sister written to?”

“Many people.”

He bowed, and this time walked away for good. Tyrion was confused by this man. He never gave much attention to Varys while he was in King’s Landing, but it seemed he could be useful after all. Tyrion would have to deal with a few people when he would be back in the Westerlands. He doubted that Gregor Clegane would side with Cersei, however. Last time he heard, his keep had no maester. Those who went there didn’t live long and disappeared just like all the servants. A raven would arrive, but Tyrion doubted that someone would take the message. Tyrion didn’t think the Mountain could even read. He would have to keep an eye on Riverspring and the Sarwycks as well and on the other bannermen too. Of course, he should warn Margaery’s father.

As he thought about it, his wife came in. “I believe he will accept. He was in much better dispositions when I left than when you did,” she declared, taking a place next to him. “I think you were quite hard on him.”

“I had to make him understand that I wasn’t joking this time. Jon Arryn is used to my jokes, but not to my threats.”

“I think you were convincing enough. Maybe too much. It won’t do to make of him an enemy.”

“We cannot be friends with everyone,” Tyrion stated.

“I hope we won’t have to execute our threats.”

“You say he should accept all the terms.”

“I think so. But there’s a chance that he will not, and if he doesn’t…”

“Then let’s hope he realizes his mistake quickly.”

“But Tyrion, you’re not really thinking about closing the Rose Road. The people in the capital will starve. You said it yourself. We could have limited our threats to stop the loans.”

“That wouldn’t have been enough. The fear of famine and uprising will be much more efficient. Anyway, the threats have been made, and we’ll have to carry them out if we have to.”

She sighed. “Well, let’s hope we won’t have to stop the trade. I think I will go buy a few things at Fishmonger’s Square this afternoon.”

“Alright, but take a few guards with you. The streets are not safe here.”

“They will follow us from afar.”

“No, they must protect you, Margaery.” Tyrion was firm. “This isn’t Lannisport. This is King’s Landing. There are people trying to rob you at every corner of the streets, and people ready to kill you under every passage way. I don’t want to take any risk. I don’t want something to happen to you.”

Margaery looked at him, then smiled and kissed him. “Thank you for your concern, but I will be fine, you’ll see. I’ll take more men with me, but they’ll stay away from us.”
She had no idea how dangerous this place was. Tyrion was worried for her. He admired Margaery’s ability to walk among the people and gain their hearts, but he was afraid that someday, someone would have the idea to plunge a knife into her heart while she was walking with children near an orphanage or purchasing a necklace in a market.

“By the way,” she said, “you should know that I talked about something else with Jon Arryn before I went to see his wife.”

“Really? And? How was the Lady Lysa?”

“That was… odd. Robin Arryn was with her.” She didn’t need to say more. “But that’s not important. I talked about Myrcella with Lord Arryn.”

“Myrcella?” What could she be talking with the Hand of the King that would concern his niece?

“Yes. I told him I had an unwed brother.”

It took some time for Tyrion to understand, but when he did, he didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry. “Your brother? Loras? Married to Myrcella?”

“Why not?” she did as if nothing was amiss.

“Please forgive me, but I think she’s missing some of your brother’s favorite bits.”

Margaery didn’t seem to find it funny. “My brother will have to marry, one day or another, and his wife will be the future Lady of Highgarden. It doesn’t seem so bad to me. You don’t want him to marry Lady Alysanne, so why not Myrcella?”

Tyrion needed wine. He poured himself a cup. It seemed Lady Durwell had brought the wine he asked for. It was rich Arbor gold. “I would rather see my niece married to a man who is at least interested in her, if not in love.”

Margaery put her hand on his. “Tyrion, most marriages never end in love. We are an exception. My own parents respect each other and they get along quite well, but they’ve never been in love. My grandmother even less. Your sister is another good example. Loras will never love a woman, it’s true. We can’t help with that. My brother is who he is. But his wife will be one of the most powerful women in Westeros, and Loras will treat her well. He will do his duty by her and give her children…”

“And then he will go to fuck boys from behind,” completed Tyrion.

Margaery’s face wasn’t without scorn. “Myrcella would be happy in Highgarden. I’m sure of that. And Loras wouldn’t mind if she took a lover.”

Tyrion half nodded. He wasn’t sure. “I suppose my old self wishes for my nephews and my niece to be married to someone they love.” It was the same old self who brought him to Tysha.

“If that’s your same old self who made you wish to marry someone you love, then I’m glad he’s still alive. Or else, you may not have fallen in love with me.”

They exchanged a long look. Each day, Tyrion could see that Margaery loved him. He brought the palm of his hand to her cheek and cupped it. “A man who marries you and doesn’t love you afterwards is either a fool, either like your brother.”

She laughed, and Tyrion smiled to see her laugh. He loved to see her like this. How lucky he was to
be married to her. It was a chance that... If the Tyrells ever received the offer to marry their daughter to Lord Renly, then they didn’t accept it. He looked at her, laughing, his hand still on her cheek. She looked back and her laugh slowly faded.

“Is there something wrong, Tyrion?” she asked.

Tyrion waited a moment, then removed his hand from her face. “Margaery, tell me. Did your family receive another proposal of marriage for you, not long before we married?”

Margaery looked at him with queer eyes. “Why are you asking this?”

Tyrion seized the scroll Varys gave him before. “I had a visit from Lord Varys while you were discussing with Jon Arryn. He gave me this. It’s a discussion during a small council meeting that took place two years ago.” Margaery took the report and read it. He thought her eyes widened from time to time. When she averted her eyes from the parchment, he asked her again. “Did you know anything about this?”

She looked at him. “We received the proposal by raven, two days before we left. We chose to ignore it, and we rode for Casterly Rock just like we had planned.”

Tyrion was stunned. The Tyrells had received an offer to marry Margaery to Renly, and yet they had chosen him instead of king’s brother. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t see it any useful. Once the wedding was celebrated, there was nothing the king could do about it. And it was better to say nothing. We did as if the raven arrived after our departure.”

Tyrion understood. It wasn’t good to reveal to anyone that they ignored a demand from the king. Still, he felt quite touched that Margaery and her family had declined Renly Baratheon for him. He looked on the floor, the back to her. He looked at her beautiful eyes.

“So, you really wanted to marry me?” he asked.

“Of course, you silly old fool. Maybe not because I loved you at the time, but I wanted to marry you. And I wouldn’t change my decision for anything in the world if it was to do again.”

She leaned over him and began to kiss him. Her breath was hot. His hands came around her waist. Their tongues met, and began their dance. As Tyrion began to grip her gown more tightly, the door opened and they broke their kiss. Sera Durwell was in the entrance. She looked a little uncomfortable. It wasn’t the first time it happened.

“Excuse me, my lord, my lady, I just brought you something to eat,” she said.

“Thank you, Sera,” Margaery replied. Lady Sera put on the table what she had brought, then left quickly. Tyrion noticed she was trying to stop herself from laughing.

Tyrion and Margaery looked at each other and burst into laughs once more. “I should have Mira to always bring our meals. She’s less shocked than Sera when she finds us about to fuck,” said Margaery.

“Strong words… for a queen,” commented Tyrion. New laughs. They began to serve themselves.

“So,” she said after some time, “the king, his council, and your sister tried to match you with a dead princess, a girl with greyscale, your own niece, and a northern lady of ten.”

“It seems they did, and they failed.”
“It’s just too bad for them that Sansa Stark wasn’t old enough. My mother met Catelyn Stark once or twice. She said she seemed to be a very devoted mother and wife.”

“Well, according to Littlefinger, Catelyn Stark is more beautiful than her sister Lysa. Everyone in King’s Landing knows the tale about how he deflowered the Lady of Winterfell.”

“What?”

“That’s what he says, but King’s Landing is a place where everyone is lying.”

“It isn’t much different from Highgarden then,” said Margaery. “I wonder what sort of Lady of Casterly Rock her daughter would have made.”

“She would have needed to be older first.” Tyrion would never have married a girl of ten. Margaery had accepted to marry him, but he highly doubted Lord Stark’s daughter would have. Her father would probably have refused immediately when the king would have proposed him to marry his eldest daughter to the Imp.

“Of course. But if she had… Her mother is from the south, her father is a Northerner. Maybe she’s not that different from Mira. Thanks to her, everyone in Highgarden and Casterly Rock knows that northern women don’t all have a beard.” Margaery seemed thoughtful for a moment. “I wonder how she is. My mother seemed to have a good opinion of her mother.”

They kept eating in silence for some time afterwards, and Tyrion broke it. “Be careful with Myrcella. If Cersei ever learns that you tried to marry off her daughter… I don’t want to be at your place.”

“I only told Jon Arryn that it could be something possible. I didn’t propose. I don’t believe he will tell your sister.”

“Only too well. My sister has many flaws, but at least there’s one good thing we can say about her. She loves her children. No one can take that away from her.”

Margaery nodded. “Tommen and Myrcella look like very good children. I’ll try to spend more time with them while we’re here.” Sadness filled her face as she said it. Tyrion felt something heavy in his chest. He knew why she acted this way. “Tyrion, do you think there’s a problem with us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve been married for two years now, and I’m still without child.” Tyrion looked down. “Maybe there’s a problem with me.”

Tyrion looked up immediately. “There’s no problem with you.”

“There could be. I’m not pregnant, even if we make love almost daily.” She talked as if it was an evidence.

“If there’s a problem, it comes from me,” Tyrion said.

Margaery looked at him with that same queer look she had previously. “Why are you so certain?”

Tyrion shook his head. “I’ve visited many brothels in my life, and as far as I know, no woman I was with ever got pregnant. Of course, one could have been, but there would be no way to tell if I’m the father. They see so many men, and most of them take moon tea. As for…”

He never knew if Tysha got pregnant. Even then, if she did, the father could be… “Did you have a
child with Alla?” Margaery asked.

Tyrion needed some time to regain his senses. “I don’t know. I never saw her since I sent her away. I avoided to stop at Kayce during our tour to not take the risk of meeting her.” He kept sending her money every month, but that was all. Margaery was the only woman who mattered to him now, or at least he wanted her to be the only one.

Margaery shook her head. “That’s probably nothing. Willas told me once that dwarves can have children like anyone else, and that they are likely to be very normal. My mother needed three years before she had me. I’ll probably have someone kicking inside my belly before I can realize it.”

They continued their meal on a lighter note, Tyrion giving more details about Myrcella and Tommen to his wife. Still, there was a certain bitterness to the atmosphere now. When it was over, Margaery got prepared to visit Fishmonger’s Square with her Lady’s retinue. That’s how they called the young women following her everywhere, including her handmaidens, her cousins from Highgarden and Tyrion’s own cousins. She kissed Tyrion on the lips and left with the Lady’s retinue.

Tyrion went to the library on his side. Again, he didn’t know how he could have found himself married to Margaery. So many things could have separated them. If his father hadn’t died, if her family had chosen Renly Baratheon over him, if Cersei had succeeded in sabotaging their marriage, if Sansa Stark had been older… However, who warned Cersei and Robert about all this? Who told them about the two families’ plans to marry them? Varys? A spy Cersei had at Casterly Rock? Someone told them. Someone warned them. It could have ruined the marriage he always dreamed of. He would find who sold him and Margaery out. And he would make him, or her, pay.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
The conclusive chapter of King’s Landing. Don’t worry, we’ll see more of the city, but not before a while, because we will move somewhere else after Joffrey’s tourney.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She looked at her dress. It was made of a tissue thicker than those she wore usually, and it was dark purple. This way, the mud would be less visible. She wore no jewels. It was better this way, because there would be many people who would try to steal any jewel she had on her down in the streets. Yes, that was perfect. She was ready.

“How do I look?” she asked, still looking at her reflection in the glass.

“No matter how you’re dressed, you’ll always be the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms.”

A smile came to her lips and she turned to look at Tyrion. He had a book opened on his knees, and looked at her with admiration. She walked to him. “I should stop asking your opinion. It doesn’t help me very much.” She leaned to kiss him.

“Be careful.”

“Don’t worry, I always am. We’ll see each other at the tournament.”

She kissed him one last time, letting it linger a little, and trailed a finger on his left cheek before she left their rooms. She travelled all through the Red Keep down to the courtyard. They were early in the morning, so there weren’t much people already awaken. Only a few servants who started their day before everyone else were visible, and a few guards there and there.

In the courtyard, Elinor, Megga, Alla, Cerenna, Myrielle, Joy, Mira, Sera and a few other handmaidens were waiting for her, along with half a hundred guards from her family and from Tyrion’s family. They all wore dresses with darker colors like Margaery, so that anything that would soil them would be less apparent, and some were wearing old dresses. Cerenna and Myrielle had made the mistake to wear one of their most beautiful gowns when they visited Fishmonger’s Square the first time last week, ruining them entirely. Alla made the same mistake. Joy wore less refined clothes than everyone, so it hadn’t mattered very much, and the others had been clever enough to not dress as if they went to a ball. Today, no one would complain if their dress was all ripped at the end of the morning.

“Very well, my friends. It’s time to go. There are many poor people who are waiting for us,” she said.

She opened the way and they all followed her. The guards were surrounding them. Myrielle had lost a necklace last week when a man snatched it from her neck in the middle of the street. It had been a terrible drama for her to have marks around her neck for the two days that followed. Margaery had to
agree that Tyrion was right. They couldn’t walk in the streets without protection. Their guards would let people reach her and her friends, but they would keep an eye in case anyone tried to hurt them.

The portcullis opened and they found themselves outside. They were going to a poorhouse in Flea Bottom, to help the sisters keeping it to serve some soup and bread to the most miserable of the city. These women appreciated Margaery’s help a lot. King’s Landing lacked of everything but poor people, and the sisters were overloaded with work. They never had enough for all of them. Margaery had seen poverty close at Highgarden, at Lannisport, and in the other cities she visited, but this was nothing when compared to the misery in which almost everyone seemed to live in King’s Landing, and Flea Bottom was worse than any other place in the capital. The streets were encumbered with shit and refuse, from this district and from the other ones of the capital. Tyrion told her that some of the sewers were spilling their content into Flea Bottom. The level of the ground was lower here than in every other district of the capital, and the place was often flooded when the rain fell. Not to mention when fire broke, and the diseases that ravaged it. Tyrion told her once that Barth, the Hand of the King under Jaenerys the Conciliator, had tried to make the city more liveable by building sewers, drains and wells, but his successors hadn’t continued his work. He mocked Baelor the Blessed one day, saying the king would have saved more lives by building new sewers and new wells than with prayers. Tyrion knew a lot about water systems because of his time in charge of the drains and sewers of Casterly Rock. He had recently funded an extension of the system of sewers and wells in Lannisport. Too bad they couldn’t do the same here in King’s Landing. Robert Baratheon wasn’t an evil man, but he didn’t seem to care a lot about the well-being of his subjects.

As they walked through he streets, many people came to her. Margaery allowed many children to walk a moment with her and her friends. She even took some in her arms when they were small enough, and a lot of copper pieces were distributed to the people begging in the streets. All along the way, they heard shouts of people calling for her. She had visited an orphanage, a poorhouse, a market, or a sept every day. Each time, she distributed food, toys and money. Her parents had sent ships full of foodstuffs at her request, and she had more than enough to give freely to the people. Even though they were early in the morning, a crowd formed around her, calling her name, hands trying to reach her at all cost.

It took some time, but they made it to the poorhouse. A lot of people were waiting for her, and the septa in charge of the place seemed more than relieved to see Margaery arrive in the kitchens.

“Here you are, my lady. I’m glad you’re here. I never saw so many people since last year. We have more than twice the mouths to feed we usually have.”

It was a chance that Margaery had sent them supplementary stocks of food, or else they wouldn’t be able to serve everybody. “That’s alright. You’ll have all the help you need,” Margaery reassured her. She turned to her friends. “You know what you have to do. Cerenna, Myrielle, Sera and Mira, you accompany me. We will walk among the people as they eat and distribute loaves of bread. The others, you will help the sisters with serving the soup at the tables. Ser Baras?”

“Yes, my lady.” The captain of her personal guards stood, ready to receive orders.

“I want you to follow me. I also want your men inside to help serving the food. They can remove their helmet as they do.”

“My lady, we’re here to protect you,” he protested.

“Ser Lannis’s men will be more than enough. You’ll be more helpful this way. Now, let’s go to work.” Ser Lannis was the captain of the Lannister guards Tyrion brought with him. He belonged to a minor branch of House Lannister.
Everyone went their way to carry on their duties. The sisters were really only waiting for them to begin the service. The place was crowded and tons of people who barely had something to wear were waiting for something to eat. Most of them were men. Margaery had visited other poorhouses for women, but today they helped one that welcomed men. A few of them had a woman with them, a sister, a daughter, and most rarely a wife. Margaery spoke with all the women. Ser Baras looked a little embarrassed. He wasn’t used to doing these things, always standing guard and keeping an eye on everything and everyone in case they would be a threat, but he didn’t have much to do anyway. He only kept following her with a sack while she did everything.

“Thank you, my lady,” said a young man, eyes full of gratitude, as he furiously bit into the bread she just gave him.

“Are you going to stay in the capital for long?” asked another.

“I’m afraid I must leave in a few days, once my nephew’s tournament is over,” she confessed.

“Please, my lady, don’t abandon us,” begged a woman at his side. “You are the only lady who ever helped us. The king and the queen don’t give a shit about us…”

“Shut up, you.” Her husband hit her hard with his fist on the arm.

“Calm yourself,” said Margaery in an appeasing voice. “I’m not here to speak to the king or the queen. I’m only here to help you. Is your arm all right?” she asked the woman.

“Yes, my lady.” She was rubbing the place where she was hit hard.

Margaery resumed the distribution, and soon everyone was eating and talking. Some asked for another loaf, and since there were some surpluses, they could provide it. People were everywhere, leaning against columns, sitting on the floor and in the stairs. The atmosphere was very good. People didn’t seem to notice the guards that had come with her, and some were even making toasts with the cups of water they had.

Margaery used everyone’s good spirit as an opportunity. The septa in charge of the place called for silence, and they all made a prayer to the Seven together. Usually, the people would only do the prayer as a formality and go back to eating as soon as it was over, but this time, the people were sated enough and the prayer looked quite genuine. Margaery had knelt like all her friends to pray with everyone else, but when the prayer was over, she stood up.

“Now, my dear brothers and my dear sisters,” said the septa, “Lady Lannister would like to tell you a few words.”

Everyone in the room was looking at her. She spoke. “My friends, I have been more than happy to see you today. I wish I could stay longer, but I will have to leave for Casterly Rock very soon. I only want to tell you that I will never forget what I saw here. Ever since I was child, I visited places like this one in Highgarden, and I kept visiting them at Casterly Rock. I never forgot the people I saw there, and I will never forget you either. Even when we are far away in the Westerlands, Lord Tyrion and I will remember you. We will not leave you alone. You have my word. You will be forever in my heart.”

A silence followed. Everyone looked hypnotized and couldn’t stop looking at her. Then, an old man stood with difficulty and raised his cup of water. “To our good lady, Margaery Lannister.”

Another man followed him. “To Lady Margaery.” Soon, everyone, every woman, every man, every child was doing the same, raising their cup only filled with water and drinking for her.
Once they were done drinking to her health, Margaery added something she hadn’t planned to reveal just yet. “I want you to know something else. This evening, when the tourney will be over, my husband, Lord Tyrion, and I will distribute a loaf of bread to everyone in the city for dinner.” An uproar began in the poorhouse, and Margaery doubted her last words were heard. “Please don’t tell it to anybody. We wish it to remain a surprise.”

She doubted it would stay a surprise for long. She told the septa in charge to ask her if they ever needed anything before she left. They managed to get through the cheering crowd inside the poorhouse, only to meet a larger crowd down in the streets. They needed what looked like hours to go back to the Red Keep, people all around them shouting her name and trying to touch her. “Lady Margaery! Lady Margaery!” She was used to that kind of attention, but not to that point. The people of King’s Landing really didn’t have a noble lady who seemed to care for them for a very long time. That made her feel quite superior to Cersei. When they finally got through the portcullis, it was about midday. They were all covered with dust and sweat. Joy, Sera and Megga had their dress torn in a few places.

When Margaery came back to her apartments, Tyrion had already left for the tournament. She knew he had certain things to discuss with the Hand of the King. Mira and Sera went for a quick bath while Margaery prepared herself for her own. She couldn’t appear in such a state before all the nobility of Westeros. Other handmaidens who were employed here at the Red Keep had a bath prepared for her, and she had an essence of peach put into the water.

She plunged into the hot water and sighed at the feeling. She sent the maids away to be alone. Margaery closed her eyes and let the feeling of the hot water bring her into a state of peace and well-being. The last hours had been tiring. She wished that Tyrion was here with her. They took their bath together sometimes. Time seemed to slow as Margaery let herself lay in the peach water.

The door opened and her two handmaidens came inside. Margaery had to go through the whole washing and scrubbing process. When it was all done, her friends cleaned, brushed and braided her hair, put on her clean clothes with a green and red velvet gown in the fashion of the Westerlands, trimmed with silvery and golden bands. She also had nine rings added to her fingers (one of them being occupied by her wedding ring), a bracelet made of gold put around each wrist, an emerald pendant around her neck, a silver hairnet to hold her hair and earrings made of gold. She was the Lady of Casterly Rock, and the daughter of the Lord of Highgarden, and it was time to show it to the face of the whole Realm for good.

They used litters to go to the tournament outside the city, instead of walking like the last time. Despite this, the people knew from the colors of the guards escorting her who she was (who else would be followed by a contingent of men both in red and green armor?), and they were slowed in their progress to the tourney grounds by all the people gathering around her. If only she was the queen.

Once they got through the Iron Gate, they advanced much more easily, though not as quickly as Margaery hoped, since people were running everywhere to assist the last day of the tourney. This tournament was so huge that it lasted for five days. This day was the last. They finally arrived to the place. Margaery sent her friends away, except Mira who accompanied her. She was eager to join Tyrion who was in the assistance, among the benches that had been organized for the tourney and that were reserved to the lords and the ladies, but first she needed to see someone.

She went among the many tents covering the field. They searched for a while among this maze of sigils, but she and Mira found the one they were looking for after some time. The golden rose on the green field stood proud. There were no guards before the tent, so she opened the flap and went into it. Mira stayed outside.
Inside the tent, a young man who looked much like her, with an armor to the colors and the symbols of Highgarden, was preparing himself for the tourney. He had set his hair loose and they were quite long for a man, about to reach his shoulders. Green eyes, a round face, brown hair that would curl in normal circumstances. Her brother had grown into a very handsome young man in her absence. He was now the most desirable bachelor in all the Seven Kingdoms. All the ladies who saw him ride in the previous days had fallen in love with him, and Margaery couldn’t blame them. He looked up at her when she came in and smiled.

“Have you come to give me your blessings before I ride?” he asked.

“Maybe, but most of all, I wanted to spend some time with my brother.” She saw him a few times in the last days since he arrived, but between the tourney, her works with the poor of the city and getting to know Tyrion’s family better, she couldn’t spend enough time with her young brother. “I wish you had come to reside in the Red Keep.”

“I would have liked that, but they refused,” he said bitterly. “I suppose the Imp doesn’t want to see me anywhere near him.”

“This Imp, like you say, is my husband and your brother-in-law. Call him by his name, he’s got one for a reason. Tyrion had nothing to do with it.” It was unfair. Margaery knew that Cersei was the one who pressured the king not to allow her brother into the Red Keep while he was there. Her sister-in-law wasn’t happy with her presence, and she didn’t want another Tyrell near her.

“As you wish, but we’re between ourselves. No one will hear us here.” Her brother sighed. “Do you think you could come back to Highgarden once this is over? Pay us a visit?”

Margaery shook her head. “I can’t, Loras. My place is at Casterly Rock now. I am the Lady of the Westerlands, and my place is next to Tyrion.”

“Don’t you want to get far from your husband for some time? He couldn’t stop you, couldn’t he? Because if he does…”

“Loras, I don’t want to hear any more threats towards him. Tyrion is my husband, he loves me… and I love him.”

Loras looked at her queerly. She had already said it a few times in his presence, but he seemed to have a very hard time believing her. He sighed again. “You have changed, sister.” They heard a trumpet call in the distance. “I would be better to go. It would be sad if I was disqualified after I went so far, and at my first tourney above everything else.”

“Make sure you unhorse my brother-in-law.”

“I will.” He left on that arrogant smirk. She heard him salute Mira outside.

You have changed. Her mother told her the same thing at Old Oak last year. Did she really change that much? She walked away and went out, heading to the tourney ground. Mira followed her obediently, as always. Cheering and trumpets could be heard very well, even from that distance. She looked at her northern friend.

“You’ll have to leave for Highgarden soon, you know,” Margaery told her.

“I know, my lady.”

“I’ll regret you, Mira.”
“So will I, my lady.”

“Soon, you’ll have to call me Margaery. We’ll be of the same family.”

“Yes, I know, but not right now.”

The happiness of some made the misfortune of others. Willas’s happiness would make the misfortune of Margaery, but she knew that would happen one day. She couldn’t keep her friends close to her forever, no longer than she could stay at Highgarden all her life. Anyway, that wasn’t as if Mira was going back into the North. She would be relatively close to Casterly Rock and Margaery would see her again when they would visit Highgarden in the future.

A slim man walked in their direction. He wore good silks and had a thin mustache. “Lady Lannister.” The Master of Coin bowed before her.

“Lord Baelish. What a pleasant surprise to see you here,” Margaery replied.

“I wish the surprise was shared, but if I told you so, then I would be lying. I was looking for you, my lady. I was hoping we could have a little conversation.”

His eyes went to Mira who stood by Margaery’s side. He wanted this little conversation to be private. “It would have to be a short conversation. I don’t want to miss my brother jousting.”

“Don’t worry, my lady. It won’t be long.”

Margaery turned to Mira. “Go on. I’ll see you there.”

Mira curtsied and walked forward. Lord Baelish made a sign with his arm to show they could walk, and they did, side by side.

“All of these tents look the same to me,” he said as a beginning.

“Then look at the banners before them, and you’ll find they are quite different from one another.”

“Not as much as you are different from all the other women here. The capital has been blessed by your presence, Lady Lannister.”

“You are very kind.” She was used to that kind of compliments, and knew when they were made only to flatter.

“I am sure Casterly Rock was blessed as well when you married Lord Tyrion.”

“It is not for me to answer this question.”

“What do you think Lord Tyrion would answer, if I asked him?”

“Perhaps you should ask him. Unless you’re afraid to meet him after you raised the duties on our lands.”

“A regrettable decision, I agree. A decision that can still be undone, all the same. Unlike some other decisions. When you marry, for example, it is for life. There is no way to end it before your life’s companion or you die.”

“Indeed,” recognized Margaery, a smile on her lips. She had no regret that it was impossible to break a marriage. She couldn’t break it, but no one else could break it either.
“It’s regrettable all the same that some women have to suffer from inappropriate behaviors of their husband. When their husband visits other women, for example.”

“I am sure you know a lot of married men who visit other women.” She knew very well about Lord Baelish’s business.

“Indeed. My involvement in business puts me in contact with many people, including men like these. Men like your husband.”

“I’m sure you know Tyrion quite well,” she replied coldly.

“It is a shame, still. To see a young and beautiful woman married to my best customer. We both lost in the bargain.”

“Really? What did I lose?”

“It is horrible to lose a child, but I don’t believe it is really better to have none.” That stung. After two years, Margaery was still without children. Despite her mother’s reassurances, she began to wonder. Was there something wrong with her? Or with Tyrion? Or with both of them? They needed children, and yet they had none until now. “It is very sad. I’m sure your parents would like you to be with a husband who could give you children. To see a Tyrell wasted in such a way…”

“I am also a Lannister, Lord Baelish.”

“Are you? When you didn’t give them any child yet?”

She tried to gain back her composure. “You seem quite interested in our marriage.”

“Your marriage is quite interesting. Not only to me, but to the Realm. The marriage of a wealthy girl always breeds interest, if nothing else.”

She stopped and turned to face him. They were close to the stage. “You’ve never married, have you?”

“I’ve been unlucky in my affections, sadly.”

“That is sad.” He could feign regret and compassion while showing without any doubt that he didn’t have any, and Margaery could just do the same. “Though perhaps it’s for the best. The whole notion of marriage seems to confuse you, so allow me to explain. My name is Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell. I am the Lady of Casterly Rock, and the Lady of the Westerlands. Lord Tyrion Lannister is my husband, and my father is Lord Mace Tyrell. And since you seem to understand numbers better than marriage, then I shall remind you that thanks to you, the Crown is millions in debt to us. I hope we won’t have to ask the king to repay the debts you gave him with your own fortune, which may be enough to cover a considerable part of these debts. So make sure you repay these debts in time, and both to the Reach and the Westerlands, or else I might not forget the discussion we just had. Enjoy the tournament, my lord. I wish you a good day.”

She walked away, leaving the Master of Coin who respectively bowed as she left. She hoped the message had gone through. If anyone hoped they could tear her and Tyrion apart, then they were wrong. The clamor grew up as she approached the platform. People were gathered all around the tourney ground. Still, Margaery managed to make her way through the crowd and walked to the center of it, but not without exchanging words with fifteen lords and ladies from everywhere in the Seven Kingdoms. King Robert was drinking from a horn with Cersei at his left. Joffrey was sitting between them, and Tommen and Myrcella were a little lower. As she approached, Myrcella’s eyes met hers and her niece smiled at her. Margaery returned it in the same kind at the moment Tommen
dropped from his chair and ran at her.

“Where were you? It’s about to begin,” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Tommen,” she said. “I had to see my brother before I came.”

“Why can your brother play in the tourney and not me? I’m tall enough to ride.”

Her youngest nephew was really a sweet boy. “You can’t ride because this is my name day.” Her other nephew’s declaration reminded her of the great differences between the two.

“I thought you would ride today, my prince,” Margaery told Joffrey. “I heard you wanted to ride for your name day.”

Joffrey looked uncertain. Sera had heard this from another handmaiden in the Red Keep. “Princes don’t ride in tourneys.”

“Really? And yet I heard that Prince Rhaegar Targaryen rode quite well in the tournament of Lannisport. I think he even unhorsed you, Ser Barristan. Didn’t he?” she asked to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

“He did, my lady,” confirmed the old knight, who stood behind his king. “He unhorsed many people on this day, but in the end he was defeated by Ser Arthur Dayne.”

“I hope he didn’t hold any grudge against the Sword in the Morning for defeating him.”

“Not at all, my lady. He never held any grudge. I defeated him once in a tourney at Storm’s End, and he never changed his behavior with me…”

“Stop talking about damn Rhaegar Targayren, you old fool!” The king’s shout put an end to Ser Barristan’s tale.

“My apologies, your Grace,” the knight said as he bowed.

The king rose from his seat and roared. “Are you going to start that damn joust or do I have to smash everyone’s head with my warhammer?”

It was amusing to look at Cersei being uncomfortable next to her husband, and Joffrey to be quite intimidated by his father’s outburst.

“Come, Tommen,” Margaery said to her nephew. She brought him by the arm down on the platform. She saw Tyrion in the first ranks with their family members who had come. He was looking in her direction. No doubt her exchange with Joffrey hadn’t gone unnoticed to him.

“Tommen, get back to your place,” shouted the queen to her son.

Margaery answered before Tommen could. “It’s alright, your Grace. Tommen is safe with me.” She continued on her way before Cersei could say more and arrived before Tyrion. The thought of Cersei’s inner rage made her smile even more than usual when she looked at Tyrion.

“Finally, you’re here,” he said theatrically. Tommen sat next to him. “Hello, you. You managed to get away from your mother? You’ll have to tell me how you did it.”

Tommen laughed at his uncle’s jape and Margaery took place next to them, their nephew separating her from her husband.
There were people all over the tourney ground. Things weren’t as beautiful as they were in Highgarden or at Casterly Rock. The Crown was indeed quite in debt. The banners of the most powerful houses of the Seven Kingdoms were here. The Arryns, the Redwynes, the Tyrells, the Lannisters, the Baratheons, the Hightowers, the Freys, and many minor houses were to be seen. Looking on her left, Margaery noticed Ser Daven with a young woman with red hair, not far from Margaery’s age. Daven seemed to get along quite well with his betrothed. Her father, Lord Paxter, wasn’t far. She noticed Lord Yohn Royce, whom she met a few days ago, not far away. A trumpet was blown and the two first contenders arrived. Tyrion applauded. Ser Jaime Lannister was one of them. He removed his helmet and bowed before Robert, a smirk on his face. He really was Tyrion’s brother, no doubt about it. His smirk lessened however when his eyes met Margaery’s. She wasn’t yet sure what to do with this man. *Tysha was a whore. Jaime had planned everything.* She couldn’t imagine Loras or Garlan or even Willas doing something similar to her, standing by and doing nothing while someone she loved was being raped right before her.

They were at the last day of the tournament, so only the final contenders were left, and sadly Ser Gregor Clegane was among them. He removed his helmet as well to bow to the king. Margaery had met his brother, Sandor the Hound, after she arrived in the capital. He was Joffrey’s sworn shield and never left the prince for a second. Margaery looked at him over her shoulder, standing next to the prince like he always did. He was as scary as his older brother with his half-burned face. Margaery wondered where he got it. The two brothers didn’t seem to notice each other.

The jousters each rode to their side of the ground. Squires came to arm them with their shield and lance, Ser Jaime shining in his kingsguard’s armor and his blond hair, the Mountain frightening in his all black full armor combined with his huge side. Margaery understood they called him the Mountain. He really looked like one right now. A black mountain, black like his doings.

“Don’t worry,” said Tyrion to her right. “Jaime will defeat him. Gregor Clegane may be impressive, but he can’t defeat Jaime.”

She thought he said it for Tommen as well as for her. Margaery hoped that Ser Jaime would give a good lesson to Tywin Lannister’s dog. The first charge was without result, and so was the second. At the third, the Mountain almost reached Ser Jaime with his lance, but her brother-in-law ducked and instead sent a violent hit on the huge man’s back. Ser Gregor didn’t fall from his horse, however. There were six more charges, and again Ser Jaime hit the Mountain, thrice. At the seventh, Ser Jaime thrust his lance into the Mountain’s side and the big man fell from his horse. People applauded him, among them her husband and her nephew. Tommen was all excited, like he had been for all the tournament. Margaery joined the cheering. After all, Ser Jaime just defeated the Mountain.

“I just won a little fortune,” Tyrion said. Margaery sighed internally. Tyrion had placed a bet again. She watched him closely in the last days to prevent him from gambling, but she supposed she couldn’t stop him on the final day.

Many jousters came. Mostly, Tyrion reacted when his brother was in the contest, and Margaery did the same when her own brother was. Both remained polite and only clapped their hands a little when their brother-in-law came in. They had more similar reactions when it was Ser Daven who rode. Loras unhorsed three contenders, including Ser Balon Swann of the kingsguard. Ser Andar Royce, Lord Royce’s second son, was defeated by Tyrion’s brother after four charges. Ser Daven was unhorsed by his cousin too.

After this new victory of her brother-in-law, Margaery looked at Sera who was right behind her. Understanding what this meant, Sera handed her the case. Margaery then tapped Tommen on the arm, attracting his attention. She put the case into his hands and whispered into his ear. “Bring this to your sister.”
Tommen executed himself and went to Myrcella, all shy. Margaery looked at him giving the case to his sister who took it, looking at Margaery with an intrigued expression. Then she opened it, and after a moment of surprise, Myrcella’s face lightened. She looked at Margaery who smiled widely at her, and Myrcella just smiled as well, as if she was just given the most beautiful thing in the world.

“What did you give to her?” Tyrion asked.

“Look,” she told him. Myrcella put the necklace around her throat. It was very similar to the one Margaery wore for her wedding. “I had a second one made before we left,” she explained before the puzzled expression of her husband. Cersei looked stunned by this, but Myrcella was almost jumping in her seat.

Tommen remained with his sister who hugged him for a moment. A few minutes later, Margaery’s brother came back to face Ser Garlan Hightower, a grandson to Lord Leyton. It took them eleven charges, but her brother unhorsed his opponent. Margaery’s cousins, along with Cerenna, Myrielle and Joy, all cheered loudly for him. Margaery rose as well and applauded her brother, to maintain a behavior fitting a great lady in public. She wished she could cheer like everyone else. She would congratulate Loras in a more sisterly way later.

A long pause followed this. There were only two contenders left. Ser Jaime Lannister and Ser Loras Tyrell would ride in the final tilt. Margaery’s heart was racing. Her brother had a chance to win this tourney. How marvelous that would be, to see Cersei’s face when Loras would defeat her twin brother. She remembered very well her smug expression when she told Margaery about how talented the Kingslayer was, while her own brother was only a boy.

“My brother has the age your brother had when he joined the Kingsguard,” Margaery had said to the queen.

“Yes, but Jaime was already a man at the time. Your brother is no man, or else he would know where to put his manhood,” the queen had retorted.

“Thinking that your brother can defeat mine?” Tyrion asked, in the present time. He had a wicked smile on his lips. He too was sure his brother would win.

“Why not?” she answered playfully. “You doubt Loras’s ability? After seeing him for days?”

Tyrion considered. “Well, I don’t believe Jaime will let himself be defeated by a lad half his age. But who knows? Maybe Joffrey will come riding as well.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it if I were you.”

“About what? Joffrey riding, or Jaime winning?”

“I think Loras has quite a good chance to win,” Margaery said.

“You would be ready to bet on it?”

Tyrion was smirking at her. He was challenging her. Very well, for once, she would encourage her husband’s gambles. “Alright. Let’s say…” She leaned to whisper in his ear. “If my brother wins, I have the right to do everything I want with you tonight.”

She looked closely into his eyes, a smile she made devilish on her face. “I’m not quite sure I want to win this bet all of a sudden. Very well. If I win, I have the right to do whatever I wish to you during the night.”
“I hope for you that your brother rides well.” She already had a few ideas of what she might do to her husband to make him pay. She knew how to torture him better than anyone. “By the way, has Jon Arryn given you an answer?”

“Yes, he did. They will withdraw all taxes on trade from the Westerlands and the Reach, and we will have a seat on the small council. I said Kevan would occupy it. I already sent him a raven.”

“And what office will he have?”

“Master of Laws.”

“It seems Renly Baratheon lost his job.”

“That was the most logical choice. Pycelle can’t be replaced, they need Varys and Littlefinger, and Stannis is useful as Master of Ships. So, unless Jon Arryn was willing to resign as Hand and give the office to Kevan, that was the only choice left.”

Margaery nodded. They had what they asked for. Lots of bets were made all around. She heard most of the people wagering on Ser Jaime. She hoped many would lose money today. She even saw the queen and the king place a bet, and her nephew Joffrey as well. After long minutes of waiting, the two jousters came back. Their armors had many scratches and bumps, resulting from their many jousts during the week. People applauded them both, though the applause was much louder from the Reach for Loras, and much louder for Ser Jaime from the Westerlands. Loras gave a red rose to Lady Desmera. Margaery noticed, not without amusement, that Lord Renly wasn’t far behind.

The first charge brought no result. The second charge didn’t change anything either. At the third, Ser Jaime ducked the lance of Margaery’s brother only an inch. Loras ducked as well on the following charge. Ser Jaime touched Loras thrice, and Loras touched Jaime twice, and none of them were unhorsed after seventeen charges. Margaery was one the edge of her seat, unable to bring her eyes away from the joust. She could feel that Tyrion was no different at her side. Every charge, every contact, every move had them almost jump.

They were at the eighteenth charge now. The tension was high in the air. More people placed bets. A lot of money would change hands by the end of this match. Her brother charged, and Ser Jaime followed a second later. Ser Jaime’s lance was low, at the level of Loras’s chest. Loras lowered his lance to intercept Ser Jaime’s, but at the last minute, the Kingslayer lifted his lance. It hurt Loras’s head. His helmet fell on the ground. Loras, however, managed to remain on his mount. Now, however, he had nothing to protect his head. He couldn’t get another helmet. That wasn’t good. He would lose a part of his focus to protect his head, and that would give the advantage to Ser Jaime. The riders faced for the nineteenth charge. Margaery wondered what Tyrion had in store for her tonight. The brothers-in-law charged together. Margaery found that Loras was charging faster than the previous times. Ser Jaime’s lance was at the level of Loras’s chest. They came closer, and closer. Lora lowered himself on his horse. Ser Jaime’s lance went high. Loras’s lance hit the Lannister knight hard in the chest. With a great sound from the contact of the lance with the armor, Ser Jaime Lannister fell from his horse as his horse kept running.

A silence followed, and then the people exploded. Margaery joined them. Loras toured around the ground, a huge smile on his face. He won. Her brother won. She looked at Tyrion. He applauded slowly.

“It seems I lost,” he simply said.

He raised from his seat and went to join his brother. Margaery did the same with her own and hugged him tightly. There was no need for formality anymore.
When she looked back on the platform, she could see the queen was gone, and Joffrey too, along with his dog. On the other hand, Tommen and Myrcella came to them. Myrcella was now wearing her new necklace, the sapphire side visible, the ruby side hidden.

“Congratulations, Ser Loras,” the princess said to her brother.

“Loras, may I introduce you to my niece, Princess Myrcella Baratheon, and her brother, Prince Tommen Baratheon,” Margaery said.

“Princess, my prince.” Loras bowed to both of them. Myrcella was smiling widely.

“Myrcella, maybe you could accompany my brother back to his tent. There will be a feast tonight. You could make sure he’s ready in time.”

“Of course.” Myrcella looked very excited.

Margaery looked at the pair heading to the maze of tents she had left a few hours ago, followed by a kingsguard. Ser Barristan remained behind to keep an eye on Tommen. Maybe this could work. A princess was a much better match for the heir of Highgarden than a lady, at least in appearance. Still, considering Tyrion’s opposition to Lady Alysanne marrying Loras, Myrcella would be quite a good replacement. She walked out with Tommen and headed back to the Red Keep for the feast.

The feast for Joffrey’s name day didn’t prove to be quite what Margaery expected. The bards, jugglers, fools, singers, dancers and other musicians proved to be less entertaining than those they had in Highgarden and Casterly Rock, the food wasn’t as refined as she thought it would be, and the music wasn’t of high quality. The king kissed at least three servants right in front of Cersei, which was both entertaining and disgracing. His brother, Lord Stannis, left after the main course, without a glance or a word to anyone. He hadn’t spoken more than five words to Margaery the times they saw each other. Joffrey’s behavior proved to be disgracing while not entertaining at all. He spent the feast receiving the gifts every present lord and knight brought for him. He seemed to hate a quarter of them, and to be indifferent to half of them. His thanks when Tyrion and Margaery presented him with their own present, a knife with a hilt made of silver and a green pearl at the extremity, were quite short.

“It’s fine.”

Then he tossed it away and didn’t look at it for all the evening. A few things still managed to make the feast enjoyable. Loras had won the tourney. She saw Ser Jaime shake his hand in congratulations. Loras danced with Margaery, Myrcella, and almost every lady in the Great Hall, under the eyes of Lord Renly. She saw Ser Daven dance with his betrothed as well. Margaery danced with Joffrey as a formality, but then she went to dance with other people, including Lord Renly, Ser Daven and Lord Royce.

The time she spent with her husband made her happy as well. Tyrion didn’t show any grudge that his brother had lost. She suspected some part of him was happy about it in fact. She forced Loras and Tyrion to make peace by shaking hands. Loras didn’t show much enthusiasm, but he did it all the same. Later, when most of the people were drunk, even though most of them emptied fewer cups than her husband, Margaery and Tyrion retired to their rooms. It was time for Tyrion to honor his debts. As he always said, a Lannister always pays his debts.

A few hours later, Margaery lied on her belly in their bed. The candles had burnt out, but she had replaced a few of them each time they didn’t have enough light left. That made the experience much better. She knew that Tyrion loved her appearance under this dim light. Now however, she was done. Tyrion had paid his debts and Margaery was just resting in their bed. Her husband, on the
other side, wasn’t resting. Or at least, not only resting. He trailed his mouth and his hands all over her back, enjoying her skin. When his lips or his tongue followed her spine, she felt shivers run along it. His hands sometimes went under her belly, caressing it and reaching her breasts from time to time. Margaery breathed deeply. A sigh sometimes escaped her throat.

“You’re beautiful… my queen,” he whispered.

She sighed again. She loved that nickname he gave her. Margaery had always wanted to be queen. She had hoped once that Robert would set Cersei aside for her, or that she would marry Joffrey, but when she looked at both of them, the king, a fat and drunken idiot, the prince, an arrogant, prickly and spoiled brat… Another shiver. How stupid she had been. She had wanted so much to have a crown on her head. She hadn’t thought about any other possibility. And yet, here she was now, Margaery Tyrell of House Lannister, the Lady of Casterly Rock, the Lady of the Westerlands, the richest woman in the Seven Kingdoms, the most powerful woman in the Seven Kingdoms.

_My dear, there are crowns without a queen. And there are queens without a crown._ She hadn’t understood back then. For her, there was no better position than to be queen, and a queen was the women married to the king. She was the one wearing a crown. Now she understood. On their way back from the tournament, people had cheered as she travelled through the streets with her brother and her husband. Some cheered for her brother, of course, but Margaery had soon realized that they mostly cheered for her. Her men had already started to distribute the bread for everyone in the city. Her work in charities had made a very good impression. They were calling after her more than after Loras or Tyrion. The king and the queen weren’t far from them, and yet all cries and shouts and cheers were for her. She even thought she heard a few people cry _Queen Margaery_. The lords and the ladies who had gathered in King’s Lading had shown her great respect, and she and Tyrion managed to get considerable reduction of taxes for their lands and a seat on the small council from the king and his Hand.

Now, Margaery understood what her grandmother had meant. She had no crown. She only was a lady, but thanks to her marriage with the man trailing his mouth and his tongue on her back right now, and thanks to her links with her own family at Highgarden, she was more powerful, more loved by the people and the lords, and happier than Cersei. She had no crown, but she was the queen, the real queen of Westeros. She thought about the possibility of her being married to Robert or Joffrey, and she compared them to Tyrion. He was a hundred times the man these would ever be. And she loved him. She loved him with all her heart. She never thought she would love someone, not in that way, and yet she did. She wouldn’t replace Tyrion by anyone else for all the gold in the world. Love and power in one handsome package. What more could she ask?

“I love you, Tyrion.” She whispered it.

Tyrion paused in his movements. A silence followed. “I love you too, my queen.” Then he returned to his previous cares.

She remained there, unmoving, keeping her eyes shut, content with her actual situation. She didn’t want it to end. She wanted nothing more than to stay there forever, all the attention of the man she loved on her.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is in someway the apex of Margaery's evolution since the story began. This
is the moment when she realizes that she is, in all but name, the true queen of Westeros. Not only she found love in marriage (something she never thought or cared to find), but she became more powerful than any other living woman thanks to this marriage, and it was really the objective of this chapter, to show where her psychological evolution finally brought her, along with establishing how powerful our power couple is. :) 

In some way, the chapters up to now have been an introduction. They have been setting the situation for when the plot of the show would begin. I would like to know what you think of the story so far, what you like, what you dislike, maybe give a mark on 10 to this story so far. I also welcome speculations about how you believe the story will go on from now on, and how the new political balance created by the Tyrell-Lannister alliance will affect the events in the show.

Please review

Next chapter: Season 1, Episode 1
Tyrion VIII

Chapter Notes

Now, the action of Season 1 starts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION VIII

The wheelhouse bumped against something on the ground, but it kept moving forward. Tyrion resumed his reading where he left it.

Although Aegon’s motives cannot be put into doubt, it seems he had a favorable prejudice towards the smallfolk that prevented him from being wise like his ancestor, Jaehaerys. He sent too much help to the North during the long winter his reign began with. He had an exceedingly pity for the smallfolk, having spent his years squiring for a wandering knight. His lack of time at court, and the too great part of his life that he spent with the people, stopped him from seeing the wisdom of lords and ladies. He saw highborn people as oppressors instead of benefactors and rulers, and he saw the smallfolk invariably as victims of harsh treatments the lords and knights gave them, while these treatments were necessary to prevent rebellions and uprisings and to maintain peace. He didn’t realize that most of the people’s misery came from their own misdoings, or from the hazards of nature, and that without their lords who stocked food for winter and watched out for them, the smallfolk would be far worse than they actually were. He deprived the lords from the rights and liberties the gods granted them, and gave them to an illiterate mob unable to rule itself. Fortunately, these unwise politics didn’t last long. Under the rule of his grandson, the great and wise Aerys the Second, and of his Hand, the wise Lord Tywin Lannister, Aegon’s laws favoring the smallfolk were undone, and the era of chaos, troubles and rebellions ended for one of peace and prosperity, all that thanks to our beloved king and his Hand.

This Maester Plutarch was quite a lickspitter. He had written his Life of Aegon the Unlikely under Aerys’s reign, when Tyrion’s father ruled the Seven Kingdoms, and he spent most of his time at the Citadel. Tyrion doubted he ever left it. He may never have met Aegon the Unlikely, Aerys the Mad or Tywin Lannister the Old Lion. He spent his time at the top of a great tower, unaware of the sufferings and the real life of the people.

Tyrion knew what the people had to go through. Ever since he met Tysha, like his father used to say, he spent his time drinking with thieves and bedding harlots. Mostly, the thieves stole because if they didn’t, they died, and the harlots sold their bodies for the same reason. He remembered the men raping Tysha, or the bruises and cuts on Alla’s back. He saw highborn people as oppressors instead benefactors, and he saw the smallfolk invariably as victims of harsh treatments the lords and knights gave them, while these treatments were necessary to prevent rebellions and uprisings and to maintain peace. When reading this, Tyrion had the temptation to agree with Aegon. This maester knew nothing. The lords had duties and responsibilities towards their smallfolk, that was true, but very often they did more to enforce their own rights over the smallfolk than to give them what was owed to them. Tyrion’s father had allowed tax collectors to rob the people as long as they gave the expected taxes they were supposed to collect for House Lannister. People lost their hand for stealing an apple. Women were raped on the roads by robbers and knights all alike. In times of war, wars that were declared by highborn people, sons were taken away from their families to join the army, and
the odds were great that they would get killed. Lands were ravaged, and all the life’s work of a farmer could be destroyed within a single day if an army passed nearby, no matter if this army was here to protect him or to conquer him. In both cases, he almost lost everything he had because the army requisitioned everything he had. That was when the soldiers didn’t steal it and raped his wife and his daughters in the process. Camp followers had a better fate in war when you looked at it.

Tyrion had tried to make the punishment for robbery less severe. He kept the harsh sentences for murder and reinforced those for rape. Tyrion had decided that all knights who were reported to have raped a woman, whoever she was, would have to be judged by him, and only him, or by men he chose himself. Any knight who was found guilty was sentenced to fifty whiplashes. Most of them fainted while the sentence was carried out. When they woke up, in the dungeons, they were cast away without anything but the clothes on them. They were stripped from their lands and all their other belongings, and were forgiven to ever carry a weapon again while in the Westerlands. Tyrion wished he could deprive them of their knighthood, but it wasn’t in his power. Only the king could do it. Still, to deprive a knight from the right to hold a sword was already very humiliating for them. As for the others who raped women, Tyrion had sent directives to his bannermen to carry out the sentence of gelding in every occasion. He had even thought of gelding the men who raped Tysha years ago, since some of them were still in service at Casterly Rock, but he decided not to at the end. They weren’t the only ones who did it. He only relegated them in lower positions and duties.

For robbery, however, Tyrion encouraged alternatives to cutting a hand. If the robbery was only about food, then he offered the robber the chance to start a new life somewhere else. There were many lands in the Westerlands that weren’t farmed, ships that lacked a crew, mines that lacked miners, and workshops without workers. He offered opportunities to these people to work honestly. These were hard works and often involved to move far away from where they lived, but it was better than losing a hand. However, if they failed and robbed again, then the sentence was for the hand. The alternatives were the Wall or the mines of Casterly Rock. Tyrion encouraged his bannermen to offer the Wall and the work in mines to all men guilty of robbery, though for rape, it was the gelding, with or without the Wall.

“Are you well, my love?” Tyrion looked up. Margaery had interrupted her embroidery and was looking at him, worried.

“Yes, I am. I’m alright.”

“Are you sure? You looked quite thoughtful, and from the face you made, your thoughts were not pleasant.”

“That was nothing. I was just… reminiscing about the past.”

She said nothing for a while. “I wonder how long it will be before the wedding.”

“Not long. Maybe a few days after we arrive. Genna is taking care of everything.”

“I hope she will respect the uses in the Reach.”

“She respected them for your own wedding. Do you think she won’t, this time? My aunt is clever enough to know our alliance is vital.”

Margaery nodded. “I know. And I suppose that organizing the wedding will be far less exhausting without my grandmother wanting to change everything.”

Tyrion chuckled. Many people hadn’t recovered yet from the passage of the Queen of Thorns in Casterly Rock two years ago. His aunt had, but others hadn’t. “She won’t complain about her
absence."

“It’s too bad that your uncle won’t assist it.”

Tyrion knew it. They had met Kevan not far from Deep Den last week. He was riding for King’s Landing to take his position as Master of Laws. His uncle hadn’t been very happy about being ordered to leave his family for a nest of vipers.

“I would have liked to be warned before you left that you would have Robert name me on the small council,” Tyrion’s uncle had told him while they discussed.

“I didn’t know at the time. It was Margaery who came up the idea while we were on the road. When we left, we thought we would only ask for a reduction of taxes. Finally, we thought it would be better to ask for someone on the small council, in order to make sure that Robert held his word.”

“So, I have to thank Lady Margaery for that?”

“She wanted someone from her family to sit on the small council, but at the end, we thought it would be better if he was a Lannister. Cersei wouldn’t suffer a Tyrell on the small council.”

“How was she? I suppose she didn’t like her sister-in-law.”

“No, she didn’t. She threatened to have her killed.” Kevan’s eyes grew concerned. “I think she used the words *strangle in your sleep.* Yes, that’s what she told to my wife. As you can see, she was in her usual mood.”

Kevan sighed. “We cannot allow that kind of things. She already crossed too many lines.”

“You’ll have to keep an eye on her,” Tyrion said.

“Of course, I will.” His uncle looked discouraged. “Attempting to rise your bannermen in rebellion, trying to have you poisoned… What’s going on with her?”

“According to Varys, she also sent ravens to the Iron Islands, the Florents, and Gregor Clegane, among all.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m not. Of course, that’s the word of the Spider, so we cannot be entirely sure, but Margaery wrote to her family to tell them to watch the Florents closely.”

“We’ll have to ask our allies to watch the Iron Islands as well,” said Kevan. “This is unacceptable. Does Jaime know about it?”

“Do you think it would be useful to tell him?” Tyrion loved his brother, but the problem was that Jaime loved Cersei above everything else. His brother would never do anything against her, and he would never forgive Tyrion if he ever did something to Cersei.

“Probably not,” Kevan admitted. “Jaime never had a head for politics. Let’s leave him out of it.”

“Do you have any idea about what we could do? Maybe send Cersei somewhere, away from everyone. Somewhere comfortable, but where she could do no harm.”

“I’m afraid not. She is your sister, and the queen. Her place is either at Casterly Rock or in King’s Landing, and to bring her back to Casterly Rock wouldn’t solve our problems. Anyway, we cannot let the other lords know about all of this. The consequences on House Lannister would be terrible.
Better to leave her in the capital under heavy guard and to watch her. That’s what I’ll do.”

“Be careful, Kevan.”

“I will be.”

“We don’t know what Cersei is capable of.”

His uncle had left not long after this discussion. They both had to move separate ways. But now, who knew what Cersei could do. At Deep Den, they learnt that Jon Arryn died of a fever. Tyrion had hoped that Kevan might get along well with Jon Arryn. Both men were men of duty, without ambition, who did as they were told. They weren’t much different. Now, the old man was dead and Robert had no Hand.

Tyrion resumed his conversation with his wife. “That won’t be so bad for my uncle in the capital. My cousin Lancel is there, acting as squire for the king. It’s been awhile since Kevan saw him. He’ll be quite happy to see his eldest son again.”

“Probably,” Margaery conceded. “Lancel will surely love to have his father close to him again. He looked so lost when I saw him there.”

“The truth is, Lancel found himself squiring for the king only because Cersei and my father insisted. But if you want my opinion, there are many other lads who could pour Robert’s wine without problem.”


“I suppose his squiring is much less entertaining than the one your brother did for Renly Baratheon.”

“Indeed,” she simply answered. They both knew how entertaining Loras Tyrell’s squiring had been for him. “Though now I wonder, if Jon Arryn is dead, who will be Hand of the King? I can already see my father suggesting himself for the position.”

“I can, me too, but I doubt Robert will accept. Your father barely has better odds to be chosen than Randyll Tarly, and Doran Martell is more likely to get the position than him.”

“Then he will turn to his bannermen in the Stormlands.”

“I doubt it. Robert is more of the sort to choose someone he loves and trust, and he probably loves none of his bannermen. I can’t see him naming Renly, so one of Renly’s bannermen?”

“Then he could choose Stannis, in this case. He doesn’t speak much, but from what I know, he’s not careless like Renly.”

“Stannis would make a better choice than Renly, it’s true, though the man would be more useful in times of war than in times of peace. But Robert has no love for either of his brothers. I think it is more likely that he will think about Eddard Stark.”

“The Lord of Winterfell?” asked Margaery.

“Yes. Robert and Ned Stark grew up together at the Eyrie. They were both fostered there. Robert speaks of him like a brother, much more than for his real brothers. They are very close friends.”

“I wonder what Ned Stark would think if he learnt that his friend considered marrying his daughter
Tyrion smiled. “I think the friendship would be in danger.”

Any sane father would refuse to marry his daughter to him. Tyrion was glad that Margaery’s father was insane.

“What about Kevan?” asked Margaery. “He advised you well. If Robert wants a good Hand, he wouldn’t be a bad choice.”

“No. Kevan would do a fine job. He always did his duty, just like Jon Arryn. He would be a second Jon Arryn, but younger. But I’m quite sure my sister is already pushing someone else to Robert.”

“Who?” Margaery seemed skeptical.

“My brother.”

Her face showed utter surprise. “Your brother? Ser Jaime Lannister?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t imagine him as Hand of the King.”

“Me neither. Jaime would certainly refuse. There are still limits to what he could do for my sister. She wanted him to become Lord of the Rock when our father died, and he refused. As he says, the Hands’ days are too long, and their lives are too short.”

Margaery nodded. “Well, I suppose we must wait and see. There isn’t much we can do, except reacting if the new Hand ever has the idea to raise the taxes again.”

“Indeed.”

Tyrion returned to the reading of his book as Margaery gave back some attention to her embroidery. However, she interrupted her work and her husband’s reading not much later.

“Tyrion, as you know, Mira will leave for Highgarden after Daven’s wedding.”

“Of course. I suppose Willa is eager to marry her.”

“Yes, he is. But I thought I should accompany her. After all, Willas is my cousin. I want to be there when he is wed.”

Tyrion wasn’t sure. “We have been away from the Rock for four months now, not to mention the time we spent touring the Westerlands and at Old Oak. We ought to spend some time there.”

“You said yourself a lord shouldn’t spend his whole life into a castle.”

“No, it’s true, but he must spend some time in here. We are not called the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock for nothing.”

“That won’t take long. I’ll go to Highgarden with Mira, then come back immediately when the wedding is over. Are you going to forbid me?”

Her face showed quite clearly she didn’t think Tyrion could or would. And she was right, he couldn’t. “Fuck it. I’ll come with you. I told you we would visit your home one day. That is as good a time as any. I’ll leave Damion as castellan and Daven to act as Warden of the West in our absence.
That will be some sort of a wedding gift.”

She smiled sweetly at him. She left her seat, came to sit by his side, and planted a long kiss on his lips. “I love you.” Then they resumed their kiss, until the carriage bumped again. “I’m afraid this is not a very good time for it. Let’s wait for the night.”

They went back to their occupations. Tyrion found his reading quite dull with the comments the author made all the time. He kept the book open, but his eyes often left it to look at his wife sitting right in front of him. He thought she was embroidering a rose, or something similar. She was beautiful, as always, and Tyrion found it more interesting to look at her working than to read a maester full of prejudices. He remembered a passage of his Life of Tywin Lannister, where he digressed about Tyrion’s birth, saying that Tywin Lannister would have been within his rights to kill the child, considering he was useless and unworthy to be Tywin’s son. Tyrion wondered if the maester had been bribed by his father or his sister.

After a few hours, they stopped. When Tyrion left the wheelhouse with Margaery, he noticed the embroidery she was making. It was a mountain that looked similar to the Rock, made with red and green lines. Tyrion and Margaery dined with Devan and his betrothed that evening, and Tyrion also shared a few words with Lord Paxter who followed them for his daughter’s wedding.

Later, in the night, Tyrion was lying on his back in their bed, his wife’s head nestled into the crack of his neck. He tried to sleep, but didn’t really succeed. Even though it was much better than before, his sleep was still light, and it wasn’t rare that he didn’t sleep at all in one night. It didn’t really bother him. He was used to not sleeping much, and it gave him more time with Margaery, even if she was sleeping and he wasn’t. He could hear her breath in the silent night, feel the warmth of her body against his own, smell the remnants of the perfume she had on her today. He cherished every minute he spent with her. Everything was perfect between them. He only wished he could give her children. They needed some to ensure their legacy, and he knew Margaery wanted to be a mother, even if she never really said it. He would need to ask Creylen about it when they went back home.

The flap of the tent opened. Someone approached with a light. With the faint light, Tyrion recognized Mira Forrester.

“My lord, my lady,” she whispered.

“What is it, Lady Mira?” Tyrion asked.

“There’s a man who just arrived. He says he wants to see you, and that it’s urgent.”

“Can’t it wait on the morning?”

“He says it can’t. He said he had to speak to you immediately.”

Tyrion sighed. “Very well. Tell him to come in.”

The northern girl left. Tyrion stretched himself and got out of bed. He put on a dressing gown to cover his naked body and moved the furs on the bed to cover his wife’s body. Margaery stirred as Tyrion was walking away to the center of the tent.

“What’s going on?” Margaery asked.

“Someone to see me for an urgent matter.”

“At this hour?” She rubbed her eyes. The man would be better to really have a good reason for a nocturnal visit.
“It seems so.” Tyrion lit a few candles, though not too many. Margaery had just woken up. She lied in their bed, keeping the covers closely to her body. The Reach may be more liberal than the Westerlands, but Margaery wasn’t a Dornishwoman either. She wasn’t about to show her body to the first visitor.

The man who came in with Lady Mira was short for someone who wasn’t a dwarf, with a flat face, small eyes and a beard. “My lord, please excuse me to bother you at this time, but I wanted to be sure the fewer people would notice me. I was given the instruction to give you this.” He produced a scroll with black wax sealing it. “I was ordered to give it to you, and only to you.”

Tyrion took the paper. “What’s in this?”

“I don’t know, my lord. I wasn’t told. It would be better if I leave.”

He left, as quick as a snake, before anyone could stop him. Lady Mira looked at Tyrion with questioning eyes.

“Leave us alone, please.”

The northern handmaiden curtsied and left the tent. Tyrion looked at the seal. It wasn’t one he knew. At the dim light of the candles, and despite the color of the seal, he managed to read the three letters inscribed on it. KLW.

That didn’t ring any bell in Tyrion’s mind. He broke the seal and read the content of the scroll.

*Jon Arryn died of a severe fever that took him within two days. One day he was fine and healthy, and two days later he died in his bed. He had nauseas all time before he died, and a great stench came out from the bowels of his dead body. The disease was as sudden as it was deadly. These aren’t only a fever’s symptoms. Gladly, no one says it is something else that took him. The Realm would be in danger if someone did.*

*Our king will find a new Hand. We all wonder where he’ll find him. Who could replace Jon Arryn?*

There was no signature, but seeing the way this message was written, and how it was brought, Tyrion had a good idea who might have sent it. And if what he said about the way Jon Arryn died was true…

“So, what is it?” Margaery’s voice testified she was still half asleep. Tyrion’s mind was working hard, trying to consider all the implications of this message. “Tyrion?”

“This is a message from Varys, I believe. He didn’t put his name, but that would be his style.”

“What does it tell?”

“It suggests that Jon Arryn was murdered.”

Margaery had talked as if they had a discussion around a glass of wine on a normal evening, but now she was more awaken. She straightened in the bed, the covers falling slightly off her beautiful body. “What?”

“That’s what it suggests. Of course, Varys doesn’t claim that he was assassinated, not directly. He only says he could have died from something else than a fever.”

“Do you think it’s possible?”
Tyrion read again the part of the message that explained how Jon Arryn died. “The symptoms are similar to a very rare poison, the tears of Lys. The poison that my sister tried to use against me years ago.”

A huge silence fell into the tent. “Do you believe that Cersei killed Jon Arryn?”

Tyrion began to pace along the room. “She would be capable of that, especially if she was in a desperate situation, that she or her children were in danger. But why would she kill Jon Arryn? She spent the seventeen last years close to him. Why now? Unless he threatened her, or Joffrey, or Myrcella, or Tommen, or all of them.”

“Could he have done this?”

“I doubt it. We’re talking about Jon Arryn, not my father.” Margaery’s face showed she agreed. She never liked it to hear about his father. People had taken the habit to mention Tywin Lannister the less possible in her presence. “It’s not his style to attack children. And why would he do that?” Unless…

“Maybe he was resentful because we forced him to lower the taxes.”

“No, the man is too honorable to do that for such a reason. He would need a huge reason for threatening Cersei or her children. She’s still the queen, and her children are Robert’s children as well.”

Margaery looked thoughtful for a moment. The covers had completely fallen now, and her whole body from her waist to her head was exposed. Tyrion tried to not think too much about it. The Hand of the King had possibly been assassinated by his sister. Jon Arryn would never do something against Cersei or Robert’s children… unless he discovered the truth.

“Tyrion, you told me Cersei wrote not only to the Leffords and the Westerlings, but also to the Florents and to Balon Greyjoy to spark a rebellion. What if Jon Arryn discovered the truth and Cersei knew it?”

Tyrion reflected about it. “That’s not unlikely. Varys had the information, after all. And Jon Arryn would be foolish enough to tell Cersei before he revealed it to Robert. Pycelle is on my sister’s side. He could help poisoning the Hand without problem.”

Margaery seized a dressing gown and wrapped herself in it. She still sat on the bed. Tyrion was glad of it. Her nakedness distracted him. “Tyrion, if Cersei is beginning to assassinate people for real, not only to try, that’s grave. We have to stop her, and now.”

“What do you want us to do? We don’t know for sure if she’s behind this. We have no proof against her. Only a message that Varys sent us, and he won’t confess to sending it. I cannot tell the whole Realm that my own sister murdered the Hand of the King without proof and without certainty. Imagine the consequences for the Lannisters, and for the Tyrells too. We are allies now. And if Cersei wasn’t behind this? If it was someone else?”

Margaery thought for some time. “You’re right. But we cannot do nothing either. If Jon Arryn was assassinated…”

“We have to discover if he was murdered, and if he was, who killed him. But we cannot investigate that from the Westerlands. We need someone in King’s Landing. Someone we can trust.”

“Kevan is riding for King’s Landing. We should send him a raven immediately.”

“No, we can’t. Pycelle has been working for my sister and my father before her for years. We cannot
be sure of his loyalty.”

“He could tell Cersei.” Margaery realized what this meant. “If Cersei committed the murder, then he will read the message and tell her.”

“And if she didn’t, he will tell her all the same. Who knows what Cersei could do in either cases? Anyway, Kevan is only Master of Laws. He cannot go all around the capital, asking if the Hand of the King was murdered. It will attract the attention of the new Hand, if it doesn’t attract Robert’s. No. The only person who could investigate this is the Hand of the King himself… Which means, we need someone we can trust as the new Hand.”

“You said Robert would never choose a Tyrell or a Lannister for Hand.”

“No, he won’t. Unless he has no choice.”

“We cannot threaten him like we did before,” Margaery pointed out.

“No, of course. We cannot threaten the king to starve the capital at every turn. But Robert may be willing to name a Lannister on the position if no one else is willing to take the job. Kevan would be a good choice, or me.”

“You?” Margaery almost looked as if she mocked him. “I didn’t know you had such ambitions.”

“If there are troubles in King’s Landing, I would rather be there. I don’t want a war to start, or to see my nephews and my niece in danger. My father was Hand of the King for twenty years, perhaps it’s time for me to be Hand as well. And it will give you the opportunity to push forward the betrothal you hope between your brother and Myrcella.”

She smiled. “I suppose we’ll have to spend more time in King’s Landing in the future.”

“Maybe. First, we must make sure whoever Robert asks to be Hand will refuse.”

“But we don’t know who he’s going to ask.”

“No, we don’t,” Tyrion recognized. He looked at the scroll. “Varys doesn’t tell us what are Robert’s intentions. We cannot even be sure this is from Varys, though I think it’s very likely to be him. But the seal…”

Tyrion looked at the black seal with three letters. He never saw it before. He didn’t think the Master of Whisperers even used seals. They couldn’t even know if the man who brought it came from King’s Landing. Tyrion noticed the three letters again. KLW. He blinked. That wasn’t the name of a person. It was an itinerary. Varys told them where Robert was heading.

“I think I know who Robert wants as his Hand.” He brought the scroll to Margaery. “Look at the letters on the seal. It’s the place he’s leaving, and the place where he’s going.”

Margaery’s face dawned with the realization. “He’s going far away to find a Hand.”

“He is. And that’s where we must go, if we want the next Hand to be on our side. I’m afraid we’ll have to leave as soon as Daven’s wedding is done. Sorry, we won’t be able to assist your cousin’s wedding.”

She shook her head and shrugged. “That’s alright. It’s not your fault. I’ll write to Willas and tell him. He will understand.”
“You mustn’t reveal…”

“Of course, I won’t tell him. This must remain between us for the time being, until we know more.” Margaery sighed and put the message on a table. “I suppose I’ll have to ask my dressmakers to prepare me a few warmer clothes.”

Indeed, she would have to, and Tyrion as well.

Chapter End Notes

It's not the best chapter for the beginning of the show part, I would rather have started it with the following chapter, but this one is necessary to understand a few things in the upcoming chapters. I can't wait for your to read them.

Please review

Next chapter: a new POV
Arya I

Chapter Notes

I would have waited next week to publish this one, but I felt like giving you more of "A Rose and a Lion". The previous chapter was setting the situation for the future of the fic, but in this one, we see the story actually expand to more characters. Tyrion/Margaery remains the focus point of the fic, but we'll see them have an impact on many other people and interact with them from now on. Let's start with Arya.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARYA I

“Good, good, pivot. Don’t forget to pivot.”

She leaned forward to launch a decisive attack, only to find nothing. He stood aside and she felt a branch hitting her back, though not hard. She turned to see Jon smiling and laughing at her.

“I told you. Don’t rush on your opponent. It will only leave you vulnerable. Now, try again, without rush.”

Arya took the branch with her two hands. She imagined it was a sword. Then she attacked. Jon parried all her attacks, and often brought the branch to her neck with a quick move. She tried again, and again, and again. He gave her advice on how to position her feet, how to hold her imaginary sword, how to parry, divert or launch an attack. By the end, she was all sweating.

“Your mother won’t like it,” Jon said when they were over.

He dropped his own branch. They were in the godswood, around the middle of the day, not long after dinner. Jon had finally accepted, after repeated demands, to train her at sword fighting. She had asked Robb, but he had refused because their mother forbade it. Arya didn’t understand why her brothers could learn to shoot an arrow, fight with a sword and ride while she was forced to stay put with a cloth and a needle, sharing stupidities with her sister and her stupid friends. Jon had accepted to train her in the end, saying Lady Stark wasn’t his mother, hence he didn’t have to obey all her orders.

“I don’t care,” she said. They began to walk away. “I want a real sword.”

“Maybe you could ask Father,” supposed her brother.

“Can’t you get me one?”

“No, I couldn’t. Not that.” He ruffled her hair and they both smiled at each other.

The time for dinner was over, and they had to get back to the castle before someone discovered what they were doing. Arya knew her mother wouldn’t like it if she knew Jon was training her. Her brother made sure to not hit her too hard as they trained, so she wouldn’t fall on the ground and damage her dress in any way, or else she would know. She wished he hit her harder. She wanted to learn how to fight.
Sansa would say a knight shouldn’t hit a lady,” he told her when they began.

“I’m not Sansa, you’re not a knight, and I don’t want to be a lady,” she had answered.

“You surely won’t be if you continue this way.” He had ruffled her hair again. She liked it when he did it. Sansa always stood away from Jon and never talked to him more than necessary, but Arya didn’t see any reason to do it. Jon was their brother. Shouldn’t Sansa behave with him like she behaved with Robb, Bran and Rickon?

The godswood was a beautiful place. Arya had always liked it. It was less crowded than the other places of Winterfell, and there she could train. She used to train alone, trying to learn how to fight using a branch as a sword, but now she would have Jon to train with. Maybe they could ask Bran to join them. He could teach them both at the same time, and it would be much more funny.

“Why can’t we use practice swords?” she asked Jon as they kept walking.

“Because Ser Rodrik would notice they are missing, and then he would discover the truth and tell your mother.”

Again, Arya felt it was unfair. Jon went to the training grounds where he would spar with Robb and Ser Rodrik. Arya went to the maester’s turret. She liked the lessons with Maester Lewin. Or more precisely, she liked the maester. He always gave them a pastry at the end of each lesson, and he was very kind. However, she liked his lessons less. Not that she hated all of them. After all, she liked it when he taught them history and talked about Aegon’s sisters, but she hated that Sansa was better than her at almost everything. Sansa didn’t boast about that, but Arya could see that her sister felt superior to her, just like she felt superior to Jon.

Sansa had everything. Sansa was two years older; maybe by the time Arya had been born, there had been nothing left. Often if felt that way. Sansa could sew and dance and sing. She wrote poetry. She knew how to dress. She played the high harp and the bells. Worse, she was beautiful. Sansa had gotten their mother’s fine high cheekbones and thick auburn hair of the Tullys. Arya took after their lord father. Her hair was a lusterless brown, and her face was long and solemn. Jeyne used to call her Arya Horseface, and neigh whenever she came near. It hurt that the one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse. Well, that and manage a household. Sansa had never had much of a head for figures. When she would marry, Arya hoped for her husband’s sake that he had a good steward.

She climbed many steps and entered the maester’s room. Sansa was already there.

“We’ve been waiting for you. Where were you?” she asked.

“That’s alright, Sansa. Your sister is not late,” said Luwin. Arya took place next to her sister. “Very well. Today, we will see your multiplications and your divisions.”

Good. Something Arya was better at than Sansa. Maester Luwin produced two sheets of paper and had them make a few exercises. Ten minutes later, Arya had finished.

“How did you do that? I’m only at the half,” Sansa complained.

“That’s not a race, Sansa,” said the maester. “The objective is to give the right answers, not to answer quickly. Keep working, I’ll look at Arya’s results in the meantime.”

Maester Luwin did so and found a few errors among Arya’s answers and method. When he was done, Sansa still needed some time to complete her questions. While Arya made advanced exercises, he had to point several mistakes Sansa made. Arya thought she made fewer mistakes than her sister.
While Lewin was explaining her mistakes to Sansa, they heard a knock on the door.

They heard the voice of their mother on the other side. “Maester Luwin.”

“Come in, my lady.”

Lady Catelyn Stark came in. She looked like an older version of Sansa, though Arya loved her mother much more than her sister. She often berated her for running into the mud and getting all dirty, or for behaving inappropriately, like she said, just like Sansa did, but she always forgave Arya in the end and smiled at her afterwards. Sansa simply disapproved of everything Arya did, and she got on her nerves most of the time.

“My lady.” Luwin bowed respectfully.

She looked at her daughters. “I must interrupt your lessons, girls. A scout just arrived. They will be here in an hour. Follow me, you must prepare yourself.”

Arya knew what it meant. They all knew what it meant. They were coming. They had been warned about this two months ago. Arya was quite excited. She wondered how they looked like.

They were escorted to the room they shared. Sansa had complained a few months ago about the fact they still had to share the same bedroom, and she had asked their mother for a room for herself, but their father had replied that they would have separate rooms the day they would get along with each other. *Sisters who are not mature enough to live together are not mature enough to live alone,* he had said. Sansa had complained, but they didn’t move, and so they were forced to keep living and sleeping in the same place. Sansa tried to be more civil with Arya afterwards, but their bickering continued all the same. Nothing changed.

The maids and Septa Mordane helped them to dress and to arrange their hair. Sansa curled her hair and let them free, while Arya kept them as they always were, with a bun and a single braid. It was easier to run and ride this way. You didn’t have hair falling onto your eyes or to worry that a bust of wind would disorganize them. Arya was ready before her sister.

“How can I leave?” she asked to their septa.

“How go and wait in the courtyard with your brothers, your lord father and your lady mother.”

Arya went to the door and left. As soon as she was out, she pulled her hood over her face. She grabbed a helmet at the armory, hid it under her cloak and ran through the Hunter’s Gate. Once outside, she removed her hood and put the helmet on her head. No one would notice her this way. Surely, they would go through the Winter Town before they came inside Winterfell. She wanted to see them before the others.

The inhabitants of the Winter Town were gathering to see them arrive. Arya mingled among them. However, she was smaller than most of the people. She searched for a place where she would have a better view. Maybe she should learn to climb like Bran, then she could see them from the top of the battlements, though she may only see them from afar in this case. She wanted to see them close. She found a cart and climbed on it. From there, she had a perfect view of the road leading from the Kingsroad that went through the town and continued to the South Gate. That would be where they would enter her home. Fortunately, the Winter Town was southwest to Winterfell, and the Kingsroad made a long deviation to lead from the town to the castle. This detour would give her enough time to join her family inside the castle through the Hunter’s Gate after she saw them.

It didn’t take long before they appeared. This was a large retinue indeed. Arya didn't remember her
father ever bringing so many people with him when he visited the other lords in the North. The first men to arrive were knights. Arya couldn’t distinguish their faces for most of them. They all had helmets, and the helmets hid most of their faces. They were riding in column, two riders at a time. The first two riders wore a red and black armor, along with a red cloak. Their helmets only allowed to see their jaws. They were carrying banners displaying a golden lion on a red field. The two riders who followed wore grey and green armor, their helmets allowing to see only the part of their faces from their mouth to their eyes. It encircled their faces. They carried green banners displaying a golden rose on a green field.

It went that way for some time. Two men in green followed two men in red, who in turn followed men in green. Then men on foot appeared, green, red and gold all mixed together. A huge wheelhouse followed. Arya had never seen such a big carriage. And then they came.

Arya recognized him the first. Even if she never saw him before, she couldn’t have missed him. He was small, true enough. He wore furs, and had richly decorated clothes. However, he didn’t look very much like Arya imagined him. He wasn’t bald. His hair fell on his forehead, and he wasn’t even disheveled. He didn’t look ugly either. No beard, nothing malformed. Maybe his head looked a little big for his body, and he had shorter arms, but nothing really noticeable except that. He was only a man of small height. Arya was a little disappointed. She expected to see the Imp, but she thought he would be more amusing than that. She thought with some pleasure that Jeyne might find him handsome. She wasn’t as tall as Sansa. She could tell her during their next embroidery lesson that he would make a good husband for her if he wasn’t married.

Next to the Imp rode a woman. She looked young, not far from Robb’s and Jon’s age. She had brown hair that flew in the air, a thick green dress with gold on it, or so Arya thought, and something around her neck, some precious stone Arya couldn’t put a name on. She looked behind them. There were other people who weren’t dressed like soldiers, and a few women among them, but they weren’t richly dressed like the Imp and the woman at his side. She had to be his wife. Arya had expected the Lady of Casterly Rock to be smaller, of an height with her husband. She looked to be of normal height, without anything particular. The woman was smiling as she looked over the people as they rode, and it reminded someone else to Arya.

She reported her attention on the Imp. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t look evil or angry either. In fact, his expression remembered her the expression her father put on when he had to be the Lord of Winterfell, like when he received petitioners or discussed with other lords. Maybe his face was a little darker, but not too much. He looked in her direction. It only lasted a moment, because he looked away very quickly, but she had the impression he looked straight at her for a second.

They went past Arya. Behind them were many other people, maybe servants, and other guards and knights. It was time for her to go back to the Hunter’s Gate if she wanted to be in the courtyard when they would arrive. She climbed down the cart and ran to the gate. Arya didn’t give any attention to the guards there. All she knew was that they let her pass. She had to be quick in order to get to the courtyard before the Lannisters began to pour in it.

She saw her family standing there, with a large open field before them to let the visitors come. She ran to her position that was between Sansa and Bran.

“Hey, hey! What are you doing with that on?” Her father stopped her. He removed her helmet. “Go on. Take your place.”

Arya did it. She was sure she would earn a scold later, whether by her father or her mother, but most probably by her mother. *A lady’s duty is to support her husband, not to make war in his stead.* Arya hated her lessons, even worse when Sansa was the one to repeat them. She found herself between
her sister and Bran, pushing her brother to leave her some place.

She looked at her siblings. Her father, her mother, Robb and Sansa all had their head up, dignified, Sansa and her mother smiling while Robb and Father looked more serious. Bran and Rickon heads fell more into their shoulders. She knew Bran was curious about the Imp just like she was. Would he be disappointed when he would realize that the Lord of Casterly Rock was only a short man in the end? Behind them, Jon had their father’s serious expression. He looked like him more than ever right now. Theon stood tall in a prouder position than her father’s. They waited for the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock to come in.

They began to emerge from the South Gate. The knights came first. Since Arya had already seen most of them, she looked at the reaction of her siblings. Most of them remained impassive, but Bran looked impressed, and Sansa was marvelling at the show. She always wanted to see knights, just like Arya did, but not for the same reasons. Arya was interested to see knights because they knew how to fight, while Sansa only saw them as the heroes of the stories rescuing the ladies in distress. Maybe she saw herself like some of these ladies in peril who were only waiting for a knight like one of those to rescue her from a horrible little sister who put shit into her mattress. Arya hoped the knights would laugh at her if she ever told them that. Sansa didn’t realize how stupid she looked sometimes, like when she talked about a dress ruined by some orange juice dropped on it, as if that was the worst thing in the world.

Then came the men on foot, much less impressive, but still, there were quite a lot of them. She noticed the skeptical look on her father’s face. Then finally they came, the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock. From there, Arya realized all of a sudden how odd they looked together. She almost burst in laugh. She hadn’t noticed this detail before, because she had focused on one of them at the time, but now that she looked at both of them together, she saw it.

She looked at Bran and Rickon, who looked essentially curious. Sansa, on her side, first looked surprised, but then she gained back the expression she had when the knights came in. Arya wondered how the Imp and his wife could rouse such admiration with Sansa. Robb looked surprised as well, and her mother too. Her father was better at hiding it, but she saw the surprise on his face for a moment.

Lord Tyrion Lannister and his wife stopped in the middle of the courtyard. A boy about Arya’s age came to the lord’s side. There was something like a ladder attached to the saddle he used. Arya had never seen such a big saddle on such a huge horse. He got off his horse.

“Thank you, Ty.”

There were the first words she heard him say. She thought his voice would be squeaky, like the dwarves she imagined from the stories she read, but it wasn’t. It was quite grave, like her father’s voice, or Jon’s voice, or any other man’s voice. It seems the boring stories Sansa liked were not the only ones to be only stories. The boy went to take care of the mount and the Imp looked at them. After a moment when he just waited there, he walked in the direction on Arya’s parents.

“Lord Stark,” he said.

“Lord Lannister,” her father replied in a neutral tone.

“It’s an honor to meet you.” The Imp offered his hand, and her father took it after some hesitation. It was quite strange to see her father speak with such a small man.

“Welcome to Winterfell, Lord Tyrion.”
“Thank you. I knew the North was almost as large as all the other kingdoms combined, but that’s the first time I test it. I wonder how you do to keep all these lands under control.”

“The lords of the North have been loyal to House Stark for centuries, and they will remain loyal to House Stark for the centuries to come.”

“I wish I could say the same about the Westerlands.” However small the Imp was, he didn’t speak at all like a child, or as if he was smaller than anyone else here. He turned his eyes to Arya’s mother. “Lady Stark.” He bowed to her.

“My lord.” She inclined her head as well.

“You have great resemblance with your brother. We stopped at Riverrun on our way and we met your family.”

“How are they?”

“Fine, for the most, but your father was quite ill, I’m afraid. He had to keep bed for all the time we stayed there. But I would say he was getting better. I had a discussion with him. He seems to be a good man.”

“He is,” Arya’s mother confirmed.

“I like your brother too. He’s a good drinking companion, though he ended under the table before I even began to get drunk.”

Arya couldn’t retain a laugh when she saw her mother’s face, and Sansa’s face too. Sansa didn’t expect that surely, even less than their mother. A few people behind tried to contain their laughs as well.

“I suppose these are your children, my lord?” Lord Tyrion looked at them on their father’s right.

“Aye.” Their father kept his serious voice, the lord’s voice. “My eldest son and heir, Robb.”

The Imp went to the eldest of all of them and looked at Robb for some time. “So, Robb Stark. The future Lord of Winterfell. Let me tell you you’re much prettier than the king you were named for.” A few muffled sniggers could be heard from behind again, and Arya found it funny to see her parents’ faces, not knowing what to do. “But don’t worry. I for myself received my name from a king who was known for being unable to get any pleasure from a woman without having her bleed first.”

The shock on Sansa’s and their mother’s face was priceless. Robb shook hands with the Lord of Casterly Rock after an awkward moment. He only a muttered a my lord. Arya didn’t understand why everyone was acting so strangely.

The little man then turned to Sansa. He bowed deeply before her, though it looked quite ridicule with his height. “My lady. May I have the honor to know your name?”

“Sansa, my lord.” Arya’s sister didn’t look very comfortable right now, but behaved like a perfect lady, as she always put it.

“You seem to take a lot after your lady mother, my lady.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you.” Sansa managed to smile. She always smiled before guests, even if they were stupid or that she didn’t like them.
"How old are you, Lady Sansa?"

"I’m thirteen, my lord."

The Imp looked quite surprised. "Thirteen." He considered her for some time, then he looked at their father. "Be careful with that one, my lord. She’s going to break hearts, and a lot of them. I’m also afraid she’ll get taller than her own parents."

He turned away and came before Arya. That was her turn. He looked at her. That was the same look she spotted in her direction back when she saw him in the town.

"So, here’s the one who seems to like my japes. Who are you, little lady?" he asked.

Arya resisted the envy to tell him she wasn’t a lady, but she remembered the lessons of Septa Mordane. She was looking, and her mother too. "Arya."

"Arya. Let me tell you, you seem to have more of the North in your veins than your brothers and your sister." He smiled at her, and she returned it. She supposed it was a compliment, and there weren’t many who gave her some. "We’ve seen each other before, I think."

"I don’t think so," Arya said, uncertain. She never saw Lord Tyrion before this day.

"Of course, we have. I saw you in the town. You were on a cart, with a helmet on your head." Arya was agape. He recognized her. He was smirking to her. What was she supposed to say? "How did you manage to get back here so quickly, before us?"

Arya decided after some hesitation that it would be better to say the truth. "I came back from another gate."

He nodded. "Hmm. You’re quite resourceful, aren’t you? I like that. It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Arya."

He showed her the palm of his hand. He wanted to kiss her hand. Arya offered it on the side. He looked surprised, but she thought it was a little exaggerated. He shrugged in the end. "A shake of hands? Why not."

They shook hands. "Do you want me to kiss you hand instead?" she asked him.

"Arya!?" Her mother and Sansa almost shouted at the same time, but the Imp only grinned.

"No, I think shaking hands will be alright. I like you. You like my japes and you make good ones." He ruffled her hair and went to Bran. Finally, he was quite funny. Arya was laughing as he turned to her younger brothers.

"What’s you name?" he asked to the oldest of the two.

"Bran."

"Bran? I suppose it’s for Brandon."

"Aye, my lord."

"So, you are Brandon Stark. The man who built this castle. I have to say that I’m impressed. You made a good work."

Arya laughed again. Bran looked confused. "No… No. I’m not… I’m not this Brandon. I’m not
Brandon the Builder.”

“How sad. I would have liked to know how you managed to look so young after eight thousand years. But I’m glad to meet you all the same. Here, take my hand.” They shook hands. “Hmm. You have a firm grip. You’ll be strong enough to build castles later. Is that what you want to do?”

“I want to be a knight,” Bran said.

“A knight?” Lord Tyrion seemed to think about something. “Interesting. In this case, I could introduce you to my brother when he arrives in a few days.”

Bran’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Of course. I’m sure Jaime will be happy to meet a future fellow knight.”

He smiled at Bran, and Bran did too. Ser Jaime Lannister was Lord Tyrion’s older brother, the queen’s twin brother, and a member of the Kingsguard, one of the most renowned warriors in the Seven Kingdoms. Bran was obviously enthralled by the perspective of meeting him. The Imp patted his shoulder and turned to the last of Arya’s siblings.

“And you, what’s your name?” Rickon was almost the only one smaller than him.

“Rickon.”

“Rickon. We have similar names. Tyrion and Rickon. We have a lot in common, my boy. We both are the smallest and the youngest of our family.” He got a smile from Rickon and a shake of hands. “You can call me Tyrion, by the way, Rickon. You too, Bran, and you too Arya.” He made the inverted path and arrived before Sansa. “I think that for the others, my lord will be more suitable.”

He came back before Arya’s father. There were rumors about the Imp being a horrible man, a demon out of nightmares, but Arya mostly saw a kind man who made jokes. She was glad he wasn’t like the lords Sansa read about in her stupid stories. He was entertaining, while the others would be boring.

He was back before her father, and had a queer look. “Excuse me, my lord. Maybe I didn’t count well, but I believe one of your children is missing.”

A heavy silence fell. Of course, one of their father’s children was missing. Jon wasn’t among them. He was left behind, along with Theon, Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik among many. Arya looked at her brother who was behind her. He looked confused. When she looked at her father again to see what he would do, she noticed her mother’s distressed look. She never understood why she didn’t like Jon. He was their brother after all.

Finally, their father spoke. “Jon.” He didn’t say more.

Their brother stepped forward. Arya left him some space to get through, but Sansa didn’t move. She looked away, as if she didn’t know their brother. The Imp looked at him and slowly walked to Jon. He stopped a few feet away from him.

“So, Jon. It’s you.” He seemed to examine her brother. “You are the son of the Lord of Winterfell, for sure.” Lord Tyrion looked at Arya, then back to Jon. “You seem to have as much blood from the North than your sister Arya.” Arya thought she saw the beginning of a smile on Jon’s face. She smiled herself too. She knew she looked much more like Jon than her other brothers and Sansa. “Try to look less dull. You should be proud. You were named after a Hand of the King who maintained peace in the Seven Kingdoms for seventeen years. Glad to meet you, Jon.”
He offered a hand, and after a moment that looked like an eternity, Jon shook it. “It’s an honor, my lord,” he said.

The Imp turned back his attention to their father. Jon went back behind them. This time, Sansa stepped aside to let him pass just like Arya.

“The hospitality of Winterfell is yours, Lord Tyrion,” her father said.

“Thank you, Lord Stark. But where are my manners?” He looked behind him, and his wife came forward. Her smile reminded Arya too much of Sansa. She didn’t like it. “I present you my wife, Lady Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell.”

“My lord, my lady,” she said to Arya’s parents.

“My lady.” Her father bowed. “I met your father many years ago. He’s a good man.”

Lady Margaery didn’t look impressed. She only shrugged. “The last time I saw him, he was still complaining that you stole his victory at Storm’s End. But don’t worry. My father isn’t spiteful. He’s just an oaf, the way my grandmother puts it.”

She looked at all of them then, with a sweet smile that annoyed Arya. Arya could easily imagine her sister wearing the same clothes than Margaery Lannister and acting exactly the same way. That would be her style.

She turned her attention to the Lord of Winterfell. “If I may, my lord, we had a tiresome journey.”

“Of course,” Arya’s father said. “My men will show you your rooms.”

“Thank you.”

“There will be a feast tonight. You and all your men are invited,” said Arya’s mother.

The Lady of Casterly Rock nodded. She looked at the Imp next to her. “Go on. I’ll join you later.”

“As you wish, my love,” he said. He walked away, and Margaery remained alone with them. Their men began to unload, and there were many boxes and crates.

Margaery Lannister looked at the Lady Winterfell. “Excuse me, Lady Stark, but when we stopped at Riverrun, your father asked me to give you this.” She produced a piece of paper from her gown and handed it to Arya’s mother.

“What is it?” Arya’s mother asked. Lady Catelyn Stark took the letter. She looked afraid all of a sudden.

“I don’t know. I suppose he had a lot to tell you, and that he couldn’t only tell it with a raven.”

“Was he quite ill, when you were at Riverrun?”

“He had to keep bed, like my lord husband said. But I talked with him, and he didn’t seem so bad. Maybe you’ll learn more by reading his letter.” Lady Catelyn Stark stayed silent for a moment, looking at the letter. “I’ll see you later at dinner. I hope we’ll get to know each other better then,” she added for Arya and all her brothers and sister, still smiling sweetly. It was too much like Sansa. The Lady of Casterly Rock walked away. Arya wasn’t sure she would like to know her better.

They disbanded afterwards. After a moment, when only Jon was close to her, Arya burst into laughs.
“What is it?” he asked her.

“You saw them. She’s almost twice taller than him.”

He laughed with her. The rest of the day went normally. The Lannisters and their men were settling in the part of the castle that was used for guests. Arya wondered how they would manage to hold everyone inside the castle when the king and his own retinue would arrive. She didn’t really understand why the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock came here. She knew the Imp was the queen’s brother, so maybe he wanted to spend time with his sister, but why come to Winterfell before her? She didn’t complain too much. He seemed nice enough, but she was afraid she would get stuck with a second Sansa with his wife present here, wanting to know her better. There was also something else she feared.

“You’ve seen her dress, and the jewels she was wearing!”

Arya sighed. That was exactly what she feared. She was getting dressed, and unfortunately Jeyne had come to talk with Sansa in their bedroom. All they talked about was Margaery Lannister, as if they didn’t talk enough about her since she arrived. They were about to go to the feast, and Arya wished it was already over.

“Yes, they were beautiful,” said Sansa, admiration in her voice. She looked as if she was dreaming. “She must have fantastic dressmakers. I can’t wait to see the queen. She will certainly look even more wonderful.”

“Have you noticed the way her hair was braided? I wish I could braid my own the same way,” said Jeyne.

“Yes, it looks marvelous. How do you think she does it?”

“She must have people to brush them. Have you seen how many servants she has? I envy them. They have better dresses than ours, and they’re only servants. That’s so unfair.”

“I agree. But the king is coming soon. Maybe we’ll go to King’s Landing afterwards. I can’t wait to go there.”

“I want so much to be like her, later.”

“Me too.”

“OH, PLEASE SHUT UP!” Arya snapped. “You’ve been talking about this all day!”

Sansa replied immediately. “You’re just jealous of her.”

“Jealous? Me? I’m not the one talking about her jewels and her dress all the time as if I wanted to be in her stead. To me it looks like you’re the one who’s jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. I just admire her,” Sansa protested.

“Why? Because she’s wearing a necklace made of gold and because she has servants following her everywhere? Because she happens to be married to a great lord?”

“Not at all!”

“Would you like to be married with him, Jeyne? With the Imp? You would wear the same jewels and the same gowns that his wife has. That would be your fairy tale, everything you’ve ever
wanted,” said Arya with a grin.

“I would never marry such a man!” Sansa’s friend shouted.

“She’s got jewels, and dresses, and servants because she has money, and she has money because she is married to the Imp. You want to be like her? Then you want to be married to Tyrion Lannister.”

“I don’t! I would never marry the Imp!” Horror was plain on Jeyne’s face, and also on Sansa’s face. Both of them would never marry a dwarf.

“Perhaps I should tell Lady Lannister about that, if that’s what you think about her husband.”

“You… You won’t! I’ll tell Mother if you do.” This time, Sansa was the one to shout. Now fear had taken the place of disgust on her pretty face.

Arya liked to tease her sister. Sansa was so stupid. To trap her into her own dreams was very amusing, and it was just as easy with Jeyne.

“You envy me because you’re not as beautiful as I am, and because if the king offers our father to marry someone to Prince Joffrey, it will be me,” Sansa said.

Arya scoffed. “The only reason he will choose you is because you were born before me. That’s not as if you did anything for that. Go and live with your stupid prince. I’ll be rid of you.”

Arya ran off the chamber. She went to the smithy to look at Mikken’s work. She stayed there until the feast began. That was unfair. Sansa always got everything, and she did everything to remind everyone of the things she did well, even if she did it with subtlety. Truly, it made things even worse than if she openly bragged about it. Their mother always marvelled at Sansa’s needlework, but never congratulated Arya for riding a horse or making her sums well. Arya would be happy if Sansa got away, and with Jeyne if possible. No one would call her Horseface anymore, and she would be free of Sansa’s annoying presence and talents. However, if what they said around was true, her father could leave as well. Arya didn’t want their father to leave.

When the time came, Arya went to the feast. Her mother seemed to look disapprovingly at her dress. She probably had some soot on it, but Arya didn’t care. The feast was delicious. There was plenty to eat. Sadly, Arya had to sit with Sansa and Jeyne and the other ladies in Winterfell. She could feel Sansa’s disapproving look whenever she took something with her hands, or didn’t hold the right utensil with the right hand. She saw Jon at the other side of the Great Hall, sitting among squires, away from Robb and his other brothers. Arya never understood why Jon ate away from them during feasts while he always ate with them when there were no guests and no special events.

Sansa and Jeyne mostly talked in whispers, so Arya didn’t have to suffer too much of their commentaries on how marvelous the Lady of Casterly Rock was, and since their eyes were almost always on the dais where Lady Margaery was, they left Arya quiet. Arya felt her eyes drawn to the dais as well. She saw her mother talk a lot with Lady Margaery. The Imp also took part to the conversation, but her mother didn’t seem to like him. Her father didn’t talk a lot. Arya saw Tyrion Lannister laugh several times. She noticed something strange with his wife. There was something that looked different with her when they talked together. She didn’t know what it was, but she looked different, and her husband too.

At one moment, servants who weren’t from Winterfell, the ones that the Imp and his wife came with, went all over the Great Hall with jars and poured everyone a cup of wine that had a golden color. Arya tasted it. It wasn’t bad. It was better than the wine their father usually allowed them to drink. She managed to drink the whole thing. It was good.
She saw Lord Tyrion kiss Lady Margaery right after he finished his own cup and leave the dais. He walked out of the Hall. Where was he going? Sansa left her place not long after and came to the dais where she curtsied before the Lady Lannister. She had waited for the Imp to be gone to go and speak with his wife. As usual, Sansa preferred the company of boring people. Arya supposed this wasn’t a surprise since Sansa was boring as well. Couldn’t Sansa stop to act like a perfect lady for one moment and be her sister instead? Of course not. At another table, Arya noticed that Jon had risen too. Unlike Sansa, he didn’t go towards the dais. Their mother wouldn’t approve. He went to the door instead. Arya decided to follow him. It took time, among all the guests in the Great Hall. Some had begun to sing in a way Sansa certainly found horrible, but Arya liked it better.

Outside, from under an archway, Arya saw her brother smashing with his sword on a dummy. She started to move to join him. Maybe he could give her a few tricks.

“Is he dead yet?” Arya stopped in her movement. A little shape came out from the obscurity on the other side of the courtyard. Jon stopped to hit his target.

“My lord,” he said, bowing.

“No need for formalities, Jon Snow. That’s not as if there was someone else here.”

Arya stayed in the dark under the archway. She wasn’t sure what to do. “What are you doing out here?” her brother asked.

“I could ask you the same, but I’ll answer first. I needed a piss, and a drink.”

“Isn’t there enough wine inside?”

“Yes, there is. But Margaery doesn’t like to see me drink too much. She watches me closely.”

“You’re hiding from your wife to drink?”

“There was a common saying when my father lived. Tywin Lannister ruled the Seven Kingdoms, but was ruled at home by his lady wife. I suppose I’m keeping the tradition.”

Arya thought she heard Jon almost laugh at it. She had to admit that it was funny to see a lord, even a dwarf, receiving order from his wife. She remembered how she sent him away to stay with Arya’s mother when they arrived.

“But you, bastard, what are you doing outside?” Jon walked away. From where she stood, Arya could see he was angry. “Did I offend you? Sorry. You are the bastard though.”

“Lord Eddard Stark is my father.”

“That’s obvious. And Lady Stark is not your mother, making you the bastard.” Arya wanted to run and punch the Imp in the face. She hated that when her brother was called a bastard. “Let me give you some advice, bastard. Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor and it can never be used to hurt you.”

Jon now looked at the little lord again. “What the hell do you know about being a bastard?” Her mother would have berated Jon for speaking like this to a lord if she was there.

“All dwarves are bastards in their father’s eyes.”

“You are your mother’s trueborn son of a Lannister.”
“Am I?” He sounded quite sardonic. “You should bring back my lord father to life and tell him. He seemed to forget that quite often before he died. And my sister too.”

“You’re the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

“Yes, and if my father had had his way, my brother would be lord, my wife would be his wife, and I would be the Imp brother of the Warden of the West.”

“I suppose it’s better than to be the Kingslayer.”

The little lord had no reaction for a time, then he made a humorless laugh. “Remember this, boy. All dwarfs may be bastards, yet not all bastards need to be dwarfs. You’re called after a Hand who gave peace and prosperity to the Seven Kingdoms for nearly as long as my own father, which is no small feat. Your brother, the future Lord of Winterfell, is named after a king who spends his days whoring, drinking and eating, while his kingdoms are heading to ruin.”

“That’s quite cheering.” Jon sounded quite sarcastic.

“You didn’t tell me why you’re outside.”

“I needed some fresh air.”

“Some fresh air away from Lady Stark, I suppose?” Jon didn’t answer. “Don’t make that face. At least your father is a good man. The same can’t be said about mine. At least, it’s your father’s wife who keeps you away, not your own father, and your sisters love you. I can’t say the same about my sister the queen.” He raised a gourd. “To the Mother of Madness.” He walked away on that while drinking.

When the Imp walked close to her, he said something. “You should learn to hide better.” He didn’t look at her while he went back into the Hall, but it was certainly meant for her. There was no one else around. The doors of the Great Hall opened to let him go in. The light from within threw his shadow clear across the yard, and for just a moment Tyrion Lannister stood tall as a king. Then the door closed and the courtyard was in darkness again.

“Were you listening?” Jon had noticed her presence, but he didn’t seem angry.

“Sorry. I didn’t want to bother.”

“That’s alright.” He had come close and ruffled her hair. “What are you doing here?”

“Taking some fresh air.”

They shared a smile. “Away from who?”

“Sansa, Jeyne, and Lady Margaery, I think.”

“Lady Lannister doesn’t look that bad. She looks fine to me.”

“She looks like what Sansa wants to be.”

He smiled. “Don’t be that hard on Sansa. She’s our sister.”

“I just wish she was less… ladylike, sometimes.”

“Just like she would like you to be more ladylike. We should get back inside, before your mother starts to worry.”
He ruffled her hair again, and they walked together back to the feast.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought that if Tyrion had interactions with the other children of Ned Stark (aside from Jon) at Winterfell, he would probably get along better with Arya than with Sansa. They are both some sort of outcasts in this society and Arya would probably be much less indisposed by Tyrion's manners and japes than Sansa. Arya is almost much more curious about Tyrion than her sister. "Where's the Imp?"

Please review

Next chapter: Sansa
The introduction chapter of Sansa. This is the first time I write a chapter from Sansa's
POV before her father dies, back when Sansa is still an innocent girl who believes in
charming princes and valiant knights. I hope I'll give an appreciable characterization of
who she was at the time.

Sansa I

She saw Lord Tyrion leave the high table. Sansa had never seen someone like him. He made her
think of Hodor. He was small while Hodor was tall as a giant, and he could speak when Hodor
could only say his name, but he was strange. He didn’t behave like a lord should, and he didn’t look
like a lord should either. Lords were supposed to be handsome and tall, to speak well to the ladies
and to have good manners. Instead, this one mocked everyone and everything, made japes and
comments of doubtful taste. Sansa had to admit his compliments about how she looked much like her
mother and that she would break many hearts later were kind, but they weren’t done in the right way.
Worse, he wasn’t rebuked when Arya shook his hand, and even less when she said she could kiss
his hand. He even allowed Sansa’s younger siblings to call him by his name, and not by his title. He
looked like everything but a lord.

Sansa didn’t know what to make of Lord Tyrion Lannister. She felt uncomfortable to the prospect of
being in his presence. He could laugh at her, and she wouldn’t know what to do in such
circumstances. He was a lord, after all. What was she supposed to do when a great lord japed
inappropriately in her presence?

His wife, on the other hand, was everything Sansa thought she would be. Lady Margaery Lannister
was a beautiful woman, a great lady, kind, good-mannered, though she said something about her
father when she arrived that puzzled Sansa. Still, she was exactly like the great ladies out of the
stories. Sansa had to admit she could have confused her with the queen, had she not known who was
coming today. The king, the queen, the princes, the princess and their retinue were riding for
Winterfell in this very moment. They would arrive in a few days. The Lord and the Lady of Casterly
Rock had, by some fortuitous event, found themselves to visit Winterfell about the same time, but
they arrived before the royal party. Sansa had nothing against it. They would have two welcoming
feasts this way.

Sansa was supposed to present herself before the Lady of the Westerlands during dinner, but she was
afraid of being introduced in the presence of her lord husband. Now he was gone. Sansa exchanged
a look with Jeyne. They both smiled in conspiracy. Sansa stood up and walked to the dais. The
Lannister men were roaring at their table.

Before she could realize it, Sansa was standing before Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of
Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands. Her hair was curled in a way Sansa never saw before,
and she had a braid arranged in such a way... Sansa felt she was insignificant next to this woman.
She was discussing with her lady mother when Sansa arrived, but she turned to look at Sansa the
moment she stood before them. Sansa made a light curtsy.
“Lady Sansa,” were the first words the Lady of Casterly Rock addressed to her. “I’m glad to finally meet you. I heard some tales about you when I was in the south and I was eager to see you in person.”

Sansa almost reddened, though she managed to keep her composure. She didn’t know people were talking about her in the other kingdoms. She thought about a story she read not long ago, about a beautiful young woman kept inside a tower and that all knights kept trying to save. A charming prince finally succeeded where all the others failed.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, Lady Lannister,” Sansa replied.

“You’re very beautiful, you know.” Sansa couldn’t control her smile. “My lord husband is right. You take a lot after your lady mother. Please, approach.”

Sansa did as she was told. The Lady of Casterly Rock looked at her closely. Did she see something inappropriate on her? Sansa feared for a moment that Arya ruined something on her dress that she didn’t notice. Her sister always did everything to humiliate her.

“Did you make this dress yourself?” Lady Lannister finally asked.

“Yes, my lady.”

“May I have a closer look? Give me your arm.” Sansa did as she was told. She felt the gaze of her mother on her. Lady Stark wouldn’t accept any misdemeanor. Lady Lannister passed her hand on the fabric for some time before releasing Sansa’s arm. “This is very well made. You have a talent.”

“Sansa was always very good at sewing, from the age of three,” said Sansa’s mother.

“I wish I could say the same. I was never much good when it came to embroidery. I’m better at dancing. You know how to dance, Lady Sansa?”

“I do, my lady. I can sing, too.”

“And do you play music?”

“The harp and the bells.”

Lady Lannister looked quite impressed. “Well, you really are a talented girl. I can’t wait to see you play or sing.”

“It would be my pleasure, my lady.”

The Lady of Casterly Rock was smiling fondly at her. “Would you have some time tomorrow, Lady Sansa? We could sew together, and you could show me a few tricks.”

That wasn’t something Sansa expected. She looked at her mother, unsure of what she should say. Her mother discreetly inclined her head, smiling all the while. “Of course, my lady. I would be very pleased.”

“Very well. What about next morning? Is there a good place for this?” The last question was for Sansa’s lady mother.

“The glass garden. It’s quite warm inside.”

“Then, I’ll see you there. I’ll bring a few friends with me. You could bring your sister and your own friends as well, Lady Sansa.”
“Yes, my lady. Thank you, my lady.”

Sansa turned away on these words. She needed to remind herself all her courtesies to not jump all around. Lady Lannister had invited her to spend time with her and the ladies following her. Sansa couldn’t believe it. That was exactly like in the songs. She sat down with Jeyne.

“And? What did she say? How is she?” her friend asked her.

“She invited us to sew with her tomorrow,” said Sansa, all excited.

Jeyne was all smile. “Really? I can’t believe it. But what dress am I going to wear? This is my best, and I can’t look like that before Lady Lannister.”

“Don’t worry. We will make you look wonderful, you’ll see.” Sansa had to reassure Jeyne. As a lady, it was her duty to reassure her friend. Sansa looked among the Lannister retinue. There were a few women, all richly dressed. Sansa wished she could have a gown like these.

She noticed that the Imp had returned. He sat back at the seat he left not long ago and kissed his lady wife. Septa Mordane always told her that a lord and a lady should never kiss in public. Sansa herself never saw her parents share a kiss. Lord Tyrion Lannister spent his time making jokes Sansa couldn’t hear. Looking at the Imp, Sansa wondered how Lady Lannister could live with him. He was small, and was all the opposite of his wife. Her own lord father looked so lordly in comparison. His wife had to be indeed a very great lady to live with him without showing any sign she disliked it. Instead, she spoke with him and laughed with him, though in a more restrained way.

All of a sudden, something splashed on her cheek. Sansa turned to the other side of the table to see her sister holding a spoon, an uncontrollable laugh on her face.

“Arya! It’s not funny!”

Her sister had come back and thrown smashed potatoes at her. She didn’t have the right to do this. This was Sansa’s favorite dress and she had worked so hard to make it. Now it would be all ruined. Jeyne helped to clean her cheeks while people were laughing all around. She looked at the dais to see the Imp laughing without control. His wife, even if she was more discreet, laughed as well. Arya had spoiled everything. Robb came to bring a groaning Arya out of table. He should have brought her out before.

Sansa spent the rest of the feast talking to no one. It was so unfair. She had made a good impression to Lady Margaery, and Arya ruined it all within a few seconds. Couldn’t her sister behave like a lady once in her life? When their guests left the high table, the Lady of Casterly Rock didn’t spare a look at her.

Back in her rooms later, once she had put on her night dress and that her handmaiden was gone, she said to her now sleeping sister what she thought of her. “I hate you.”

“I’m awake, you know.” Arya’s reply surprised her. She really thought she was asleep. She shouldn’t have said that. A lady should never say such things, especially not to her sister.

“Sorry, Arya. I didn’t mean it.”

Her sister scoffed and went back to sleep. Sansa wished so much that things were better between them. Arya was her only sister, but she didn’t know how to behave. Couldn’t Arya be sweet? Everything would be so simple. No, instead Arya preferred to ride, get dirty in the smithy, the mud and outside the walls of Winterfell. All that was Arya’s fault. Sansa tried to help her, to correct her, to make her in a passable if not fine lady, but there seemed to be nothing to do. Jeyne shouldn’t call
her Horseface, but she wasn’t entirely wrong. Arya was more a horse than a lady. She wanted so much for things to be different between them, but she couldn’t see how. Arya was impossible to manage.

She fell asleep and dreamed of Margaery Lannister. They were sewing together, and everything was fine and perfect, until Arya jumped in with a horse and covered them all with mud. Then she dreamed of the prince. He had come to Winterfell, and he looked perfectly like a prince ought to be. He spoke with ceremony and great courtesy to her, calling her my lady, and everything was perfect again, until Arya stole his sword from the scabbard at his belt and ran away with it. The prince ran after her, Sansa being left all alone in the courtyard.

“Wake up, my ladies. It’s time to get up.” Septa Mordane’s voice got Sansa out of her sleep. As usual, Arya groaned. “Arya, a lady does not groan,” the septa lectured her.

“Is a lady allowed to do anything?” her little sister asked, sounding annoyed.

“Get up and prepare yourself. It is very important that you are presentable today.”

“Why?”

“Because you are to spend time with Lady Lannister this morning.”

Sansa realized she forgot to warn Arya about it. Now Septa Mordane would pay for her omission.

“Ahh.”

“Arya, what did I say?” lectured the septa again.

“Arya,” tried Sansa, “Lady Lannister invited us both to sew with her this morning in the glass garden. We cannot refuse her.”

“I would rather spend time with the Imp,” retorted her sister.

“Don’t call Lord Lannister this way.” Arya well earned a new rebuke from their septa.

“Why not? That’s how everyone calls him, and I don’t think he would mind. He didn’t when I shook his hand.”

“Be glad he didn’t. He would have been in his rights to not ever speak to you again, or even ask your lord parents to not allow you at the feast.”

“Well, he didn’t. And at least he’s kind with Jon.”

That was another mystery for Sansa. Lord Tyrion Lannister had been very kind with Arya, despite her misbehavior, and with Jon too. He even asked to be introduced to him, a bastard, while he mocked her mother’s family, Robb and even Sansa herself to an extent.

“It’s not with Jon we’re going to spend time now, Arya, nor with Lord Tyrion,” Sansa said. “We will be spending time with Lady Margaery Lannister, the Lady of the Westerlands. We must behave well this time. You cannot make any false step like yesterday.”

“What did I do?” asked her sister.

Sansa felt herself grow angry despite her better sense. “You pitched food at me! You ruined my dress! You humiliated me in front of everyone!”

“Oh, I see. I mustn’t embarrass you in front of Lady Lannister.”
“Stop now, both of you,” said the septa. “Get ready. You must be in the glass garden before long.”

Arya only did the minimum before she slipped away. Sansa, on her side, combed her hair the best way she could and put the second nicest dress she could find after Arya soiled the first one. When Sansa went down to the Great Hall, Arya wasn’t there. Bran told her she ate quickly and left, almost without a word. Sansa didn’t linger for the breakfast, but she didn’t press herself. It wasn’t fitting for a lady.

Jeyne joined her and Sansa had, once again, to reassure her. She was afraid that her appearance before Lady Margaery wouldn’t be good enough. Sansa was afraid that the great lady wouldn’t look so well at her after yesterday’s accident. She secretly hoped that Arya wouldn’t come. When the time came, Sansa left the Great Hall with Jeyne and Beth Cassel, Ser Rodrik’s little daughter.

Sansa didn’t know if it would be better to find Arya and risk to be late, or to go immediately to the glass garden and take a chance to believe she wouldn’t make her dream of last night a reality. In the end, she didn’t have to choose since Arya was in the courtyard with a very small man. Sansa recognized Lord Tyrion after some time. He and Arya were close to the practice grounds where Robb and Jon were sparring together. Arya always skipped her lessons to see them fight.

“I never understood why I couldn’t wield a sword,” Sansa heard her say from the distance.

“Because you’re a lady,” replied the small lord.

“I don’t want to be a lady.”

“Do you think I want to be a dwarf? We do not choose who we are, but like Margaery says, we must make the best of our circumstances. Being a lady has its advantages, Arya, just like being a dwarf has its own.”

“What advantages?”

“People underestimate you when you’re a dwarf or a lady. They don’t expect you to be clever, or to be a danger for them. This served me well when I played tricks to my sister.”

“You played tricks to your sister?”

“I did. Just like you did to your own sister yesterday. One day at a feast, I noticed a misplaced plank, and my sister and I just happened to sit at the opposite extremities of it. I put all my weigh on it. I never found my sister funnier than when she was entirely covered of turtle stew.”

They both laughed. To Sansa, it was everything but funny. Cersei Lannister was Lord Tyrion’s sister, the queen of the Seven Kingdoms. You couldn’t do that to the queen. She stood away. She didn’t want to talk with the Imp.

“You know, when I really am angry with Sansa, I hide sheep shit in her mattress.” Sansa flushed red. “She never knows where the smell comes from. I get the shit out after some time, then put some back when I’m angry again.”

The Lord of Casterly Rock laughed with Arya. Now Sansa knew where that stench she sometimes had in her rooms came from. She would say that to their mother. “Poor Lady Sansa. That must hurt her sensibility a lot.”

“She’s so stupid, always there to tell me what I should do, and how, and where, and when… Always saying I don’t do the things correctly.”
“At least you have a sister who cares about you, Arya. I wish I could say the same about mine. I would rather have a sister like yours than the one I have actually.”

That was so misplaced. He couldn’t talk this way about the queen. Sansa also felt outraged he didn’t rebuke Arya for speaking ill of her. A young woman with a green gown and brown of hair appeared at this moment before the Lord of Casterly Rock.

“Lord Tyrion,” she said.

“Lady Sera. How are you today? I hope you don’t miss your friend Mira too much,” the Imp replied.

“I’m well, my lord. Everything is fine. I wish Mira was here, but I don’t blame her for visiting her family.”

“It’s true she doesn’t have much opportunity to see them.” Lord Tyrion turned to Arya again, but Sansa had the impression he looked at her for a short time too. “I think it’s time you see Margaery. Please be kind with her, Arya. My wife may not fight with swords, but she’s gentle. She’s not that different from your lady mother. Now, I have to see your father.”

Lord Tyrion ruffled her hair, then bowed to her and left. Arya looked around and seemed to realize that Sansa was close.

“My ladies,” said Lady Sera. Sansa thought she remembered her to be in the service of Lord Tyrion’s wife. “Lady Margaery Lannister is waiting for you.”

Sansa and her friends followed the young woman. Arya followed them as well. None dared to speak. Jeyne and Beth were anxious to meet in person Lady Margaery, and Sansa was afraid of the impression she would make after last night, and the impression her sister would make. Arya said nothing either. They walked through the glass garden, all warm inside thanks to the hot springs. Sansa had often wondered if it was warm like that in the south. She may ask Lady Margaery about that. No, she couldn’t. She would have to limit herself to the usual courtesies, to not risk to aggravate the things more than they already were.

In a square open space, the Lady of Casterly Rock was waiting for them. Two other girls were with her. They looked to be twins, with blond golden hair and green eyes. Sansa noticed that the gown Lady Lannister wore today was lighter than the one she had when she arrived. It even let her arms bare. She welcomed them much warmly, even Arya. She didn’t seem to remember at all the events of last night. Sansa decided to not make any mention of it.

Soon, they were all sitting together, working with needles. Sansa had the place of honor next to Lady Lannister. When she asked her, Sansa showed her how she worked on her embroidery. Sansa noticed, not without pride, that she was indeed better than the Lady of Casterly Rock at needlework. Lady Margaery’s works were nice enough, but she lacked the skill to finely do it. Sansa spent some time showing her how to do it. It was strange to teach something to a great lady, but Sansa was glad she could. After all, the king was coming soon, and everyone talked that he was planning to make her father his new Hand, and probably to marry his son to Sansa, or his daughter to Robb. Sansa wished the better for Robb, but she hoped fervently that the king would offer to marry her to Prince Joffrey. She already saw him every night in her dreams.

“You really do it well, Sansa,” Lady Margaery said. “I’m impressed. I saw no one in Highgarden who could stitch like that. Or in Casterly Rock, for that matter.”

“How is it, my lady? I mean, Casterly Rock, and Highgarden. How are they?” That was the first real question Sansa dared to ask to the Lady of Casterly Rock since they arrived. Everything was going
well. Arya stayed silent in her corner, but she didn’t cause any trouble.

“Well, how to say?” She hesitated. “The two are wonderful places. The Rock is a mountain more than a castle, so large that you can explore it all your life and still ignore some of its secrets. It is divided in two hills, one with the main buildings, the Great Hall, the armory, the godwood, the sept, the yards, the rookery… But the northern hill is more like a place for pleasure and relaxation. When we want to get away from the life at court, my husband and I go there. The castle is next to the Sunset Sea, so we can watch beautiful sunsets and have the scent of the sea coming to us in permanence. Every room is decorated with ornaments made of gold and silver, and the city of Lannisport in its shadow is beautiful too. Ships from all around the world stop there to sell their goods in its markets. I often go there to buy a few things.”

Casterly Rock looked like a wonderful place out of the stories as Lady Margaery kept talking about it. Sansa found it odd that the Lady of Casterly Rock went to buy things herself in Lannisport. Why not let her servants do it in her stead? But who was Sansa to question that? Lady Lannister was a great lady, and she had the right to do as she wished.

Lady Lannister spoke for a very long time about Casterly Rock, but she spoke even longer about Highgarden. It was the place where she was born, and it looked even more wonderful than Casterly Rock. The gardens, the festivals, the feasts, the tourneys, the knights, the godwood, the sept, the white stone walls and towers, the fields were fruits and vegetables grew everywhere… While talking about her home, Lady Margaery asked questions to Sansa about her own. Sansa did her best to describe Winterfell, but it looked dull in comparison with the two high seats of the south where Margaery Lannister lived. If the Lady of Casterly Rock thought so, she showed no sign of it and looked quite interested by what Sansa told her. Sansa was impressed by her. She really was a true lady, all courtesy and smile.

“Have you ever heard about my brother, Ser Loras Tyrell?” she asked Sansa. “The Knight of Flowers?”

“Yes, I have.” Everyone in Winterfell had heard about how Ser Jaime Lannister had been defeated by the young Knight of Flowers at the tourney organized for Prince Joffrey’s name day. “How is he?”

“Quite handsome, I have to admit it. Loras is two years younger than me, but he’s already promised to become a great knight. There are many young women who are keeping an eye on him,” she added.

The Lady Cerenna and the Lady Myrielle giggled together. Sansa wished she had been there for the tourney, and that she had seen the final confrontation between Ser Jaime and Ser Loras.

“What about Prince Joffrey? How was he? How does he look like?” Sansa wanted to know more about her prince.

“There isn’t much to say,” answered the Lady of Casterly Rock. “I didn’t get to know him quite well. With his name day and the tourney, he had too many people around him. I spent more time with his brother and his sister, Prince Tommen and Princess Myrcella. They are very kind and sweet children. You would like the princess I think.”

“I’m sure I’ll be pleased to meet her.”

“My lord husband loves them too. He’s very close to them. I’m afraid Prince Joffrey is not so fond of his uncle like his brother and his sister. Tommen loves cats very much. He spends a lot of time playing with them. I gave him one when I visited him.”
The idea of a prince playing with cats was quite foreign to Sansa, but Prince Tommen was certainly very young, of an age with Bran. Joffrey was older, certainly very different and gallant, but Lady Margaery didn’t seem to know much about him. That was a pity.

“Are you done with your stitches, Lady Arya?”

Lady Lannister had noticed that Arya had stopped to sew and looked everywhere. She didn’t participate to the conversation and looked bored.

“Aye.” Arya shouldn’t answer like this. A Lady said yes, not aye. Furthermore, she said it on a gloomy tone.

“May I have a look at it?”

Arya didn’t refuse and Lady Lannister stood up to look at Arya’s work. Septa Mordane once said Arya had the hands of a blacksmith, and it was true. Arya had no talent for sewing. She was only good at riding, and she often rode away from them in a run when they went outside the gates. Sansa prayed to the Old Gods and the New Gods that Arya wouldn’t ruin everything.

The Lady of Casterly Rock took the cloth Arya was working on and looked at it. She smiled. “How old are you, Lady Arya?”

“Eleven, my lady.” Sansa almost sighed in relief. Arya remembered her courtesies.

“This looks like the type of embroidery I made when I was your age.”

“Really?” Arya looked dumbfounded, and Sansa was too.

“Of course. Do you think I knew how to sew at the time? I didn’t. Even now, I’m not that talented. I often skipped my sewing lessons.”

Sansa exchanged a look with Jeyne. That was so unexpected. Cerenna and Myrielle Lannister were giggling in silence with Lady Sera. Lady Lannister had allowed her handmaiden to join them.

“My grandmother, the Lady Olenna Tyrell, is not very good at embroidery either,” Lady Margaery resumed. “One day, she decided to run away from one of her embroidery lessons, and she bumped into someone while going back to her chambers. The next morning, this someone asked for her hand. I’m quite happy she didn’t like embroidery, or else I may not be there.”

The ladies accompanying Lady Lannister all burst into laughs, and both Jeyne and Beth joined them. So that was how Lady Lannister’s grandmother had met Lord Luthor Tyrell, the father of the actual Lord of Highgarden Mace Tyrell, who was the father of Lady Margaery and Ser Loras. Sansa wondered if that would be how she would meet her future husband, in a corridor, at the moment she expected the less, or in a more official way, with formal presentations.

“Don’t worry, Lady Arya,” said one of the twins, stopping her giggling. “One of our cousins stitch so badly that it looks more like a cobweb than sewing.”

“If you’re talking about Joy, then you could say her name, Cerenna,” commented Lady Margaery. She came back to her seat beside Sansa.

“I’m sure Lady Joy will get better with time,” offered Sansa.

Her comment was followed by new giggles from the Lannister twins. “Lady Joy?” She thought it was Lady Cerenna who spoke. She seemed to be the one to talk the most. “She’s not really a lady,
“Joy Hill is the daughter of Ser Gerion Lannister,” intervened Lady Margaery. “Ser Gerion was the favorite uncle of Lord Tyrion, and the brother of the previous Lord of Casterly Rock.”

Hill. That was the name given to bastards in the Westerlands. Snow, Waters, Rivers, Flowers, Storm, Sand, Pyke, Hill. All different names used for boys and girls who had highborn parents, but were born out of marriage. Sansa had wondered some time ago if Arya was a bastard. She and Sansa were so different, and Arya looked like Jon. Her mother had assured her that Arya was her sister as much as Robb, Bran and Rickon were her brothers. Sansa’s mother was always distant with Jon. Sansa regretted that he was a bastard, but there was nothing to do about it. She had to keep her distance from her half-brother, though she remained in good terms with him. Truth be told, she liked him more than Arya, and she pitied him. He was sometimes so shy that Sansa told him what he should do and how he should behave in front of a lady. These times were funny in some way, and Jon never mocked her. He was always kind, and tried his best, unlike Arya.

“Does Joy sew with you?” asked Arya to the Lannister ladies, a little too rude.

“She does,” confirmed the Lady of the Westerlands. “Your half-brother Jon spars with your brother Robb. Do you think this is any different in the Westerlands or the Reach?”

“It’s not,” added Lady Sera. “Someone isn’t thrown away because he has the wrong father or the wrong mother.”

They kept sewing for some more time, but at some moment Lady Lannister decided they needed to take a little walk. She told Sera and the Lannister twins to accompany Arya, Jeyne and Beth. Sansa had the chance and the honor to walk with the Lady of the Westerlands all alone. This excited her even more than everything else since the Lannisters arrived. The embroidery session had gone very well. Even Arya’s bad stitches proved to be almost a blessing in the end. They walked in silence for some time.

“This is a very beautiful garden,” Lady Margaery said.

“Yes, it is, my lady. I sometimes walk there,” Sansa said.

“You do love gardens, don’t you?”

“I do, my lady.”

“I’m sure you would love the gardens in Casterly Rock and Highgarden. Perhaps I could ask your parents to let you accompany me when I travel back there.”

“You would? Hmm… That would be a great pleasure for me, my lady.”

“Call me Margaery, please. There are only the two of us here, and anyway there are some rumors that we could become related before long.”

Sansa flushed. “These are only stories.”

“Stories can be false… or true.” She smiled in a conniving way, and Sansa couldn’t do anything else but follow. “Have you ever left Winterfell, Sansa?”

“No. Not really. I sometimes rode around, but nothing more.” Arya was the one to travel with their father most of the time. Sansa preferred to stay here and learn under Septa Mordane’s and her lady mother’s guidance. It was more important.
“I would like to go to the town outside, the one you call the Winter Town. Would you like to come with me in the afternoon?”

“I’m afraid I can’t, my lady. I have lessons to attend to.” It was Arya’s style to skip lessons, but not Sansa’s.

“Of course. By the way, I told you to call me by my name.”

“Sorry, my… Margaery.” Sansa rectified at the last moment. She wasn’t used to call a great lady only by her name. The Lady of Casterly Rock smiled fondly at her, then looked at her right.

“Are these winter roses?” she asked.

The blue flowers emerged from the earth on meters. “Yes, they are.”

She caressed the petals of one. “I wanted to have some at Casterly Rock, but the weather doesn’t allow the gardeners to cultivate them. Do you think your lady mother would mind if I took one?”

“No, I’m sure she wouldn’t.”

The Lady of Casterly Rock took it and smelled it deeply. “Sweet.” She kept it in her hands and looked again at Sansa. They resumed their walk. “I’m sure you would love the gardens in the south.”

“I’m very eager to see them.”

“I’m surprised you never left your home, at your age. At five, I was already travelling through the Reach with my parents, and since I got married, I spent more time on the road than at the Rock.”

“The Rock?”

“That’s how we call Casterly Rock, sometimes, between Lannisters.”

“Well, I’m sure I will have my time to see the Seven Kingdoms. Margaery,” she added in the end.

“You should really come with me. I have to go back to Highgarden anyway, but we will stop at Casterly Rock on our way, and even at Riverrun, your mother’s home. I’m sure you would like it.”

“I would, my lady. But it is to my lord father and my lady mother to decide.”

“Yes, you’re right. You called me my lady again.”

Sansa rebuked herself inside. “Why are you going back to Highgarden? Aren’t you the Lady of Casterly Rock?”

“A cousin of mine is getting married. Willas Tyrell. We were very close in our childhood. He’s like a second brother to me. He’s marrying a handmaiden of mine.”

“Is he marrying Lady Sera?” Sansa asked, curious all of a sudden, by the talking on marriage.

“No. Sera is not betrothed. It’s another of my handmaidens, a dear friend of mine. I wish I could introduce you to her, but she’s visiting her family right now.”

They kept walking, discussing about that thing and another. They had a very pleasant time, and to the opposite of Sansa’s dreams, Arya didn’t come on a horse to spoil everything. Sansa got used to calling Lady Lannister only Margaery after a time. She felt very privileged to call this way one of the greatest ladies in the world. She wondered if the queen would allow her to do the same when she
would arrive. She reflected that Lord Tyrion said to Rickon, Bran and Arya to call him by his name as well. Maybe he and his wife were not as different as Sansa believed.

“Tell me, Sansa, is everything all right between you and your sister, the lady Arya?”

Sansa was surprised by the question. She didn’t expect that. “Yes, everything is all right.”

“Are you sure? I could feel a little strife between you this morning, and last night at the feast too.”

Lady Margaery had an inquisitive look. Sansa couldn’t avoid the subject. “We… We have differences. That’s all.”

“I have many differences with my brother. It doesn’t stop me from loving him. As for my husband… My marriage would be an ordeal if I let our differences get in the way. You have to look at us standing together.”

The Lady of Casterly Rock laughed about it, and Sansa timidly joined her. It wouldn’t do to not laugh when the Lady of the Westerlands did. “We have a few quarrels sometimes. Nothing serious.”

“When I had quarrels with my brother, we made peace after an hour at most. It didn’t stretch over the next day.”

Lady Margaery Lannister had a sad and concerned expression upon her face. Sansa tried to explain. “Arya… she doesn’t behave well, sometimes. I’m trying to tell her, but she doesn’t listen, and… And she makes things she finds funny when they’re not.”

“Like when she ruined your dress. I saw her throwing food at you at the feast.”

“That was my favourite dress. I had worked on it for hours.”

Sansa looked at the stones on the ground. If only Arya understood and stopped mocking her. Jeyne and Beth mocked Arya sometimes, and although Sansa was tempted to join them from time to time, she never did. Se never gave any cause to Arya to behave so horribly with her.

“You know, Sansa, my husband has a sister, and truth be told, they hate each other. When I met the queen in King’s Landing for the first time, I tried to mend the fences between them, only to find out that she had no wish to get along with her brother. Tyrion seldom talks about it, but he regrets it. I know he does. He would like his sister to love him, and to understand him, instead of always looking at him as if he was a monster.” Sansa understood to some point. She wished Arya could understand and love her too. “I never had a sister, Sansa, and Tyrion has one, but he lost her a long time ago. Don’t lose Arya.”

“I don’t want to lose her, but she… she’s impossible.” How could she explain that? She couldn’t find a way to get things well between them. Arya was everything a lady shouldn’t be, and she refused to be anything a lady should be.

“She ruined your favorite dress last night, you told me.”

“Yes, she did.” Sansa heard some anger piercing through her voice. She had made this dress especially for Lady Lannister’s arrival.

“You can get another one, or even make a new one, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course, but…”
“Can you get another sister?” The question startled Sansa. “Can you replace Arya like you can replace a gown? Is a dress worth losing your sister?”

Sometimes, Sansa wished she could replace Arya, but it was true, she couldn’t replace her. Her father refused to give them separate rooms when Sansa asked him, and he refused because they couldn’t live together.

“No,” Sansa answered. “But… that’s not only the dress. She…”

“Are all the little quarrels you had enough to sacrifice her? Arya is your only sister, Sansa. You won’t get another one. If you lose her, you are unlikely to ever get her back. Is a ruined dress or a wrong behavior or a couple of unwanted jokes worth losing someone of your own blood?”

Sansa thought about that. It was true. The way it went, there could be a permanent break between her and Arya. Sansa didn’t wish it. She wanted Arya to be her sister, but they were so different that she almost felt sometimes that they were no sisters at all. And yet, they had good memories together. She remembered a snowball fight they had years ago. Arya and Bran had ambushed her when she emerged from the keep one morning and thrown dozens at her. Sansa had chased Arya through the stables and around the kitchen until she slipped on some ice. Arya had come back to see if she was hurt, only to throw another snowball at her face when Sansa told her she wasn’t. Sansa then had grabbed her sister’s leg and rubbed snow in her hair. They were both laughing when Jory pulled them apart later. There had been good times between them, and Sansa had loved them.

As she kept walking with Lady Lannister, Sansa thought she should try to make things better between her and Arya. After all, Arya wasn’t evil. She laughed at Sansa, but Sansa did as well, even if that was less often, and she never really tried to stop Jeyne from calling her little sister Horseface, even if she knew that wasn’t kind, or to stop the other mockery towards her sister. Arya was two years younger than her. Her sister wouldn’t marry before long. Maybe she could allow some violations of courtesies from time to time. After all, in the stories, there were often women who tried to ruin the life of the lady or the princess, but what Arya did was nothing in comparison to what these women did. She would try to mend the fences between her and Arya. She had to. If the Lady of Casterly Rock said so, it had to be the right thing to do.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Eddard
Lord Eddard Stark was sitting in his solar, going through a recent report that was sent by Jeor Mormont. Ned had met the Old Bear on several occasions in the past. They met when the man was still Lord of Bear Island, back when Ned was only the second son of Lord Rickard Stark, both at Winterfell and at the lord’s castle. When he joined the Night’s Watch to let his son rule Bear Island, the contacts Ned had with the man became sparser. The last time they met was a few years ago, when Ned returned Longclaw to him at Castleblack, after his son went to exile for selling thieves into slavery. Jeor Mormont by then had become the 997th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. It was obvious that the old man was hurt and grieved by the actions of his son, though he tried not to show it.

Ned respected Jeor Mormont. He was a man of integrity and honor, and wasn’t to blame for his son’s errors. Jorah Mormont broke the law, and instead of facing the consequences of his crimes, he fled. Ned didn’t understand how the young man who was anointed a knight by Robert for his bravery during Balon Greyjoy’s rebellion had turned into a slave trader, only to satisfy the desires of his wife. Still, Ned’s opinion of the Old Bear hadn’t changed in the slightest after the accident. The man was honorable and true, caring for his men, a capable commander, and he defended the Wall very well during the last years. Benjen also had a deep respect for him. However, the report the Lord Commander just sent to Ned left him puzzled, and frightened.

_I received the raven you sent to me, my lord, and I am deeply preoccupied. This man was a seasoned ranger, not prone to desertion. Your brother knew him very well. We couldn’t find his companions’ dead bodies._

_We’ve captured more and more wildlings in the last months, trying to travel south, whether by getting around Eastwatch-by-the-Sea in boats or by climbing the Wall. They say they’ve seen the dead, as our man did right before he died. This summer has lasted for years. It is the longest in living memory. Mance Rayder is gathering an army north of the Wall. We might need your help very soon._

Ned didn’t think the Old Bear would lie, and he was certainly no more mad than Benjen, which meant he wasn’t mad at all. But the ranger Ned executed, what he said was nonsense. The White Walkers hadn’t been seen for eight thousand years. They were a legend, as much as Bran the Builder was, probably. And yet… If Mance Rayder, who styled himself as King-Beyond-the-Wall, this traitor to the Night's Watch, was gathering an army, he certainly planned to do the same than his six predecessors. Ned may have to call his banners if he ever marched on the Wall. Robert hadn’t chosen the right time to ride for Winterfell. Ned would be needed here soon. His place was in the North.
Cat came in at this moment, taking Ned out of his thoughts. He folded the report and put it aside. He would think about it later.

“Are all the preparations over?” he asked.

“Yes, they are.” She sat down before his desk, but Ned decided to join her by her side. He took her hand in his.

“I’m sorry to have burdened with all this. Especially with your father’s news.”

“That’s not your fault.”

She looked down. Cat hid it well, but she was shattered by the letter that Lady Lannister gave to her when she arrived. The Lady of Casterly Rock spoke the truth. Hoster Tully was indeed ill. He was very ill. The maesters didn’t give him more than a year to live. Cat’s father was a good man, and Ned respected him as a man, as a lord and as a father. At least he would die in his bed, unlike Ned’s own father, and his brother.

“Maybe I should have shut our gates to the Lannisters. This would have saved you some work. You would only have to care about the royal party,” he said with a chuckle.

Cat smiled in return, but it didn’t last long. “In truth, the royal party was easier to prepare than the Lannisters. Lady Margaery has been of great help with her people. She did almost half the work for me.”

“She really helped you?”

“Yes, a lot. I almost expected her to spend her days doing nothing, with all her jewels, all her needs attended by her servants, but it seems I was wrong. I never saw someone so active. She visits the Winter Town every day, helps with the preparations for the king’s arrival, and finds time to visit Winterfell and spend time with Arya and Sansa all the same. I wonder how she does.”

Ned had shared the opinion of his wife when the Lannisters had arrived. Lady Margaery Lannister was the daughter of Mace Tyrell, who was already called the Fat Flower when Ned met him at Storm’s End fifteen years ago. To the opposite of her father, she was slender, and also quite pretty. However, she was charged with jewels and wore thick gowns made out of costly fabrics. Ned thought she might be doing nothing of her days, just like Cat said. After all, she was the Lady of Casterly Rock, thus the woman living in the most luxurious way in all the Seven Kingdoms, and she had grown up in Highgarden, which was almost as luxurious. It turned out she wasn’t at all what they believed at first sight. For Ned, this was a relief, seeing how Sansa looked up at her. He didn’t want his daughter to take for an example a woman who spent her days doing nothing. He may have to revise his opinion on Lady Lannister, especially considering how kind and helpful she was with Cat after bringing her the news of her father’s illness. Still, Ned didn’t know what to make of the presence of the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock. Why were they here at all?

“I think I will go to Riverrun as soon as the king and his entourage leave. I must see my father,” his wife said.

“Of course. If you want, you can go before they leave. Robert won’t be displeased by it. He will understand.”

“I will stay. That would be disrespectful, but as soon as they’re gone, I’ll be on my way.”

Ned nodded. As always, Cat would do her duty. “As you wish. I could come with you, and bring the children with us, so they can see their grandfather one last time.”
“And then you’ll be on your way to King’s Landing.” Ned knew it would come back. He hadn’t taken a decision yet. He didn’t want to go in the south. His place was here, at Winterfell, but if the king asked him to come… “You can always say no, Ned.”

Could he? “Let’s wait for Robert to say what he came for.”

“You know why he’s coming for.” Sadly, Ned did. “I won’t let him take you away from me.”

He still didn’t know what he would do. He could still cling to the hope that Robert wouldn’t ask this of him, but it was certainly futile. “There’s something you must know, Cat. Tyrion Lannister told me a few days ago that Robert was going to propose me something else when he would arrive.”

“What is it?”

“He said he would offer to marry Prince Joffrey to Sansa.”

Catelyn stared at him for a moment. “Well, that’s not entirely unexpected. We thought he might propose this, or offer his daughter to Robb.”

“What do you think of it?”

She seemed to think about it for a moment. “This would mean that Sansa would be queen one day, but she would have to leave Winterfell, and she’s still a child. Maybe we could convince Robert to let her stay here until she is sixteen.”

“If I refuse to be his Hand, I doubt he will maintain his offer concerning Sansa.” A silence settled. “You know she will have to leave one day.”

“I know. I suppose I’m not ready for that.”

“I’m not sure I should accept. I mean, I don’t believe I should accept this betrothal.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s something Lord Tyrion told me. He said he wouldn’t envy anyone who would marry his nephew.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all,” Ned confirmed.

“I’m not sure we can trust a Lannister. Remember what Lord Tywin did when he sacked King’s Landing.”

Ned remembered it too well. He could still see the two children draped in crimson cloaks to lower the sight of the blood. He had seen the same image in the Tower of Joy when he found his sister, dying. Promise me, Ned. He kept his promise, despite all the pains it meant for him and his family.

“Have you taken a decision, concerning the offer Lord Tyrion made to you?” his wife asked. That was another decision Ned didn’t look forward to. He looked at the woman he had five children with, and saw the hope in her eyes. He sighed.

“Not yet. I don’t know. I wouldn’t give a dog I hate in the care of the Lannisters.”

“He cannot stay here forever,” she said icily.
“You just said you didn’t trust the Lannisters.”

“Not Lord Tyrion, but his wife seems decent enough. I talked to her about it, and she thinks this is a
good idea. So why not let him go? They’re not going to eat him.”

Ned got on his feet and looked away. He knew Cat didn’t like the boy’s presence, for all sorts of
reasons, but he found it cruel that she was ready to leave him in the care of the Lannisters for the
sake of having him out of sight at last. “Would you leave one of our sons between the hands of the
Imp?” Catelyn said nothing. “The boy is my blood. I will not give him to people I wouldn’t entrust
with our children.”

Tyrion Lannister had offered Ned to take Jon as a ward in Casterly Rock, while Ned would take one
of the cousins who accompanied Lady Lannister here as a ward in Winterfell. That was, one of the
Lannister twins, the Lady Cerenna or the Lady Myrielle. Ned had been surprised by this offer, and
even more by the reasons the Lord of Casterly Rock had given. He said that Jon would have far
greater chances to find a place in the world in the Westerlands than at Winterfell, under the
disapproving eyes of his stepmother. He also said he wanted to make the relations between the North
and the Westerlands better, after the last war. While Ned had to admit this could be appealing for
Jon, who didn’t have much prospect as a bastard, he wouldn’t give him to the Lannisters. That was
the last thing he would do.

A servant knocked on the door at this moment, sparing Ned another very possible quarrel with his
wife over his bastard son. He announced that the king and the queen were coming. Ned and Cat
looked at each other, both knowing what was to come next. They rose, and after giving a kiss on his
wife’s forehead, Ned went to prepare himself for the king’s arrival. When he walked into the
courtyard, Cat was already standing there with all their children in line, except for Arya. The king
would be there within minutes. Ned wondered where she was again.

Everyone was present in the courtyard, like the day the Lannisters had arrived. Only, this time, the
Lannisters were waiting with them. They stood on their left, all tall and proud, led by their lady.
Margaery Lannister was more richly dressed and wore more expansive jewels than ever. Looking a
moment at the rose shaped pendant around her neck, Ned wondered how many people could be fed
through winter if they sold it. Ned realized at this moment that Tyrion Lannister wasn’t among them.
He should have been at his wife’s side.

He didn’t wonder for long where the small lord was. He came from the Hunter’s Gate, with Arya at
his side. Ned’s daughter was almost taller than him, and if she wasn’t already, she would be very
soon. Arya had a gloomy look, while the Imp was grinning, a helmet in his hands, that he gave to
one of his men as they went through the courtyard.

“She tried the same trick than when I arrived.” He gave a pat on Arya’s shoulder, and she walked to
stand between Bran and Sansa without a word. “I’m afraid she would have been disappointed. There
isn’t much interesting with my brother and my sister. Bran, you’ll recognize Jaime very quickly. He
is everything I’m not.”

On that note, the Lord of Casterly Rock walked to his retinue who waited for him. Bran had been
smiling at the lord. Ned didn’t like it. Bran had taken a liking to the Lord of Casterly Rock ever since
he promised to present him his brother, the Kingslayer. Arya too seemed to like the Imp, and even
worse, Jon shared their impressions. Ned was unnerved with him. He had a gift to get on the nerves
of the people. He had gained some appreciation from his younger children and from Jon by mocking
Robb, and even Sansa in some way. Cat didn’t like the lord at all, and Ned agreed with her opinion
that it wasn’t good to see their children getting close to the son of Tywin Lannister.

The royal party began to pour into the courtyard. First came a kingsguard, then a boy with golden
hair displaying a huge grin, followed by a guard with a helmet in the shape of a dog. After them came a carriage followed by several servants, then another kingsguard, and the king himself. Ned looked at his friend. It had been years, and he had changed. Ned went on his knees, as it was appropriate in the presence of your king. He heard everyone following him in the courtyard, and saw the Lannisters do the same. Well, most of them did. Lord Tyrion and his wife didn’t bend the knee and stood tall. Ned didn’t know what to do of it. Everyone in the Seven Kingdoms was a subject of the king, and from the peasant to the highest lord, they all had to bend the knee. He found it surprising, and arrogant as well, that Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery wouldn’t do it. Even Tywin Lannister bent the knee before Robert. He shot a glance at his friend, who didn’t seem to notice the strange behaviour of his brother-in-law and his wife.

His friend got off his horse. Ned saw boys bringing a stool so he could leave his horse. The young man he knew at the Eyrie would have shattered any stool, saying he didn’t need it, then gotten off his mount as if he was born to ride. Instead, Robert climbed down the stool and walked directly towards Ned. With a small movement of his hand, he indicated to Ned that he could stand up. The Lord of Winterfell did as his king commanded, and everyone followed him.

“Your Grace,” he said to his friend. They looked at each other, right into their eyes. Ned waited for the king to say something. His friend was peering at him. Then finally he said something.

“You’ve got fat.”

That was certainly the last declaration someone expected from a king when he visited one of his liege lords, but Ned knew Robert better than anybody. He felt people around them getting nervous and uncomfortable. Ned only made a move of his head, meaning Have you looked at yourself? After a moment, they both burst into laughs. Robert could be king and Ned could be Lord of Winterfell, but they would still deeply remain the two young boys who grew up together at the Eyrie. They tightly hugged. Once it was done, the king turned to Ned’s wife.

“Cat!” she managed to mumble Your Grace as he kissed her on the cheek in all but a kingly manner, and then ruffled Rickon’s hair before turning to Ned again. “Nine years! Why haven’t I seen you? Where the hell have you been?”

“Guarding the North for you, your Grace. Winterfell is yours,” Ned answered.

Robert went to see his children. “Who have we here? You must be Robb.” He clasped hands with Ned’s eldest son, then turned to Sansa. “My, you’re a pretty one. Your name is?” He asked to her sister.

“Arya.”

He nodded, and turned to Bran. “Oh, show us your muscles. You’ll be a soldier.”

In the meantime, the queen had left the carriage in which she was and walked forward to Ned and Cat. Ned had last seen her at her wedding with Robert, some sixteen years ago, in King’s Landing. She was a young maiden at the time, the pride of Casterly Rock and the golden daughter of Tywin Lannister. Years later, she had grown older, but was still very beautiful, and Ned knew there were many men whose neck were turning on her passage. Behind her, Ned noticed her twin brother, Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, as he removed his helmet. Ned would never forget the time when he entered the Throne Room and found him sitting on the Iron Throne, the dead body of his king still warm lying at his feet, his sword still soaked with the blood of the man he swore to protect. He displayed the same arrogant grin he had back then.

“My queen.” Ned lowered his head to kiss her offered hand. Cat knelt and said the same.
Ned took a look at Lord Tyrion. He tried to find the resemblance between him and his siblings, but it was hard to find. All the gods had given to Cersei and Jaime, they had denied their young brother. He was half their height, his hair so blond that it looked white when his siblings’ hair was shining gold, and looked very ugly when compared to them. Ned wondered how a man could be so different from his brother and sister.

“Take me to your crypt. I want to pay my respect,” said Robert to Ned.

“We’ve been riding for months, my love. Surely the dead can wait.”

Robert didn’t seem to hear. “Ned.”

The king went forward, and Ned was forced to follow his friend, giving an apologizing look to the queen. He hadn’t really liked the way Cersei Lannister said the dead could wait, but Robert could have been more tactful instead of simply ignoring his wife. Ned showed Robert the way to the crypts. He knew to who Robert wanted to pay his respects. As they walked through the darkness, Ned asked what he wanted to know for a very long time.

“Tell me about Jon Arryn.”

“One minute he was fine and then… Burned right through him whatever it was. I loved that man.”

“We both did.”

“He never had to teach you much, but me? You remember me at sixteen?” They both chuckled. Ned remembered it only too well. Who could forget how Robert was back then? “All I wanted to do was crack skulls and fuck girls. He showed me what was what.”


“Don’t look at me like that. It’s not his fault I didn’t listen.” More chuckles. They both knew Robert only did what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it. Robert stopped, still smiling, looking at him like they used to when they were young. “I need you, Ned. Down at King’s Landing, not up here where you’re no damn use to anybody.” So the time had come. That was the moment Ned feared the most. “Lord Eddard Stark, I would name you the Hand of the King.”

It wasn’t his friend who spoke at this moment. It was the king. Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynar, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, had just proposed him to become his new Hand. Ned knew it was very likely to happen. Robert could only have come here for this reason. Yet, now there was no doubt left. Stunned, despite the months he had to prepare himself for this moment, Ned got on his knees.

“I’m not worthy of the honor.”

“I’m not trying to honor you. I’m trying to get you to run my kingdom while I eat, drink and whore my way to an early grave. Damn it, Ned, stand up.” Robert had not remained the king for long. Ned did as he was told. “You helped me win the Iron Throne, now help me keep the damn thing. We were meant to rule together. If your sister had lived, we’d have been bound by blood. Well, it’s not too late. I have a son, you have a daughter. We’ll join our houses.”

Robert resumed to walk. Ned was too dumbstruck to move for a while, then he followed. Robert had not spoken as if he had a choice. As he followed his king, he remembered the conversation he had with Tyrion Lannister. The Lord of Casterly Rock spoke the truth. He said that Robert came to make him his Hand, which was no surprise at all, but he also said that he would propose Sansa to marry Joffrey. The little lord hadn’t lied.
“Sansa is only thirteen, Robert. She is still a child,” Ned said to his friend.

“She’s old enough for betrothal. The marriage can wait a few years. My Joff may not be the most handsome bachelor that lives, but she will be queen one day, and it’s still better than if she was married to an old man like your wife’s sister.”

Ned agreed that Sansa would certainly be happier with the prince than if she was wed to a man twice or thrice her age. “I believe Cat would want to keep Sansa close to her before the wedding. Maybe she could wait at Winterfell…”

“Oh, come on, Ned. She’ll come with you in the capital. She needs to spend time there to learn how to be queen. Cersei is unflinching about this. Consider yourself honored by this. I’m doing you a favor. Cersei didn’t want Joff to be married to her. If your sister had lived, she would have been my queen. It’s only natural that your daughter should be queen one day.”

If Lyanna had lived, there may never have been a rebellion, and Robert would never have become king. If she hadn’t disappeared with Rhaegar Targaryen, Brandon wouldn’t have ridden to King’s Landing, he and their father would never have died, and Ned wouldn’t be Lord of Winterfell. All his family would still be alive, and Lyanna would be Lady of Storm’s End, not resting in a grave.

“I need you, Ned. I really need you. I’m sure you saw it in the courtyard. I know you did.” Ned wasn’t sure what his friend was talking about. “The Imp and his wife. Did you see them bend the knee when I came in? No, of course, you didn’t see it, because they didn’t. Not long before Jon died, they forced him to lower all sorts of taxes on their territories, and this is only the beginning.”

“How could they force Jon into it? They don’t have the authority for that.”

“They have soldiers, ships, crops, gold. They have everything they need, and I have nothing. Only a crown that weighs on me more and more every day. The Lannisters and the Tyrells have been an impossible problem ever since the Imp married his rose.”

“The Lannisters are supposed to be allies. You’re married to Lord Tyrion’s sister. How can they pose so many problems?”

When Tywin Lannister had died three years ago, Ned hadn’t been overjoyed, but he hadn’t mourned the man either. He still remembered the dead children. He had heard only rumors about his second son, Lord Tyrion, but most of these rumors said that he was ugly, perverted, monstrous, a mongrel, a drunkard, a sodomite, and worse. So far, Ned couldn’t pretend he liked the Lord of Casterly Rock, but he thought the rumors might have been exaggerated. Ned still wondered why he warned him about the king’s proposal. Why tell him?

“Cersei hates her brother. He spent a lot of time in King’s Landing before his father died, and everyone knows how he and Cersei hate each other. Cersei was always insufferable, but since Tywin Lannister died she’s got worse than ever.” He chuckled. “I liked the little man, truth be told. He was one of the few who could beat me in a drinking contest, and he whored as much as me. But since he became lord…” Robert sighed. “I thought Tywin Lannister was a pain in my ass, but his son is a damn bloody bolt in my arse. He married that Tyrell girl, and ever since he’s become insufferable. I tried to stop that betrothal by marrying her to Renly instead, but the Tyrells somewhat missed my offer, or feigned they never received it. Now I’m stuck with a Lannister for a wife, three children who look too much like her, her twin brother to guard me, and the Imp and his rose who tell me how to rule my kingdoms. And there’s nothing I can do, especially since Jon Arryn died.”

“Are they so powerful?”
“Yes, they are. I thought I would have peace after Tywin Lannister died, and that his son would spend his time drinking and bedding whores like he always did, but he didn’t. Jon said he had the impression to see a smaller version of Tywin Lannister when he came for Joff’s name day. Varys says he stopped whoring, and almost stopped drinking as well.” Robert’s face changed all of a sudden. “Sometimes, I envy him. I saw him with his wife during the tourney. You’d think the Rose of Highgarden would be miserable with that man, but if she is, she hides it very well. Her brother won the tourney, and I never saw a woman so happy in years. I saw them feeding each other and kissing at the feast, and before it was over, they were slipping away to their bedchamber, and I saw stars in her eyes and her whole face shining like…”

Robert stopped. They had halted not long ago, and without realizing it, he was standing before Lyanna’s statue. Now he seemed to notice it. Robert’s face softened like it only softened when it came to Lyanna. After all these years, he still loved her. Ned remembered how his friend had been heartbroken when he came back from the Tower of Joy and told him of Lyanna’s death. She had been the woman Robert had loved, and he had wanted to marry her. Their mutual grieving, one for his sister, the other for his betrothed, had mended the fences created by the death of the Targaryen children.

Robert took a feather from his furs and laid it in the immobile hands of the statue that represented the woman he had loved and still loved. “Did you have to bury her in a place like this? She should be on a hill somewhere with the sun and the clouds above her.”

Sadness pierced through Robert’s words like they only pierced when he spoke of his long lost love. “She was my sister. This is where she belongs.” She should never have left Winterfell. All this story with Rhaegar Targaryen would never have happened if she had stayed home.

“She belonged with me.” Robert brought his hand to touch the stone of Lyanna’s cheek. “In my dreams, I kill him every night.”

Ned knew who he was talking about. Robert and Rhaegar had fought for Lyanna on the Trident, and they both lost her. “It’s done, your Grace. The Targaryens are gone.”

“Not all of them.” Robert turned sinister. Ned felt a chill run along his spine. Of course, the Targaryens were not all dead, but none of them posed a real threat now. It was over. Robert was king, and nothing was left of the Targaryen hegemony but memories, dragon’s skeletons and an iron chair.

Robert kept looking at Lyanna’s statue for a very long time, still lost in his memories, as was Ned. *Promise me, Ned.* Robert finally turned to look at him. “I need you, Ned. I need the North to balance the growing power of the Tyrells and the Lannisters. Only you can help me.”

Ned tried to think about an answer that was nor a refusal nor an agreement. “These honors are all so unexpected. May I have some time to consider? I need to tell my wife…”

“Yes, yes, of course, tell Catelyn, sleep on it if you must. Just don’t keep me waiting too long. I am not the most patient of men. Now let’s go up and feast.”

And so they did. That is, they went up, but they didn’t feast before a few hours. Ned would already have enjoyed the feast much more if the thoughts about Robert’s offer didn’t weigh on his mind as the crown weighed on his brother’s head, but even without that, the feast wasn’t a very pleasant occasion. Benjen was there, which brought him some joy to see his brother after so long, though this was deeply weakened by the discussion he had with him about the deserter Ned beheaded and the White Walkers. Ned kept saying to himself that the lad was speaking nonsense, but Benjen’s words didn’t relieve him. He also had a nasty encounter with Jaime Lannister, who was as arrogant as he
was fifteen years ago. Robert didn’t help by bringing a kitchen wench on his knees and patting her bosom under the eyes of his wife. Robert had always been whoring, but he should have tried to do better with his wife. She was the mother of his children, after all.

The most tensed moment of the feast came when the queen asked the bards to sing the *Rains of Castamere*. Ned had never been fond of this song, and it wouldn’t make him any fonder to hear it tonight. However, as the bards began to play it, a knight with the flower sigil on his arms unsheathed his sword and placed on one of the bards’ throat. They all stopped to play before they could even sing the first words.

“This song is not to be played in the presence of Lady Lannister,” he said with a booming and rude voice.

Everyone had frozen all around, as if the frost giants had come suddenly upon them with the Casket of long gone winters. The queen was first to react and stood up. “I asked for the *Rains of Castamere*. Surely you’re not going to disobey your queen, bard. Play.”

Another moment went on, and this time the Lady of Casterly Rock broke the silence. “Your Grace, you are the queen, but this is not your home. We are under the roof of Lady Stark. You wouldn’t do anything to displease Lord and Lady Stark after they welcomed us so warmly, and I doubt that Lady Stark would enjoy to listen to a song praising the murder of children.”

Lady Margaery Lannister had spoken calmly and with respect, but there was a hardness in her voice as well that she didn’t hide. Finally, Catelyn ordered the bard to play something else and diplomatically tried to take away the attention from this incident afterwards. However, Cersei Lannister kept throwing daggers at her sister-in-law, to which Lady Margaery remained indifferent. If that was any indication of their normal relation, it seemed that the queen didn’t get along with her sister-in-law any better than with her brother.

Later, when the feast was long gone, Ned was sleeping in his wife’s chamber. It was the warmest place in Winterfell. They both had their own chamber, but Ned often slept with her. It hadn’t been easy between them at the start. They barely knew each other when they were married. Cat was supposed to marry Brandon, Ned’s older brother, but that was impossible after Brandon died, so she was wed to Ned instead. Then he had been off to war with Robert and Jon Arryn, leaving Cat pregnant behind him. They would only meet again two years later, and then there had been Jon. Ned knew his wife wouldn’t like it, but he couldn’t do otherwise. Jon was his responsibility. He had hoped for Cat to forgive him with time, hoped that she would understand.

Their marriage had turned out quite well, all things considered. They had four more children in the years that followed, and they loved all of them. They both came to trust, appreciate, and love each other. Still, Brandon’s shadow was still looming over them. And of course, Jon remained a constant problem. So often Ned had wanted to tell her, to tell her the whole truth, why he kept Jon with them. Surely Cat would have understood. But he didn’t. He never told her. He never told anyone. Cat had suffered the boy’s presence, but nothing more, and even then… Ned hoped she would come to not disdain Jon. After all, it wasn’t the lad’s fault. Ned was the one to bring him here. She should have hated him, but although she often asked him to send Jon away, and even if Ned refused every time, he never felt that Cat hated him for that, but he could feel she hated Jon. It wasn’t fair. He should be the one she should hate. He remembered when the Lannisters arrived. Lord Tyrion had welcomed Jon more warmly than he had welcomed Robb and most of Jon’s siblings. He thought that Catelyn didn’t like the Imp at all because of this from the moment he set foot in their courtyard. It was true that the Imp hadn’t helped by saying Jon was named after a man who ruled the Seven Kingdoms for more than a decade and a half, when he mocked the king Robb was named after. She never liked to see Jon excel in anything when compared to Robb.
“Have you reached a decision yet?” she asked him.

Ned thought for a moment she was talking about Lord Tyrion’s offer concerning the boy, but he quickly realized she certainly asked about the king’s offers. “I’m a Northman. I belong here with you, not down south in that rat’s nest they call a capital.”

“I won’t let him take you.”

Ned sighed. “The king takes what he wants. That’s why he’s king.”

“I’ll say, listen, fat man. You are not taking my husband anywhere. He belongs to me now.”

They both laughed at it. Ned was sure it would be a great show to see Robert rebuked by the Lady of Winterfell. Very few women refused something to Robert. Cat would be the second Stark to refuse him something. Maybe Ned would be the third.

“How did he get so fat?” Ned wondered aloud. He may have taken a few pounds himself when compared to his youth, but Robert seemed to have doubled his size.

“He only stops eating when it’s time for a drink.” She laughed, but Ned almost didn’t follow her. That wasn’t the Robert he knew. He was afraid for his friend, and not only because of his enemies in the south. He was afraid that Robert might be his worst enemy.

A knock resounded. “It’s Maester Luwin, my lord,” said a servant behind the door.

Ned closed his eyes for a moment. He wished he could spend a quiet night with Catelyn after this tiring day. However, if Luwin came to see them at this hour, it was certainly not for nothing.

“Send him in.”

The old maester came in on Ned’s words. “Pardon, my lord, my lady. A rider in the night… from your sister.”

Ned’s only sister was dead. It could only be Cat’s sister, Lysa. Cat understood it as well since she got up and took the letter the maester was handing to her. Ned started to get up as Cat began to read and told Luwin to stay.

“This was sent from the Eyrie,” his wife said, surprised. Ned was too. He didn’t think Lysa would go back to the Vale of Arryn so soon after her husband’s death. “What’s she doing at the Eyrie? She hasn’t been back there since her wedding.”

Cat took her time to read, then quickly threw the letter in the fire. That startled Ned.

“What news?”

“She’s fled the capital. She says Jon Arryn was murdered. By the Lannisters. She says the king is in danger.”

That was impossible. Jon Arryn couldn’t have been assassinated. He was old. It was to be expected he would die one day. “She’s fresh widowed, Cat. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.” All this made no sense. Why would the Lannisters kill Jon Arryn? Lysa was surely confused.

“Lysa’s head would be on a spike right now if the wrong people had found that letter. Do you think she would risk her life, her son’s life, if she wasn’t certain her husband was murdered?”

Ned looked away. It couldn’t be. Jon couldn’t have been killed. Why? But Robert… He told him he
needed his help. He said he was having problems with the Lannisters and the Tyrells. Why were they here at all? Cersei Lannister and Jaime Lannister had good reasons to be present, as queen and kingsguard, but not the Imp and his wife. Why had they come? Were they preparing something? Ned knew there had been something odd to their visit. If Jon Arryn was killed…

“If this news is true and the Lannisters conspire against the throne, who but you can protect the king?” said the maester. He was saying exactly what Ned barely dared to admit to himself.

“They murdered the last Hand,” said Catelyn. “Now you want Ned to take the job?”

“The king rode for months to ask Lord Stark’s help. He’s the only one he trusts. You swore the king an oath, my lord.”

“He’s spent half his life fighting Robert’s wars. He owes him nothing. Your father and brother rode south once on a king’s demand.”

“A different time. A different king.”

Luwin spoke wisely. Ned knew what he had to do. He didn’t want to do it, but duty demanded that he did it. The night was no better than the day it followed, but at least he knew what he would do now.

On the morning, they went to hunt. Many were drunk, including Robert himself, though he didn’t show it much. Robert was quite resilient to wine. Many men from his retinue and from Winterfell followed them, and many men who came with Tyrion Lannister as well. The Lord of Casterly Rock himself joined the hunt, though Ned wondered what he would do. Ned gave specific orders to Rodrik Cassel to never let the king out of his sight. He couldn’t be entirely sure if Lysa’s letter was true. After all, she might have panicked, but he wouldn’t take any chance. They rode to the Wolfswood through the Hunter Gate, and soon they were dispersing in all directions.

After some time, the dogs Ned and his men brought with them came upon a group of Lannister men who were disembowling a stag. Ned didn’t feel right about it. A deer first gored a direwolf, and now Lannisters had hunted down a stag.

“A nice catch, isn’t it,” said a voice on his right. He saw the Lord of Casterly Rock riding slowly toward him with two of his men behind.

“I suppose you’ll say this is your kill,” Ned seriously mocked.

Tyrion Lannister chuckled. “Do I look like someone who’s good at hunting?”

“Then why are you here?”

“I may be useless in a hunt, but I enjoy riding all the same, seeing others sweat for the joy and pride of killing an animal, so they may boast they are real men.” Lord Tyrion looked at him, waiting for a reply, but Ned gave him none. If the Lannisters had killed Jon Arryn, the Lord of Casterly Rock surely had a hand in this. “My lord Stark, I was wondering if we could have a few words in private, while my men take care of their catch.”

Ned didn’t relish to speak alone with the Lord of Casterly Rock, but maybe that was the opportunity to make things clear between them, and to give an answer to his proposal. Then he would give his answer to Robert. They rode away all alone for a time, until they were no longer in earshot.

“I suppose your friend Robert made his offers,” the little lord said at last.
“He did offer me something,” Ned recognized.

“What was it?”

“I thought you already knew.”

“So, are you going to take the job?”

Ned stared straight into his eyes. “Why are you here? Why did you come here?”

“I wanted to see the North. This is the only part of the Seven Kingdoms I never visited. And I wanted to convince you to refuse the king’s offer.”


“When have you been in King’s Landing for the last time, Lord Stark?”

“Ten years ago.”

“Believe me, you don’t want to go there.”

“And why do you think so?” Ned was getting tired of this game. Couldn’t he simply come to the fact?

“I’ve seen the North for what it is in these last weeks. King’s Landing is everything but the North. Everyone is spying your every move there, everything is to sell and to buy, lickspitters are waiting everywhere to beg the king’s favor, and the greatest allies can turn into bitter enemies within the hour. Did you ever meet people who made you believe they were your friends, and then turned on you at the right moment, sometimes after plotting against you for years?”

“No.”

“Did you ever plot against someone? Did you ever trick someone?”

“What’s the point of it?”

“No, you never did. When someone is your enemy, you face him, and you fight him, fair and square. If this is your way, Lord Stark, King’s Landing is not the place for you. You won’t survive there. Jon Arryn played the game, even though he disliked it, but he didn’t play it very well. Look where he is now.”

They stared at each other for a long time. Then the question burst from Ned’s teeth. “What happened to Jon Arryn?”

“He died, obviously.”

“How?”

“Of a sickness. Officially.”

“How did he die?” Ned was getting furious.

Tyrion Lannister shrugged. “I don’t know. Not for sure. But he died. The fact remains, if you go there, the same fate may be waiting for you.”

“What do you want?” Ned asked.
“I want you to refuse the king’s offer. I want you to stay at Winterfell, where your place is. I want you to refuse the betrothal between your sweet daughter and my repulsive nephew. I want you to stay away from King’s Landing.”

“Then you’ll be disappointed, because I’m going to accept. I swore an oath to my king, and he’s asked for my help, so I will answer the call. I will go to King’s Landing to serve as Hand like Jon Arryn did for seventeen years, and I will bring my daughter Sansa with me, since I will accept the proposition of betrothal.”

The Lord of Casterly Rock looked at him with a neutral expression, then it changed to something that looked like sadness. “I pity your daughter, then, my lord. Her life will be miserable with my nephew. Joffrey may look more like my brother than his father, but he’s too much like Robert and Cersei, and sadly he inherited their bad traits without their few good qualities. You’re sentencing your sweet Sansa to a horrible marriage.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He didn’t trust this man’s word. He didn’t trust it already when he arrived, but now he didn’t trust it at all.

“And I’m afraid you may only come back to Winterfell as a pile of bones.”

“Is that a threat?”

“That’s no threat, my lord. It’s a warning. You’ll have many enemies in the capital, but I’m not one of them. These enemies won’t warn you before they stab you in the back, believe me. As I told you, King’s Landing is not the North. I’m only trying to help you.”

“And why would you want to help me?”

“I like peace. Unlike so many young men of my age, I cannot ride to battle and enjoy it. My joys in life are books, wine, food, and my wife. I don’t want a war, and the best way to avoid a war is to keep you as far away from King’s Landing as it is possible. And the best way for you to not lose a war you would be doomed to lose, is to refuse the king.”

This man really was a queer sort. “I will serve my king, no matter what happens, and no matter the consequences. He is my king.”

“And he is mine. But to the opposite of you, I’m not ready to follow him as he digs his own grave. Mark my words, Lord Stark. One day, you will regret accepting Robert’s demands. My lord Stark.”

He bowed and began to ride away. Before he was too far, Ned shouted. “What happened to Jon Arryn?”

“I told you. I don’t know.”

“Stop lying!”

“I’m not lying. I’m in the dark as much as you. Maybe Jon Arryn died naturally. Maybe he didn’t. But I know one thing. If Jon Arryn died the wrong way, it would be far better if I discovered the truth about it in your stead.”

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t get me killed. Oh, by the way, you gave me no answer about MY proposition.”

“The answer is no.”
“How sad. Your son would have liked the Westerlands, I think.”

Tyrion Lannister rode away for good this time. Ned didn’t know what to do of him. He claimed that he wanted to help him, and that he didn’t know what happened to Jon Arryn, but Lysa claimed the Lannisters assassinated her husband. If they did, the Lord of Casterly Rock had a hand in this. Robert said he was present at the prince’s name day. Ned would have to investigate this. He would have to investigate about a lot of things in the capital. As for Joffrey, Ned saw nothing in the young prince to let him think that Sansa would be miserable with him. He looked more like his mother than his father, true, but nothing he witnessed so far led him to believe he would make a bad husband. Furthermore, that was his king's wishes.

Ned reined his horse and went back to his men. They met the king’s retinue some time later, and Ned went to speak with his friend as he stopped for a large swallow of wine. It was then that Ned told him he accepted. His daughter would marry Robert’s son, and he would come with him to King’s Landing. Robert strongly clasped his back. He had lost nothing of his force. He could still crack skulls if he wanted.

When they went back to their men, however, one of Ned’s stewards was here, talking very quickly with Ser Rodrik. When he saw his lord walk in their direction, he got on his knees.

“My lord, please forgive me, but you must come back to Winterfell immediately. It’s my Lord Bran. He fell.”

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jaime
Jaime III

Since the last update, this fic reached its 50th bookmark. I'm really impressed by how many people are following it. Thank you everyone. No matter you bookmarked, kudoed, commented or only read this story, I thank you.

Now, Jaime and his thoughts after he pushed Bran. And also, how a breakfast between Lannisters turns out when Margaery is present.

JAIME III

Jaime woke up. This place was cold. Cersei complained from the moment Robert decided to head north, not only because of the weather, but that was part of the problem. Cersei would have wanted that Jaime becomes Hand of the King. The truth was, Jaime was glad that Robert chose someone else. To become Hand of the King was the last thing he wanted in the world. Even Pycelle would make a better Hand than him. But really, the king should have chosen someone else than Ned Stark.

Jaime had never liked the man. The Lord of Winterfell judged him the moment he saw him. He should have thanked Jaime. He killed the man who murdered his father and his brother, and whose son kidnapped his sister. Instead, he despised Jaime for that, looked at him like the Kingslayer, called him an oathbreaker because he murdered a mad king he swore to serve, as if the honorable Ned Stark would have done anything different in his stead. He would have killed Aerys on the spot if he found him alive in the Great Hall. If Jaime had kept his oath, he would have protected the Mad King while Rossart prepared the destruction of the city and probably killed Ned Stark. And after that, once it would all have been done, he would have gone to see his father, cut his head and presented it to his king. If he had been a man of honor, the way the Starks saw it, this is what he would have done. Well, he looked forward to see Ned Stark in the capital.

Robert really was stupid. He should have chosen Tyrion or Kevan as his Hand, or Mace Tyrell. It would have been to his advantage to give positions to one of these two families. Even his brother Stannis would have been a better choice. Jaime still didn't know why the Master of Ships had left King's Landing for Dragonstone not long after Jon Arryn died. They didn't know what killed the Hand of the King, but Jaime was glad he died. If he had lived, things would have become quite complicated… just like they could be now.

Jaime rose and stirred up. He wouldn't have to guard the king before a few hours, which left him some time to spend with Cersei for breakfast. He wished they could sleep together, but of course that was impossible, not here in Winterfell, and especially not after the boy fell. If only he didn't see them. The kingsguard got dressed and left his room, eager to find his sister. On the way, he stopped a servant in red carrying a jar of wine.

"How is the Stark boy?" he asked.

"Still sleeping, ser, as far as I know," the servant answered.

"Thank you."
He let the man go. Jaime hoped the boy died. He had to die. If he woke up and told everyone what he saw him and Cersei do, they were doomed. Tyrion wouldn't abandon them, but they were inside Winterfell, in the very heart of the North, surrounded by people who despised them. If it came to battle, they may not win.

After turning a corner of the corridor, he saw his sister-in-law walking in his direction. She wore a gown that looked more suited for the climate of the Rock than for here, but it covered her more than what she usually had when Jaime met her in the capital. She stopped when she noticed him.

"Ser Jaime." A quick smile appeared on her lips but it didn't remain there for long.

"My lady." Her face was neutral, without expression, as she looked at him. "I'm going to the guest hall to break fast with her Grace and her children. Would you come?"

"Later. I'm going to see Lady Stark. She needs some support. Her son just fell from a tower after all."

"Yes, I suppose she does."

"She does. Her boy of ten may die."

She almost said it on an accusing tone, but Jaime supposed it was more exasperation because she thought it was an evidence. Tyrion surely knew, but he would never tell his wife. She made a few steps towards him and looked up. Jaime was much taller than her.

"I do hope you offered your sympathies to Lord and Lady Stark," she added.

"Of course, I did." He was no fool.

"Good, because your nephew didn't, and it's already been noticed."

She walked away, but Jaime called for her before she turned the corner. "What do you mean?"

"Your nephew, Joffrey, didn't offer his sympathies to Lord and Lady Stark when they might be about to lose their son."

"Well, Joffrey is who he is," Jaime replied. There was nothing else to say. His nephew was spoiled.

"That's all?" she asked.

"That's all what?" Jaime returned the question. He grew tired of this conversation.

"You see your nephew behaving like this and you don't try to correct him?"

"I'm not his father." It was the truth. Joffrey was his seed, but nothing more. Cersei's children were hers and only her children. If Jaime was a father to any of them, they would get killed and they both knew it.

"Did you use the same excuse ten years ago?" Jaime didn't wonder for long what she was referring to. Last night, he has seen her again, not long before he pushed the boy again in his dreams. He regretted he had to push him, and that the lad was only ten, but there was nothing else he could do. He should never have spied on them.

"That's entirely different."

She smiled, but not in a kind way. "It's not. You see your father commit atrocities and you do nothing. You just stand aside and you watch. You see your own nephew, a boy you have known
from his very birth, shame his family and give no attention to the suffering of others, and yet you do nothing. Every time you are with Tyrion and your sister, you always take no part. You let them quarrel and say nothing. That's what you always seem to do. Nothing." Before Jaime could reply, she said more. "Tyrion and I have no time to show Joffrey how to behave properly and Cersei and Robert seem unable or unwilling to do so. I don't know which one it is, but it seems to me they failed to educate their eldest son. You're his uncle, you see him daily, and you are a much better model for him than his father who drinks all the time. I suggest you try to teach him a few things. He's the closest thing to a son you'll ever have."

On that she left, leaving Jaime to ponder her words. He stayed there a moment to think, then walked to join his sister and her children. He found them where he expected them to be, sitting around a copious breakfast in the hall they had for themselves. Only Tommen and Myrcella were present. Joffrey was nowhere to be seen. Jaime was still thinking about the words of his sister-in-law. Margaery Tyrell was indeed a phenomenon. He understood better now why Tyrion was madly in love with her. This young woman had brains and wits, and she knew how to use them. She could compete with Tyrion in that domain. Robert feared Jaime's brother and his wife, and he was quite right to fear them. Cersei also feared them, and unfortunately Jaime shared her fear now. Their visit in King's Landing had proved that the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock were more powerful than the king himself. Jaime had heard that people shouted Queen Margaery in the streets, and that some wept for days after she left. No one had ever wept for Cersei or Jaime or their father. There was also the fact that Ser Loras Tyrell won the tournament. He should have lowered his lance. And of course, there was Kevan who sat on the small council now. The fact that Tyrion could force the king to replace his brother by one of his own men spoke a lot about his influence. Jaime knew that Robert would regret the day when he felt like dancing on the grave of Tywin Lannister. This was only the beginning. If Robert dared anything against the Lannisters, he was lost.

However, Jaime was somewhat worried when it came to the new Lady of Casterly Rock. He was happy for Tyrion to be in love, and with a woman he could love this time, not with a wheelwright's daughter, but Jaime wished she had been different, more like the first wife Tyrion married long ago. Instead, they had a sister-in-law who could prove to be more dangerous than Cersei. Jaime even started to be afraid she could use Tyrion. There was something Cersei told him during their visit. Jaime had never talked about it with Tyrion. He couldn't have done this. Surely Cersei was mistaking. She had a tendency for exaggeration and melodrama. Tyrion would never hurt someone in the family.

"Hello, everyone," he said as he entered the hall where they ate together.

He kissed Cersei on the cheek, though he wished he could kiss her on the lips. "Hello, brother," she said.

He ruffled Tommen's hair and sat by his right. Tommen was a very sweet boy, not at all prone to arrogance like Joffrey. Jaime liked him much more than Cersei's eldest son.

"Is Bran going to die?" asked the princess. She asked it all the time since the boy fell.

"Well, he made quite a fall. I'm not sure. I wouldn't keep my hopes too high if I were you."

Myrcella looked sad at the words. Jaime understood, but if she knew how Brandon Stark could destroy their lives if he ever was to wake up, she wouldn't worry so much about him. She should be worried that he could wake up. Jaime wished he could kill the boy. Anyway, at this point, it would be a mercy for him. Even if he woke up, he would be a cripple for the rest of his life. It would be better if he died. Unfortunately, his mother remained at his bedside all time. There was no way for Jaime to kill him without getting noticed. All they could do was hope for the boy to die in his sleep,
and all would be for the better for everyone.

Jaime felt sad for Brandon Stark. The boy was only ten and named after his uncle. Jaime remembered the day when the heir to Winterfell strangled himself as he tried to save his father from wildfire. When he killed the Mad King, it felt like justice for the Starks, but Jaime only earned their scorn in return. Still, the young Bran was only a boy. Tyrion had introduced him to Jaime when he arrived. He had been all excited to meet Jaime and wanted to be a knight later. Jaime had even promised to show him a trick or two with a sword the next day, but things turned out differently. *The things I do for love.*

Jaime took a piece of bacon and chewed on it. "Is it true we go back to King's Landing today?" asked Tommen.

"Yes, we are," said Cersei.

"Is Sansa coming with us?" This time, it was Myrcella.

"Yes, she is. Her sister, Arya, is coming too."

"Is it true that...?"

"Yes, it's true. Your brother and Sansa are betrothed. They will marry, but not before some time. Sansa must bleed first." You could tell by Cersei's tone that she wasn't enthusiastic at the prospect to have Sansa Stark as a daughter-in-law.

"Will I have a new gown for the wedding?"

"Of course, you'll have one."

"What about Bran? Is he coming with us too?" wondered Tommen.

"No. He would have without this incident, but I'm afraid that now it will be impossible, even if the boy lives."

Tommen didn't look happy about that. Jaime saw him practice with Bran the morning before he fell. Maybe he hoped to have a brother to play with. Joffrey hadn't been very good at that. He was arrogant even with his brother and his sister.

"Bread, and two of those little fish. And a mug of dark beer to wash it down. And bacon, burned black."

Jaime didn't have to turn around to know who just entered. He could recognize his brother's voice anywhere. The servants were quick to obey him. The first thing Tyrion did when he reached their table on the dais was to lift Tommen by taking him under the arms and place him left to the place he occupied before. Tyrion took that seat between his nephew and his brother. The previous Lord of Casterly Rock would never have made the prince and the princess laugh and smile like Tyrion did.

"Little brother," Jaime said as a welcome.

"Beloved siblings,"

He sent a huge grin to Cersei. Here it began. Cersei was never happy when Tyrion was around, and Jaime knew that Tyrion reciprocated those feelings. Still, here, with the prince and the princess present, they hid the best they could, Tyrion by making jokes, Cersei by smiling quickly.
"Where is Margaery?" she asked.

"Paying a visit to Lady Stark," he answered. "She should be here soon."

"Is Bran going to die?" Myrcella asked just like she did to Jaime a few moments ago.

"Apparently not." The answer brought a smile that illuminated the face of the princess instantly. For Jaime, however, the answer was like a punch in the stomach.

"What do you mean?" Cersei asked. She didn't seem to like what she just heard either.

"The maester says the boy may live."

Jaime exchanged a silent look with his sister. They knew what it meant. If Brandon Stark lived and told everyone what he saw, they were all in danger.

"It's no mercy, letting a child linger in such pain," Cersei said carefully after a long silence.

"Only the gods know for certain. All the rest of us can do is pray," Tyrion declared, as if nothing was amiss. He surely knew. Jaime's brother was too clever to ignore how the boy really fell.

"Strange to say, for someone who never prayed in his life," said a voice from behind. She was there. Lady Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands, wife to Jaime's brother, walking towards them, wearing the same clothes than when Jaime saw her this morning, but this time displaying a smile that could warm anybody in the North. This was the Margaery he saw when they first met in King's Landing, before he realized the rose could be dangerous. She went around the table to sit next to Myrcella on the other side, casting a gleaming glance to Tyrion who just looked like the happiest man in the world. He was really bewitched by the Rose of Highgarden. Jaime didn't blame him. Pretty and intelligent. What could Tyrion ask more? Jaime knew the answer: a woman who loved him. And he had it too.

"There was a time when I used to pray," Tyrion replied.

"When? Before you were born?" she asked playfully.

"How is Bran?" Again, Myrcella asked about the Stark boy. Jaime regretted that she cared so much for him, and was starting to get annoyed by this.

"Still sleeping, but I talked with Maester Luwin and he's quite optimistic. He thinks Bran will live. However, he will never be able to walk again," her aunt explained to the princess.

"That can't be."

"I'm afraid so. Still, he'll be alive." His sister-in-law sighed. "He should never have climbed."

"No, he shouldn't have," Cersei said. "That's what happens, when parents let their children do as they want."

"In this case, you should watch your son carefully, Cersei." Cersei looked at Margaery with a questioning expression. Tyrion's wife turned to Myrcella. "Do you always do what you want, Myrcella?"

"Not always. I have lessons, and I must attend them, even if sometimes I don't want to," confessed the princess.

"Do you always attend them?"
"Almost always," she replied shyly.

Margaery laughed shortly. "Congratulations. You're much better at this than your big brother."

Jaime looked, not without amusement, to Cersei's furious stare she directed towards her sister-in-law. The rose and the lioness didn't get along at all. If Margaery felt disdain towards him, her impression about Cersei was far worse.

"It seems the North did well on your charms, my ladies," said Tyrion. The three ladies in question smiled, though the length, nature and honesty of their smiles varied from one to the other. "Too bad the charms of the North seem entirely lost on you."

"I still can't believe you're going. It's ridiculous even for you. As ridiculous as it would be to visit a tower just because it's hundreds of feet tall." Jaime supposed Cersei meant the Hightower with this, which was in the Reach, the territory of Margaery's father.

"Where's your sense of wonder? The greatest structure ever built, the intrepid men of the Night's Watch, the wintry abode of the White Walkers."

Tyrion made a terrifying face to Tommen as he said it, earning laughs from his nephew and niece while his wife kept smiling.

"I hope you're not going to stay there for long. People who go to the Wall have a habit to never come back," Margaery said.

"Don't worry. I won't stay there for years. Only the time necessary to stand on top of the Wall and piss off the edge of the world."

This earned new laughs from Tommne and Myrcella while Margaery had a sorry smile and peeled a pear.

"The children don't need to hear your filth." Judging by the glances Tyrion exchanged with the children in question, it didn't bother them. "Come."

Cersei left on this, Tommen and Myrcella on her trails, though they both obviously didn't want to leave. Margaery told Myrcella that they would see each other again later. When Cersei was gone, Margaery left her seat and went to sit at Tyrion's left. They exchanged a long kiss, as if Jaime didn't exist.

"I hope you're not thinking of taking the black," she told him after they were done.

Tyrion scoffed. "A man who's married with you and chooses to take the black either lost his mind or his cock."

"I wouldn't speak so quickly if I were you. There are ways to pleasure someone without a cock, like you say."

"In any case, you don't have to worry. I lost none of these."

"You reassure me," said Jaime. "I don't know what me and Cersei would do if you joined the Night's Watch."

"I'm sure Cersei would be very happy about it. That would certainly be the best day in her life."

"Cersei, maybe, but not me," Jaime countered.
"And me neither," added Margaery. For once, she and Jaime agreed.

"I will only stay there long enough to visit it. You should come too," Tyrion said.

"I'm afraid I'm not interested as much as you are to see a huge wall of ice, and perhaps you should consider that half the people at the Wall were rapists and murderers once."

"There isn't much difference between that and Flea Bottom."

"In Flea Bottom, I could make friends. I'm afraid the men of the Night's Watch won't like me just because I give them bread."

Tyrion looked sad. "The trip will be much grimmer without you."

"Grim enough for you to forget about it?"

"No. I'll never have a better chance to see the Wall. We may never come in the North again."

"Well, in this case I'll remain in Winterfell while you piss off the edge of the world. Just don't forget that our men are watching you, so don't even think about visiting Mole Town's brothel."

"I would never think about that. I'll go celibate for the time the trip will last."

"Good." She drank some water, then stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I need to see someone. Don't forget to come and see me before you leave."

She kissed Tyrion again and left. Tyrion watched her go. Jaime's brother was really in love.

"You'll miss her," he said.

"I will," Tyrion confirmed.

His brother returned his attention to the bacon before him and the black beer that was brought. Jaime noticed it was only brought once his wife had left.

"Does she know?" Jaime asked.

"Depends what you mean she knows."

"You know very well what I'm talking about."

"Just like everyone else, she believes the boy fell. I suppose it's better if it stays that way."

Jaime was relieved by this. His sister-in-law didn't know and didn't have any doubt on how the boy fell.

"Tyrion, even if the boy lives, he'll be a cripple, a grotesque. Give me a good clean death any day."

"Speaking for the grotesques, I'd have to disagree. Death is so final, whereas life… Ah, life is full of possibilities. I don't regret I was left to live at my birth, considering how it turned out. I hope the boy does wake. I'd be very interested to hear what he has to say."

"My dear brother," began Jaime, looking down, "there are times you make me wonder whose side you're on."

"My dear brother, you wound me. You know how much I love my family."
Somewhat, this didn't reassure Jaime. "If he does wake up, and tells everyone…"

"People make many dreams when they are in a coma, and the boy is only ten. He will be confused when he wakes up. Why should people believe his dreams?"

"And what if they believe them all the same?"

"Well, we'll have to face the consequences."

Tyrion had spoken while looking at his food all the time, but now he looked at Jaime with an accusing stare.

"I had no choice," Jaime said.

"You had the choice to hunt with us," Tyrion opposed.

Jaime knew that very well, but damn it, it had been weeks since the last time he could be alone with Cersei. Couldn't they have some privacy together? The boy should never have climbed to that tower. It was his fault.

"What are you going to do?" asked Jaime.

"Nothing. It's like I said. All we can do is pray."

"And what if they learn the truth?"

"As I said, there's nothing we can do. Anything we could try would make things worse. But I wished you had been more careful. We are not at Casterly Rock or King's Landing. We are in the North. You should have thought about this."

"You do it with your wife all the time."

"My wife is not my sister."

"I couldn't know that the boy…"

"I came here with objectives, Jaime. I'm trying to make our relationships with the rest of the Realm better, and THIS might ruin everything that I've tried and that I'm going to try. Think about the children before you act next time. The boy is only ten, and so is Tommen."

Tyrion emptied his beer and walked away, leaving Jaime alone. If only he could kill the boy. However, if he killed him, wouldn't that look strange? Tyrion was right. Everything they might try next could only make things worse than they already were. They would leave Winterfell very soon anyway. Hopefully the boy wouldn't wake up before they had left the North, and once they were south of Moat Cailin, Ned Stark wouldn't have the power of the North behind him. There was still Robert, but he knew it would be dangerous to anger Tyrion. Furthermore, Tyrion was staying behind. His brother had always been better when it came to talking his way out of trouble, whatever the trouble was, so he could surely convince the Starks, as unlikely as it may seem, that their son simply fell while climbing and that all this was an accident. Hopefully he could convince his wife too that there was nothing more to it. She loved Tyrion after all, and Tyrion would never let her believe anything wrong about his brother and his sister. Or so Jaime hoped. The young woman was shrewd. What if she found out?

Jaime sighed and left the hall too. There was no one inside apart from him. Even the servants were gone. For the second time today, he wished Tyrion had married a nice girl who wasn't cunning and
intelligent like Margaery Tyrell. Cersei should have tried to find Tyrion another wife who wouldn't be a threat to them, but she hadn't even succeeded to prevent him from marrying Margaery. Even the king could do nothing about it. At the same time, Jaime knew there was a part of him that was happy that Cersei failed in her schemes. Tyrion looked so happy with Margaery and she loved him. Jaime didn't really understand how the Rose of Highgarden could fall in love with his brother, but she did. Tyrion had managed to get one of the most beautiful and desired women in the Seven Kingdoms to love him. A starving child who he saved from rape was something, but the Rose of Highgarden! After their time in King's Landing and on the road to Winterfell together, Jaime couldn't doubt the mutual feelings between his little brother and his wife. It puzzled him. Was there something he overlooked in this marriage?

Anyway, Jaime didn't want to ruin his brother's marriage. Tyrion was right. He shouldn't have spent time with Cersei that day. He endangered all of them, but he also put in danger Tyrion's marriage. If his wife learned about the relationship between Jaime and Cersei, Tyrion would fight for them and this could destroy his union with Margaery. On that, Jaime found himself really stupid. That could be one of the worst consequences of his time with Cersei in the tower. He would ruin his brother's happiness again. Jaime couldn't let that happen, not after what he saw ten years ago. Tyrion would defend him because he loved him. He would defend him because of a lie.

Jaime walked out in the courtyard. They would have to leave soon. He saw Joffrey leave the Great Hall in a very bad mood. Jaime thought his cheeks were a little redder than usual. As he approached the smithy, he noticed something, or more exactly someone. He looked different from all his brothers and sisters, which made it easy to differentiate him from the others. He was also the one who looked the most like his father. Jaime saw Tyrion speak a few times with him, and with the youngest sister too. He was the Stark, or the Snow more precisely, that Tyrion would follow to the Wall. Jaime knew there had to be a precise reason why Tyrion was going to the Wall. His brother never did anything without some interest behind it. He saw something in the lad. Jaime wondered what it was. He decided to see what it may be.

"A sword for the Wall?" Jaime asked loudly, attracting the attention of the bastard.

"I already have one," Snow replied.

"Good man. Have you swung it yet?"

"Of course I have."

"At someone, I mean." The expression on the bastard's face said everything. "It's a strange thing, the first time you cut a man. You realize we're nothing but sacks of meat and blood and some bone to keep it all standing."

Jaime still remembered the first time he killed a man, when he fought against the Kingswood Brotherhood. You never truly knew what it was to kill until you did it for the first time. It seemed so easy, after the first time, to do it again, and again, and again. The lad would experience that soon enough, and then he would know that being a member of the Night's Watch, just like being a knight, only meant killing in the end. You swore pretty vows at the beginning, but in the end, you were only a killer and the vows meant little. Like a knight once told Jaime, their job was to slaughter organic meatbags.

Jaime returned his attention to the bastard. It was time to see what kind of Stark he was. "Let me thank you ahead of time for guarding us all from the perils beyond the Wall, wildlings and White Walkers and whatnot. We're grateful to have good, strong men like you protecting us."

He shook the bastard's hand. When he tried to pull it off, Jaime only clasped it more tightly, to see
how the boy would react. Jaime then tapped his shoulder and moved away. He hadn't shown much reaction. He didn't seem to understand what Jaime did, or why he did it. One day, when he realized how the world really was, he would understand why Jaime mocked him.

"We've guarded the kingdoms for eight thousand years," the lad said at his back.

Gods, he really took himself seriously. "Is it we already? Have you taken your vows then?"

"Soon enough."

"Give my regards to the Night's Watch. I'm sure it will be thrilling to serve in such an elite force. And if not? It's only for life."

Jaime walked away with one last grin. It had been entertaining if not instructive. The boy was as dull as his father. Whoever his mother was, there wasn't much of her in her son. Jaime wondered what sort of woman could have made the honorable Eddard Stark forget about his dear wife and his thrice damned honor. As far as Jaime could tell, the bastard was a younger version of his father. He didn't know what Tyrion saw in him. Perhaps his brother only wanted to go the Wall to see it once in his life finally. Well, that was a chance Jaime would miss without much regret. He went back to his chambers to prepare their departure.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Sansa (I'm very excited about publishing this chapter, I can't wait for you to read it.)
Sansa II

Chapter Notes

A chapter I really enjoyed to write. This is a key chapter for Sansa's storyline and will have a deep influence on her future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA II

"When will we leave?" Sansa asked.

"In a few hours. You'll make sure that all your things are packed," her father answered.

"Mine are ready. Septa Mordane told me everything was perfect."

"Good. Don't forget to say goodbye to your mother and to Bran before we leave."

"Is Bran going to be all right?"

"Luwin thinks so."

That was a relief for Sansa. They sat at the high table in the Great Hall of Winterfell, she, her father, Robb and Rickon. Arya wasn't up yet and their lady mother was still at Bran's side. Jeyne sat next to Sansa. She was glad that Bran would live. It had been horrible for everyone when they learned that he fell. He should never have climbed so high. Their mother always told him, but he never listened. He said he would never fall. At least, now they knew he was no longer in danger. Sansa was so afraid that it would spoil everything.

Bran was supposed to follow them to King's Landing. He would never follow them now. Sansa would have liked it that their brother came with them. Instead, there would only be Arya. Sansa was afraid of the impression her sister would make in the capital. She couldn't let Arya ruin her betrothal with Joffrey. At the same time, Sansa didn't want to ruin her relationship with her only sister. She had tried for the past week to make things better between them.

"Is it true that Lady Margaery is staying at Winterfell?" Sansa asked.

"Aye. Lord Tyrion is going with Jon to the Wall to visit it, so Lady Lannister will remain here in the meantime. You'll make sure she is honored as a guest, Robb," her father said.

"Aye, Father. Still, this means a few more weeks with Lannisters here. I don't feel comfortable around them," Robb said.

"I'm sorry about that, but it's not as if we could throw them outside. Anyway, I think your mother will be glad to have her close."

"Of course."

It was true. Sansa's mother and Lady Margaery got along quite well. She went to see Bran and their mother every day since the tragedy took place. Sansa sometimes went with her. She regretted that the
Lady of Casterly Rock wouldn't come with them to King's Landing, but on the other hand she would keep her mother company while Robb ruled Winterfell. Sansa would still have Princess Myrcella and the queen to spend time with. And of course, there was Joffrey.

"Do you think I should find her some better place, Father?" Robb asked.

"I think her apartments right now are quite enough," replied the Lord of Winterfell.

"Well, I mean, almost everyone will be gone. I can give her some more place."

"If you think this is appropriate, then do it. You'll be the Lord of Winterfell while I'm away. You'll have to make your own decisions. Speak with Lady Lannister to see if she needs something."

"Aye, I'll do it."

Sansa noticed some red on Robb's cheeks. She had noticed it once before, when he spoke with Lady Margaery. Sansa had thought strangely that her brother and the Lady of Casterly Rock were about the same height and the same age when she saw them talking together. Arya walked in at this moment, her hair all tousled like it always was. Jeyne made sounds of a horse galloping with her tongue. Sansa looked at her friend to silence her. She too found that Arya didn't maintain her appearance well enough and that her stitches were those of a blacksmith, but this was no reason to laugh out loud. This wasn't the right behavior to have, and it wasn't kind for Arya. Lady Margaery didn't sew better at the same age.

Arya took place on Sansa's right. Jeyne was at her left. Arya immediately began to pick in every plate with her hands, no matter what it was. "Arya, you should use your fork and your spoon," Sansa told her.

"Why? It's breakfast." She seized a long fish and started to eat it from one end to the other, juice running on her fingers. Sansa looked at her father and Robb for help, but they weren't about to do anything. They seemed to enjoy it. What would Sansa do in King's Landing? She would have to make sure that Arya sat far away from her at the feasts, especially when she would be with Joffrey.

"It is true that the Imp is going to the Wall with Jon?" Arya asked.

"Aye. Why, I don't know, but I suppose it can do some good to the Night's Watch to have a southern lord visit them," their father thought aloud.

"Why is Jon going to the Wall? Can't he come with us?"

"I'm afraid he can't. The capital is no place for Jon."

"Why?"

Their father was silent for a moment, then he spoke very carefully. "It's time for Jon to make a life for himself. He's almost a man, and it's a great honor to serve in the Night's Watch. The Starks have manned the Wall for thousands of years. Jon may not have your name, but he has your blood. He'll make our family proud at the Wall."

"Lord Tyrion said he wouldn't mind if Jon was to go in the Westerlands."

"He told you that?" Their father had a curious expression on his face.

"Aye. He said it wouldn't bother him."
Their father looked aside. "You shouldn't spend so much time with Tyrion Lannister, Arya."

"Why?"

"Let's just say he's not the best influence you could have. And Sansa is right, you should use your fork and your knife with this fish."

"The Lord of Casterly Rock doesn't always use them."

"Just like I said, he's not someone to follow."

Sansa somehow agreed with her father. Lord Tyrion may be a great lord, but she didn't like his way to behave. She once caught a discussion he had with Jon and Arya where he told them, while talking about Joffrey, that the more pretty someone was, the less brain he had. Arya had approved by giving Sansa as another example afterwards. Sansa didn't understand how Lady Margaery could be married with a man so unlike her. She remembered something Arya said at their arrival, that she was about twice his height. It wasn't the only thing making them entirely different. Sansa was glad she would never have this problem with Joffrey. At the same time, she admired Lady Margaery even more for that, to be married with this man and still behave perfectly, like a true great lady should.

A servant came in at this moment, bringing a lemon cake that Sansa commanded a moment ago. She ate it with delight and asked for another one once it was over. Her father allowed it since it was their last day in Winterfell. Sansa noticed Arya looking at her with envy. Arya loved lemon cakes too.

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"When do you think you'll marry the prince, Sansa?" Jeyne asked her.

"I don't know. Soon, I hope," she replied.

"Father says it won't happen before a few years. You're too young to marry yet, Sansa," Robb said.

Sansa knew it, of course, but she was eager to wed the prince all the same. "I will wait."

"He says Sansa is beautiful," Jeyne added.

Sansa blushed. "Jeyne, please, you shouldn't make up stories." Sansa looked at her sister who wiped her hands from the fish's juice with a towel. "What did you think of Prince Joff, sister? He's very gallant, don't you think?"

"Jon says he looks like a girl," Arya answered, uninterested.

Sansa sighed. She was sorry for her half-brother. "Poor Jon. He gets jealous because he's a bastard."

"He's our brother," said Arya too loudly. A few in the Hall turned to look at them.

"All right, calm down, you both," said Robb in a low voice. "You'll have more than enough time to quarrel on your way to King's Landing."

They remained silent for a time. The servant came back with the second lemon cake Sansa asked for. Arya was looking away, angry. Is a ruined dress or a wrong behavior or a couple of unwanted jokes worth losing someone of your own blood? Sansa looked at the lemon cake. She already had one. She took the plate and handed it to her sister.

"Arya, I'm sorry I said Jon was a bastard. I shouldn't have. It wasn't kind."

Her sister looked dumbfounded, but she took the lemon cake. "Thank you, Sansa."
They kept eating in silence for a moment, Robb looking strangely at Sansa. After a moment, Arya asked a question to her brother.

"What do you think of the prince, Robb?"

"What I think of him? I'm afraid I agree with Jon. He looks like a girl. Sorry, Sansa."

He had a sorry look on his face. Sansa didn't agree, but she decided to let it pass. Robb had no reason to be jealous of Joffrey, to the opposite of Jon, and there was nothing evil in the way he said it.

Breakfast was interrupted when Septa Mordane came for Arya, telling her that she had to prepare her luggage again. Her clothes weren't properly arranged. Sansa didn't have to do the same, so she had some time for herself before they left.

She decided to make a tour of the castle before she made her farewells. Sansa was excited to go to King's Landing. She would marry Joffrey. Maybe it would only be in a few years, but they would marry one day. He was so handsome, gallant, tall and good-mannered, all the opposite of his father. His mother, the queen, was very kind, everything Sansa expected a queen to be. Princess Myrcella was very sweet and kind, the type of sister Sansa always dreamed of. They would be real sisters one day. Sansa would be queen. This was a dream, a song. Her song. It was just about to begin.

Still, Sansa was somewhat bitter to leave Winterfell. It had been her home and she had never left it. She had so many good memories. She would miss Robb, Bran, Rickon, and her mother. She would miss the godswood, the sept, the Great Hall, the maester's turret where she took her lessons with Luwin, the crypt, the glass garden, the library where she used to read about *Florian and Jonquil* or *Ella*. She remembered that the prince in the latter story, a young man named Kit, was very similar to Robb the way he was described. She visited every part of the castle, to see it one last time. She said goodbye to her old life, preparing for the new. She wondered if her mother felt the same when she left Riverrun.

Sansa arrived in the library. She realized quickly that she wasn't alone.

"Take this one. It's about dragonglass. I need enough to read on the road."

"You already have twenty books, my lord. This should be quite enough." She recognized the voice of the septon who kept the library.

"Not for me. Ty, bring all of these with you and pack them. I'll stay here. Maybe I'll find another book or two that are interesting."

Sansa saw a small boy emerge from the shelves with a cart full of heavy tomes. She recognized him to be Lord Tyrion's squire. When he saw her, he stopped.

"My lady," he said, blushing red.

"Hi." That was all that Sansa replied. "What are these?"

"Books that Lord Tyrion is borrowing for his trip to the Wall, my lady."

"I hope he'll like them," she said.

The squire seemed at a loss of words. "I must be going. I must prepare everything for my lord's departure."
The boy walked past her with the cart. As he did, the Lord of Casterly Rock emerged from the shelves in turn. He didn't greet Sansa and kept looking at the shelves. After a moment, Sansa cleared her throat and curtsied.

"Lord Tyrion."

He turned and seemed to realize she was there. "Oh, Lady Sansa. Please forgive me, I didn't see you." He turned back his attention to the shelves but kept talking to her. "You must look forward to your journey to the capital."

"Yes, I am, my lord."

"Hmm. I remember when I left my home for my first long journey. I was sixteen, only three years older than you. I travelled through the Westerlands with my brother. I wanted to tour the Free Cities of Essos, but my lord father forbade me. Still, it was a pleasant journey. I'll never forget it."

Sansa thought she heard a longing in his voice as he said the last words. "I'm sure the Westerlands are a beautiful place to visit."

"They are. Margaery told me she offered you to visit them one day."

"Yes, she did. Lady Margaery was very kind."

"Indeed, she is. Everyone loves her, me the first. Ah!" The cry came from nowhere. "Blood of Elves by Septon Sapkowski. There are chapters about dragons in it."

He began to browse the pages of the volume. Sansa remembered that her mother advised her to not read it. She said the content wasn't fit for a lady. "You like to read about dragons, my lord?"

"I do." His eyes didn't leave the pages. "When I went to King's Landing for my sister's wedding, the first thing I did was to search for the dragon skulls. They were kept in the dungeons. Our dear king hid them when he took the capital, to show the days of the Targaryens were gone, and probably because he couldn't suffer anything that made him think about the last of the dragons."


"Maybe. Though I'm not sure his wife and his children got what they deserved, or that all the poor men who died in this war deserved to die. To me, it seems strange to start a war that kills thousands of people only to save one. But again, the history of the Seven Kingdoms is full of these absurdities."

Sansa didn't know how to take it. Her father had fought the Mad King because he killed her grandfather and her uncle, and because the heir to the Iron Throne stole her aunt. Her father fought for those he loved, just like Robert Baratheon did. They did what true knights did.

Lord Tyrion looked at her over his books. He laid it down on a nearby table. "Sorry, my lady. I didn't want to cast a shadow on your day."

"No, my lord. You didn't," Sansa assured him, though it wasn't entirely true. Still, it was better to not make things worse.

The Lord of Casterly Rock looked at her carefully. She felt examined, just like the day he arrived. She didn't like it. "You will marry my nephew soon."

"Well, not before some time."
He made a strange face and looked aside for a moment. "I hope this will be a long time." Sansa didn't know what to think of it. "What do you think of your future husband?"

"He's very gallant, and kind."

The small lord pulled a face. "Do you love him?"

The question startled Sansa. That wasn't something she expected, especially not coming from this man. It wasn't the type of questions you asked. She looked at him. He was waiting for an answer. Sansa had to give one.

"Yes, I do, and I hope I will prove worthy to be his queen."

The Imp nodded and looked down for a moment. He walked to her and took one of her hands in his. "Well, in this case, I wish you all the happiness in the world, my lady. You'll need it."

He looked straight into her eyes. There was something strange in them. He looked... sorry for her.

Why should he be sorry for her? He released her hand.

"Have a good day, my lady, and an eventless journey to King's Landing."

He grabbed the tome he left on the table and left on these words. Why did he look sorry for her? Surely Sansa misinterpreted his expression. Surely he only wanted to wish her well, nothing more. Why would he be sorry?

Sansa left the library after a moment and went to the glass garden. She had spent a lot of time in this place. It was beautiful, but she heard the gardens of King's Landing were far better and bigger. She couldn't wait to see them. She looked at the blue winter roses. Margaery said they didn't grow up in the south. She would miss them.

Joffrey offered her a flower to place in her hair two days ago, after he gave his sympathies for her brother's fall. He was so gentle, strong, tall, brave, kind, handsome. He was perfect. She would be his queen one day. They would have children together. She hoped they would look like him. She dreamed of him every night.

"I hoped I would find you here."

Sansa turned to see Lady Margaery right behind her. She hadn't heard her coming. "Margaery." She curtsied, but didn't forget to call her by her name this time.

"I'm glad to see you, Sansa. Though I'm afraid this will be the last time we meet before long."

"Yes, indeed." Sansa wished that Lady Margaery would follow them to the capital, but she had to stay with her husband who wanted to visit the Wall. Sansa didn't understand why the Imp wanted so much to see a great wall of ice. Joffrey would never force her to stay alone while he was far away, unless he was forced to by something important. She didn't see what was important in visiting the Wall, especially not for the Lord of the Westerlands when the Wall was in the North. That would be different if it had been her lord father.

"Let's walk." Sansa followed the lady. "Winterfell is a beautiful place."

"It is."

"Will you miss it?"
"I will, but my mother left her home a long time ago. I'll manage, just like her."

Lady Lannister nodded and smiled. "I still remember when I left Highgarden. I was sad of it, but I knew it would happen one day. And I'm quite happy at Casterly Rock."

"I'm sure I'll be happy in King's Landing too."

"You'll be my niece by alliance very soon."

"Yes, it's true." Sansa had almost not thought about it. Joffrey was the nephew of Lady Margaery, so her marriage with him would make them family, even if it would be only twice through marriage bonds. Joffrey was Lady Margaery's nephew by alliance after all. They shared no blood, not even indirectly.

"You know, Sansa, there was a time when it was King's Landing where I hoped to live."

"Really?"

"Of course. Do you think you're the only girl who ever dreamed of becoming the queen." Sansa's eyes widened in surprise. Lady Margaery laughed. "I was younger at the time, about your age. But I'm happy enough now. I wanted to be queen once, but today I wouldn't exchange Tyrion against any other man in the Seven Kingdoms."

Sansa was puzzled by what she just heard. Margaery Lannister had wanted to be queen before. That meant she had wanted to marry Joffrey. It left quite a strange impression on Sansa. Lady Margaery was Joffrey's aunt. Though, when Sansa thought about it, Margaery was of an age with Joffrey. She was eighteen and Joffrey was sixteen. Margaery had jewels, dresses, perfumes Sansa could never have, and her hair was arranged in such a complicated and wonderful way that Sansa didn't see how she could replicate it. She looked like a queen as much as the queen herself, while Sansa looked like a child, which she still was. She hadn't even bled yet. For a quick moment, Sansa felt jealous about the Lady of Casterly Rock, even threatened.

However, it left very quickly. She just said she wouldn't take a different husband from Lord Tyrion. That sounded just as strange for Sansa. She couldn't imagine someone preferring the Imp to Joffrey. Well, maybe Arya, but it was a special case.

Sansa found something else to talk about. "My mother was supposed to marry my uncle, Lord Brandon Stark, but he died and she married my father instead."

"Yes, I heard. What a horrible thing. No one deserves to die in this way. At least, it seems to me that your parents were happy together."

Sansa nodded. Indeed, they were. "I'm sure it will be just like that with Joffrey." She felt red coming to her cheeks as she said it.

"I hope so for you."

"Can't you really come with us?"

"No, I must stay. I'll wait for Tyrion to come back from his visit at the Wall, and then we'll go back to Casterly Rock. I may not see you until your wedding."

That would be a long time. "I could visit you to Casterly Rock," Sansa suggested.

"That would be my pleasure." Lady Margaery sat on a bench and Sansa joined her on her invitation.
"I thought the North was a grim place when I saw it for the first time, but I have to agree with Tyrion now. It has its own charms."

"King's Landing is a beautiful place too, I'm sure."

"It depends." Lady Margaery said nothing more. Sansa didn't press the issue, but there was something else she wanted to ask her.

"How was it, when you left Highgarden? How did you feel, if I may?"

She smiled at Sansa. "I was sad, and excited, at the same time. My new life was waiting for me." That was exactly how Sansa felt right now. "I was afraid in some way, too."

"Afraid? Why?"

"Unlike you, I had never seen my betrothed before our wedding."

"You never met him before?"

"No. I only heard rumors about him, and let's say they weren't pleasant. Our families discussed about the betrothal, we made plans, chose a date, travelled to Casterly Rock. I arrived there, and next week I was married."

It seemed somewhat rude to Sansa, to marry a man you never saw before, especially when it was the Imp. And yet, Lady Margaery talked about it so casually that you could believe she talked about the weather. It didn't seem to bother her. Sansa felt a great respect for her all of a sudden. She had done her duty, just like her mother and Septa Mordane told her so often that she was to marry the man she was destined to.

"My only interaction with my future husband before this was a letter," Lady Margaery added.

"A letter?"

"Yes, Tyrion wrote me a letter before I came to Casterly Rock."

That surprised Sansa. She didn't expect that the Imp could be romantic. "What was in that letter?"

Margaery looked at her with a surprised expression. Sansa realized she had made a mistake. "I'm sorry, my lady, it doesn't concern me."

She expected to receive a lesson, after asking something so impertinent to one of the greatest ladies of the Realm, but the lady in question only laughed. "That's all right, but you called me my lady again." Of all things, she didn't expect to be berated about that. "I will answer your question. The letter told me that if I wanted, I could call off the betrothal."

"What?"

"Yes. Tyrion told me that if it wasn't my wish to marry him, I only had to say the word and he would stop all discussions between our families. He gave me the choice to marry him or not."

"And… you said yes?"

"If it wasn’t the case, do you think I would be here today?"

"Why didn't you refuse?"

Lady Lannister looked ahead of her, to a bench in front of them. "He was… kind in the way he gave
me that choice. He told me who he was, everything bad and good about him. He hid nothing. He wanted me to be sure that I wanted to marry him. I didn't expect that, truth be told. According to rumors, Tyrion Lannister was a monster at worst, an ugly man at best, but that's not what I had the impression to see through his writing. I was curious, and I knew I would have to marry one day. So I said yes. We rode for Casterly Rock, I met him, and during the week before the wedding I tried to know him better. There was nothing about him that told me he was the monster that rumors depicted. Then we were married and it was done. Since that day, I have never regretted my decision, not a single moment."

She had a timid smile on her lips and looked far away, as if she was in a distant land. Sansa didn't exactly know what to say, so she just stayed there and did nothing while the Lady of Casterly Rock looked far away. After some time, she turned to Sansa.

"What can you tell me about Joffrey?"

Sansa was glad that she was asked about it. It was her favourite subject of conversation lately. " He's so handsome, and gallant, and gentle with me. He compliments me all the time. I couldn't dream of a better husband."

Lady Lannister scoffed. "That's quite different from the nephew I know."

"What do you mean?"

"The first time I met Joffrey, he said that Tyrion probably chained me at the altar to say my wedding vows. He told that while a dozen other people were present, including the queen, his brother, his sister and several of his cousins."

"He may not have felt well at this moment. Maybe he was in a bad mood," Sansa supposed.

"In this case, he's always in a bad mood. He was insulting for all his name day. If you ask my opinion, Joffrey is a spoiled brat."

"No, he isn't." Joffrey wasn't like that. Lady Margaery was wrong. She misjudged him.

"What do you know of Joffrey, Sansa? Don't tell me he is kind and gentle. Tell me what you really know about him. Do you know who are his best friends? What he does in his spare time? What he likes? Who are the people in his family he loves and those he cannot suffer?"

Sansa was at a loss of words. She couldn't find an answer. That was unfair. She would marry Joffrey one day. Margaery had no right to say she knew nothing about him. She knew things about him, many things, but right now she just couldn't find out something to say.

"I know enough about him," Sansa sputtered, trying to remain as ladylike as possible.

The Lady of Casterly Rock smiled at her. It was the same kind of smile that Lord Tyrion gave her an hour ago. A sad smile, as if she pitied her. She didn't have to pity Sansa. There was nothing to pity her about.

"Do you love Joffrey?" Again, she was asked the question. Did all the Lannisters decide to ask her the same thing?

"Yes, I do love him."

Lady Margaery shook her head. Sansa began to feel annoyed by all this. "Do you think I loved Tyrion when I married him?" Sansa didn't know what to answer to that. Could she say no? "You can
Sansa didn't dare to say it aloud. How could she answer no? "I'm sure Lord Tyrion is a good man," she said instead.

"He is, but I wasn't in love with him when we met. I barely knew him. I only had a letter from him before I came to the Rock, and after that we barely had time to know each other in the week before the wedding. There were so many preparations. We didn't have time to know each other. We got married, like two strangers. At the beginning of our marriage, there was nothing between us. I thought he was decent, but I couldn't be certain. I didn't know enough about him. We learned to know each other during our marriage. At first, we were barely acquaintances. Then we became allies, then friends, and one day, I realized I loved him. I didn't fall in love with him all of a sudden. Love didn't hit me, or him. We built it, through the time we spent together, getting to know each other, learning to appreciate the qualities of the other, to accept his flaws and to live together. I needed six months before I could tell that I loved him. But when I told him, I was sure to love him, because I knew him at the time. I knew the man I loved."

Sansa was hypnotized by Margaery's tale. It didn't sound like any tale she ever heard about. It wasn't like the stories she read, and yet, it had its own romantic side, to believe that a marriage without love could blossom with time.

"Do you know why I'm telling you this, Sansa? I was lucky. Tyrion could have been a monster. I didn't have time to know him enough before our marriage. I had a great chance to marry him. What if he had really been the monster some people said he was? The thing is, I didn't love Tyrion at the beginning because I couldn't love him. I didn't know who he was. If I had fallen in love with him the first time we set eyes on each other, I would have loved who I thought he was, and our beliefs are quite often far from the truth. I would have been disappointed in the end. You don't know Joffrey, Sansa. You cannot say you know him only after two weeks spent next to him in feasts. I didn't have the chance to know my husband before my marriage, but you have that chance. You have a few years before you marry. Use them wisely. Learn who is Joffrey, what he likes, what he does, how he behaves. This way you'll know better what to expect from a marriage with him. If you give your heart to him immediately, you may regret it all your life and condemn yourself to suffer in the future. Don't give your heart to Joffrey yet. He doesn't deserve it."

Sansa got angry at that. Joffrey was a prince, the heir to the Iron Throne. He would be king one day, and she would be his queen. He was going to be the greatest king there ever was, and she would sit by his side and bear him princes and princesses who would be kings and queens after him. Margaery Lannister was only jealous. She confessed that she wanted to be queen. Sansa would be the queen one day. Margaery would be nothing next to her when that day came.

Sansa stood from the bench and took a proud attitude of the lady she was. "I love Joffrey. I love him, and I will love him to the end of my life. He is kind, courageous, strong, and no man in the world will ever make me happier than him. I will be a good wife to him, and I will remain loyal to him forever. Now, if you'll excuse me, Lady Lannister, I must make my farewells to my siblings. I won't see them before long and it would be inappropriate to leave them without a last word."

Sansa turned on her heels and walked away. It was a good thing finally that Lady Lannister wouldn't follow them to King's Landing. She wouldn't speak to her again, except if circumstances forced her to. Her world wouldn't be destroyed by this woman's words.

"Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you'll realize it before it's too late."

Sansa didn't listen to these words. She heard them, but she didn't listen to them. She wouldn't listen
to lies. Her song was about to begin, and Margaery Lannister wouldn't ruin it. She wouldn't let anyone ruin it. No one would separate her from Prince Joffrey.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, when Sansa thinks about stories she read, the second one, Ella, is a reference to the movie Cinderella released in 2015, where the charming prince, Kit, is played by Richard Madden, who also plays Robb Stark.

The book Tyrion finds in the library of Winterfell, Blood of Elves, by Septon Sapkowski, is a reference to a real book written by Andrzej Sapkowski, one of the books at the origin of the video game Witcher.

Please review

Next chapter : Catelyn
Catelyn I

Chapter Notes

First time I ever write a chapter from Catelyn's perspective. I hope I caught her character well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CATELYN I

She kept tying the straws, making it take the shape of a man. This one would represent the Warrior. She used one of the straws she took on the floor to tie other ones, giving arms and legs to the body, and rounding the top to make it look like a head. She kept praying to the Warrior to protect her son from death. She had to pray for him while she made his figurine. That was all she could do. Pray.

She looked at Bran. His eyes wouldn't open. They were shut for two weeks now. She made another prayer to the Warrior to protect him. She put aside the figurine and prayed to the Mother instead. Save my son. Gentle Mother, fond of mercy, save my son. How could the world do that to her? They were taking away her father, and at the same time they wanted to take away her son. He was only ten. He never caused harm to anybody. Tears rolled on her cheeks. She had several handkerchiefs with her, all wet.

Her early life had been marked by tragedy. Her betrothed had been killed along with his father when a king summoned them to the capital. She had loved Brandon. When Petyr defied him in duel for her, she gave her favor to her betrothed instead of giving it to Petyr, even if her friend asked for it. He was only a boy and she asked Brandon to spare him. He did spare Petyr, who left the next day. However, Brandon died on the orders of Aerys Targaryen. She lost him. War was declared and Catelyn had to marry Brandon's brother to maintain the alliance between the Starks and her house. She didn't know Ned at the time. They never met before. He was a ward at the Eyrie. They had less than a day to know each other before the wedding, and the next morning he left to join Robert Baratheon to war, leaving her behind with his son in her belly.

Catelyn still remembered their wedding. It hadn't been the great celebration she hoped for with Brandon. Ned was silent for most of the ceremony. She had loved Brandon. When Petyr defied him in duel for her, she gave her favor to her betrothed instead of giving it to Petyr, even if her friend asked for it. He was only a boy and she asked Brandon to spare him. He did spare Petyr, who left the next day. However, Brandon died on the orders of Aerys Targaryen. She lost him. War was declared and Catelyn had to marry Brandon's brother to maintain the alliance between the Starks and her house. She didn't know Ned at the time. They never met before. He was a ward at the Eyrie. They had less than a day to know each other before the wedding, and the next morning he left to join Robert Baratheon to war, leaving her behind with his son in her belly.

Catelyn still remembered their wedding. It hadn't been the great celebration she hoped for with Brandon. Ned was silent for most of the ceremony. He wasn't evil with her. Quite the opposite, he was very kind, but they barely talked. She tried to enjoy the dance, the music and to talk with the others, but she didn't really succeed. She still grieved Brandon. As for Ned, she hadn't thought about it back then, but he also grieved his brother, and a father above that. He had just become Lord of Winterfell, a charge he never thought he would occupy. Catelyn regretted she didn't think about it at the time. She had only thought about herself, and not about the man she was about to wed and who was just as uncomfortable to marry her as she was to marry him. He had forbidden the bedding ceremony afterwards, for which Catelyn had thanked him. Later, in their bedroom, he said he didn't think it would be appropriate if he broke a man's jaw. It had been the first time she saw him smile. Even more surprising had been his behavior afterwards. He didn't urge her to disrobe. He said that he would understand if she wanted them to wait if she still loved Brandon, which would have been normal. Catelyn had been surprised by his disguised suggestion to delay the consummation of their marriage. However, she knew what her duty was and she almost ordered him to bed her, for the sake of the ties between their families. That had been their first quarrel. It wouldn't be the last.
She needed time to love Ned. Things were complicated at the beginning, with that bastard son of his he brought back from the war. The boy and his midwife were already installed at Winterfell when she arrived with Robb. He looked more like Ned than all the sons she gave him. With time, they built their love, for them two, and for their children. Ned was very kind with her, and patient, even building a small sept for her so she could worship the Seven, though there were things she asked he never conceded, like sending his bastard son away.

Still, they managed to be happy. She had lost Brandon, but she found happiness with his brother, even if she never entirely forgot the man she would have married without the Mad King's folly. But now, everything was about to collapse again. Her husband had left with their two daughters to the capital, to replace Jon Arryn who was assassinated. Her eldest son was now acting Lord of Winterfell at the age of sixteen. He wasn't ready for that. Worse, her son she named after her first betrothed now laid somewhere between life and death.

She hadn't left his bedside since his fall. He shouldn't have climbed. She told him so often, but he never listened. She should have forbidden him for real. She should have been more strict. She wasn't, and now he could die, and that was all her fault. She prayed to the Father.

The door opened to let enter a slender young woman with green eyes and brown curly hair. Margaery Lannister wore a deep purple gown. She changed her dress every day.

"I thought you would like something to eat, Catelyn," she said.

She nodded. The Lady of Casterly Rock brought the tray with porridge, some bread and water, and a few fruits. Catelyn didn't think these ones grew in the glass garden. She had come to visit Catelyn and Bran every day since he fell and she always stayed for some time. She went to the windows and opened them. Light came into the room, so bright that it blinded Catelyn for a time.

"What time is it?" Catelyn asked.

"We are early in the morning. You didn't sleep last night either?"

"No."

She had lost all notions of time. She hadn't left this room for the last fortnight and the shutters of the windows were closed most of the time. Only her meals could help her remember the hour, and she didn't always eat them. Sometimes she didn't even notice them. She realized something.

"You shouldn't have brought it yourself. A servant would have brought my breakfast," Catelyn said. It wasn't the duty of a lady to bring meals.

Margaery Tyrell smiled. "I was coming to visit you anyway. I saw the servant bringing you this and I told her I could do it."

"Thank you," said Catelyn.

The Lady of Casterly Rock had been of great support lately, not only with her visits but also with everything she did that Catelyn would do otherwise. Bran needed her, so she asked Margaery if she could take care of some of her own duties as Lady of Winterfell. The young woman had kindly accepted and Catelyn was glad of it. She didn't want Robb to be overloaded with work and she needed time with Bran. The Lady of Casterly Rock also informed her about Robb and Rickon when she visited. Catelyn never thought she would appreciate so much the presence of a Lannister in Winterfell, especially after Lysa's letter. Margaery was staying here while her husband visited the Wall and she looked well disposed to help for the time she would spend here. Catelyn doubted she
had anything to see with Jon Arryn's death. She was still almost a girl and was forced to marry the Imp. Anyway, she couldn't do any harm to Ned while she stayed in the North.

"You should try to eat something, Catelyn. Maybe you don't know it, but you look pale and sick."

They had begun to call themselves by their first name two days ago, after Lady Margaery asked Catelyn to call her this way, and Catelyn had allowed the Lady of Casterly Rock to call her without her title in return. She took a piece of bread and slowly chewed on it, unable to swallow it.

"You should leave this room. Go outside, even for a moment," the young woman suggested.

Catelyn shook her head. "I can't. Bran needs me. He could die any moment."

"You've been there for two weeks and he didn't die."

"But he could die any time."

"Your son will not die, Catelyn. I understand what you're going through. I know what it is…"

"No, you don't."

"I do. I know you fear to lose…"

"No, you don't know what it is. You can't. You don't have children. You're not a mother."

Catelyn regretted her words almost immediately. Margaery Tyrell looked at her blankly.

"Very well. I'll leave you alone."

She did what she said. Catelyn almost sighed. She would apologize to her later. She shouldn't have been so harsh. The young woman was only trying to help. Everyone had given their sympathies and their hopes for Bran's recovery after the accident happened. Robert gave his own through Ned. The queen herself came to her in person. Even Lord Tyrion, Margaery's husband, who Catelyn didn't like, came to offer his sympathies to her. He was very kind and gentle, all the opposite of who he was in the previous days. She almost forgave him all his misbehavior for that.

The visit that had been the most painful was the one Jon Snow paid to Bran before he left for the Wall. He had talked to Bran as if they were brothers, which they were, and kissed him on the forehead. Catelyn had only wanted him to leave. She wanted him out of her sight. She couldn't support to see the boy who had so much of Ned in him stand next to her son and tell him he could visit him at the Wall one day. Bran shouldn't have fallen. Jon should have. It was unfair he was well when her son wasn't. She knew it was unjust to think so. The boy had done nothing wrong, but she couldn't help it. Each time she looked at him, it reminded her that Ned had loved another woman, and that he loved her enough to have her son live with theirs. Catelyn could have forgiven Ned for his infidelities, especially at the beginning of their marriage, when they were separated and that they barely knew each other, but she couldn't support that this boy who wasn't her son grew up with her children as their brother.

Catelyn had been favorable to it when both Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery brought forward the idea of taking the boy as a member of their household. He could enter the service of another lord. That would have brought him far away from Winterfell, at last. She would certainly never see him again. She even thought it could really give him a chance to do something with his life. As long as he stayed in Winterfell, Catelyn wouldn't allow him to take a position or a role, not in the North or in the service of her husband or Robb. She didn't want him here, but she had no objection to him being happy somewhere else. However, Ned refused the offer that the Lannisters put forward, saying he
wouldn't leave any of his children in the care of the Lannisters. Catelyn had to admit she found it odd that Lord Tyrion and Margaery took an interest in the bastard. Maybe it was for his skills. She saw him defeat Robb far too often at sword fight. He was better with a sword than her son, and there were many times when he excelled in studies over Robb. Anyway, the boy left for the Wall to join the Night's Watch instead. After reflection, it was probably for the better. If Jon Snow went to Casterly Rock and proved himself, which was quite possible, he could eventually obtain a knighthood, maybe a lordship. The Lannisters were known for their cunning and she had no difficulty imagining Tyrion Lannister trying to turn him against her children. He could try to use him against the Starks and divide the North by convincing some lords to choose Jon Snow as their liege lord. And even if he didn't do it with the boy, the Imp could try the same with his children. By sending him to the Wall, they prevented Jon Snow from fathering any children who could eventually contest the positions of Catelyn's children or grandchildren.

Ever since the king left with his retinue, her husband and her daughters last week, Margaery had been the only one to pay her daily visits. Luwin came each day, but it was to examine Bran and see if he was recovering. The young woman spoke to Bran sometimes, even if he couldn't hear her. Catelyn had noticed how Margaery had been close to Bran and Rickon since she arrived. She also spent a lot of time with Sansa before she left. Sansa always dreamed to become a princess or a great lady, and Margaery was everything she dreamed about. Of course, she also admired a lot the queen and the princess, but she spent much more time with Margaery. The Lady of Casterly Rock was easy to approach and to speak with. She visited the Winter Town every day and spoke to the smallfolk and the highborn people alike. Catelyn had never seen someone behaving so easily with everyone from every horizon and every birth. Still, she had seen the young lady spend a lot of time with Bran and Rickon, even playing with them. Catelyn thought about Margaery's reaction when she told her she couldn't understand what she felt about Bran. She really ought to apologize. Catelyn didn't know how she would feel if she may never have any children.

She returned her attention to Bran. Her thoughts had drifted away. She resumed her prayers and kept working on the figurines of the Seven. The day went on and no one came, except for the servants who collected her trays of food, often barely touched, and who brought them to her. She was glad to be alone with her son if this could be his last hours. She waited anxiously, expecting him to die any time. She remembered sitting through the night with another child who got the pox, years ago. Was that her punishment for not holding her promise? Would the gods take away one of her sons because she couldn't love him? Was this only a coincidence that Bran fell right when he was about to leave? Did she miss her last chance when she told him to leave? Was Bran going to die by her fault, because she couldn't love a motherless child?

The day went on, and she kept praying and wondering if that would be the cost of her mistakes. She begged the gods to not take Bran away from her. At one moment, she got so desperate that she made another promise. This time, she thought she could hold that one. Let him have a life. A real life. Let him go somewhere he can prove he is someone, where he can be happy, where he can find a purpose, where he can marry, where he can start a family of his own. Let him be with someone good, someone he loves. Give him a life. I will love his grandchildren. I will be a grandmother to them. I swear I will. Please don't punish Bran for what I did. He's only a child. My little boy. Please, let him live.

The light of the day increased, then lowered and faded until only darkness was all that was left. When it began to be too dark, Margaery came back. She closed the shutters and lit the candles.

"Rickon misses you, you know. He spends his days asking where you are, and where his brother is," she said while giving some light to the room.

Catelyn ignored it. Rickon wasn't at risk of dying. Bran was. "I'm sorry for what I said before." She
truly was.

"That's all right. I know what it is, to see someone you love like that and to not know if he will live. To know that there is nothing you can do. To feel so powerless. You're not the only one who faced this, who could lose people they loved."

Catelyn hadn't almost lost people she loved. She had lost people she loved, and she was about to lose another one, maybe two, or more, if Lysa's warning was founded. Ned should never have gone to King's Landing. He should have stayed here, with her.

"Who did you lose?" Catelyn asked.

Margaery Tyrell was done with lighting the candles. "No one. But it wasn't far."

"Who?"

"Willas, my cousin." She came to sit on the bed next to Bran. "When he was fourteen, he rode in a tourney, even if he wasn't ready. He fell from his horse, and the horse fell on him. He was unconscious for days afterwards. I stayed by his side for five long days and five long nights. I was afraid he could die, even if Master Lomys said he wouldn't. I was only eight."

"And he lived?" Catelyn.

"He lived, but he was never the same again. Now he can only walk with a stick." She looked at Bran, an expression of extreme sadness on her face. "I don't have children, but that doesn't mean I can't imagine what it is to see your son lying there, and all you can do is wait for him to wake up, or wonder if he will ever wake up. People might tell you that he will live, but until you see his eyes open again, you can't do anything else but wait."

Catelyn listened to her. She returned to the making of the figurine. There was nothing to say. They understood each other. A very long time passed, and nothing was said. Catelyn almost jumped when the Lady of Casterly Rock rose from Bran's bed where she remained sitting all this time and came at her son's side. She leaned over him and whispered in his ear. Catelyn could hear.

"Wake up soon, Bran. Your mother needs you."

She kissed him on the forehead very tenderly and left after a nod meaning sympathy towards Catelyn. Hence the Lady of Winterfell found herself alone with her son, once more. She almost missed the presence of Margaery. Luwin and Robb had tried to make her leave Bran. Margaery had never tried, not until this morning, and she was the only one who seemed to understand what Catelyn somehow went through. She wasn't a mother, but she understood all the same.

Time kept going on and Catelyn still didn't move from her seat. At one moment, the door slowly opened. Maester Luwin came inside. He made a slight bow and came to take Bran's temperature on his forehead.

"It's time we reviewed the accounts, my lady." He crossed his hands before him. "You'll want to know how much this royal visit has cost us."

"Talk to Poole about it," she said, close to tears.

"Poole went south with Lord Stark, my lady. We need a new steward, and there are several other appointments that require our immediate attention…"

"I don't care about appointments!" How could he talk about accounts and stewards when Bran could
"I'll make the appointments." Catelyn realized that Robb was standing in the door's threshold. "We'll talk about it first thing in the morning."


Robb went to the windows as the maester left and opened the shutters Margaery closed not long ago. They shouldn't open the windows. Bran needed to stay warm. She heard the wolves howling in the night. She hated them.

"When was the last time you left this room?" he asked.

"I have to take care of him."

"He's not going to die, Mother. Maester Luwin says the most dangerous time has passed."

"What if he's wrong? Bran needs me."

"Rickon needs you. He's six. He doesn't know what is happening. The only reason why he doesn't follow me all day crying is because Lady Margaery keeps him occupied, and at the same time she's performing your duties as Lady of Winterfell, the duties you should be performing. You didn't even come to the gate when Father and the girls went south."

"I said my farewells to them here and watched them ride from the window."

"Lady Margaery said goodbye to her husband in the courtyard, at the gate. She even kissed him, in front of everyone else. The Imp! Are you telling me you couldn't be there for Father, Arya and Sansa when she could be there for a dwarf?"

"Margaery doesn't have a son lingering between life and death."

"He's not going to die, Mother. Rickon needs you. I need you, too. I'm trying, but I can't... I can't do everything by myself."

"Close the windows! I can't stand it! Please make them stop!" She shouted. She couldn't suffer that anymore. They had to leave her with Bran. She would kill these wolves to bring her son back to her.

She looked at his pale hand, so small, so vulnerable. They couldn't hold him to the walls of that tower.

"Fire!" Catelyn looked up at her son. "You stay here. I'll come back."

He ran out. Catelyn walked to the window to see what it was. If there was fire, Bran could be in danger. She was relieved to see that the library tower was in fire. The tower was across the bailey, which meant fire wouldn't reach this room. Bran was safe.

When she turned away from the window, a man was in the room. He had a hood over his head, and was slim. She didn't know him. She never saw him before.

"You're not supposed to be here. No one is supposed to be here. It's a mercy. He's dead already." He produced a dagger from his belt.

"No!"

Before Catelyn realized it, she ran to the man to stop him, but he pushed her on the bed, then pulled
her to him with the dagger near her throat. Catelyn managed to seize the blade before he cut her throat. She felt blood running all over her hands as they both struggled. She bit his hand that held the knife and felt blood between her teeth. He pushed her on the floor as he cried out. Then he looked at Bran. Catelyn's hands were painful and covered with blood. She wasn't sure if it was her blood or the man's blood. He walked to Bran. Catelyn wanted to do something, but before she could, a shadow came out of nowhere and jumped on the assassin. The man screamed as it planted its fangs into his throat, tearing pieces of flesh away from it. The man kept screaming and crying, then he gurgled, and no more sound could be heard apart from the beast devouring his throat.

The beast left the man as he laid dead and nestled next to Bran. The direwolf. It saved her son. She looked at the throat of the assailant. It was wide open. She looked at the wolf, who looked inoffensive like a pup while just a moment ago, he killed a man. Catelyn started to laugh hysterically. She couldn't refrain it, nor control it. She remained there, on the floor, laughing without end, until she couldn't remember anything else.

When she woke up, the world was in a blur. Her mind was cloudy and she felt as if she laid on tons of feather and cotton. It was all grey around her. As her vision turned better, she distinguished a window on the right. The sky outside was of a grey paler than the walls. They had to be in the middle of the day. She looked before her and saw fire in the hearth.

"Catelyn."

The Lady of Winterfell turned her head on her left to see green eyes on a round face framed by curly brown hair. This woman was familiar to her, but she couldn't put a name on the face.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The young woman smiled sweetly. "Take it easy. It's normal you're confused. You've slept through the last four days."

"Four days?" said Catelyn, bewildered.

"Yes. You gave us quite a fright. You weren't yourself when we found you. Master Luwin gave you Milk of the poppy so you could sleep peacefully, and to give time to your hands to heal."

"My hands?"

She looked at them for the first time, and was shocked to see the thick bandages that were wrapped around. What happened? Catelyn looked around, and just at this time the realization came to her that she was in her room. Her lord husband shouldn't be far… Where was Ned? She remembered he was gone with Robert. He had left a few days after… Bran. The fall. The assassin. The direwolf.

"Bran." The word came out, weak, low. "Bran." She repeated with more force.

She shouldn't be here. She should be with him. She began to sit in her bed, but before she could a great headache took her and she fell back.

"Don't overstrain yourself. You'll be groggy for another few days. Your maester says the blade reached the nerves. It cut through your bones. I may not have studied medicine like my husband or my cousin, but I know enough to say that you must rest. You'll be lucky if you get out of it without permanent damage."

Catelyn's breath was hoarse. "My son needs me."

"Your son needs a mother, not a dead body, and that's what you'll become if you try to go to him.
with your injuries. If you want Bran to have a mother when he wakes up, then rest and make sure your wounds heal."

The Lady of Casterly Rock was standing tall and spoke with authority. She had no right to speak to Catelyn in this way. That wasn't her castle. However, Catelyn didn't have the force to fight her, and she knew she wouldn't be able to stand in her state. Lady Margaery went to the door and said something to a person outside. Catelyn couldn't hear it.

"Now rest, and don't try go back to Bran. He's well," she told Catelyn.

"How is he?"

"Still asleep. You don't have to worry about him. There are two guards before his room all the time and Maester Luwin says he's getting better."

"I need to see him."

"I'm telling you he's getting better."

"I need to see him. He's my son."

"So is Robb, and so is Rickon. Robb is struggling to rule Winterfell on his own, and Rickon spends his days asking where you and Bran are. Have you ever wondered what it was for them, to see their mother shut herself behind closed doors and not speak to them anymore?"

"Bran..."

"Stop talking about Bran for a minute. He's safe. You were right, I'm not a mother. I don't have children, but I know certain things all the same. And I know that a mother who abandons her four other children because she worries about the fifth, when she knows he will not die, is not worthy to be called a mother."

Catelyn was shocked by the harshness in Margaery's tone. The expression on the face of the Lady of Casterly Rock softened almost immediately after she pronounced the words.

"Sorry, Catelyn. I shouldn't be so hard with you, especially after you were just almost killed. But you should see Rickon crying and asking about you and Bran all day, and Robb about to crumble under his charges since your lord husband left. They need you. They are your sons as much as Bran, and you won't help Bran by barricading yourself with him."

Margaery Tyrell sat down and opened a small book she let on a nearby table. Catelyn looked at her, this young woman she barely knew a few weeks ago. She looked tired. Catelyn supposed it was normal after all this time she spent to carry out the duties that the Lady of Winterfell usually took care of, and taking care of Rickon at the same time. She may not have children yet, but she was the lady of a great castle, married to one of the most powerful men in the Seven Kingdoms, and a dwarf above all. It couldn't be easy, to find yourself the wife of the less desirable man in the world. Margaery told her once that she was only sixteen when she was wed, and that she knew nothing about her husband except for rumors saying he ate children and spent his nights in brothels. Catelyn tried to imagine how she would have faced this, how Lysa, Sansa or Arya would have faced it. The fact that this young woman succeeded to live with this man, and even managed to be happy with him, showed how strong she was.

"Did you wait here all day?" That was a strange question to ask, but that was the only one that came to Catelyn's mind in that moment.
"I spent an hour or two with you since that night. There was always a servant standing by your side when I wasn't there," replied the Lady of the Westerlands.

Catelyn noticed that her arms were bare. How could she manage to dress so lightly in the North? Catelyn never dressed this way, not even after sixteen years spent here, and even in her own room that was the warmest of all the castle. Even back in the Riverlands, before she was wed, she never dressed in this way. That was far too provocative, but she knew that Margaery Tyrell came from a region where the weather was quite hot and where people wore lighter clothes, so she overlooked it.

"What happened to the assassin? Have you found anything on him yet?"

"He's dead. We can thank your son's direwolf. I used to be unsure about them, but it seems your sons took a good decision when they brought them. You would be dead the other way."

"Did you find anything about this man?" repeated Catelyn.

"I know Robb is inquiring about it. You could ask him when he comes. I sent for him and the maester."

"Thank you." Catelyn breathed deeply for a moment. "I'm sorry I was hard with you lately. You did more than anyone could expect from you, and it was unkind from me to not show you any recognition."

"I suppose we're evens now," the young lady replied with a smile.

The door opened at this moment. The young woman stood as Catelyn's eldest son and Maester Luwin came in.


"Thank you for watching over my mother, Lady Lannister. Could you leave us alone?" her son said.

"Of course." She looked back at Catelyn one last time. "Take care of yourself. That's the most important thing right now."

Once she was out, the maester closed the door and Robb approached of her. He was dressed in leather and ringmail, and had a sword at his waist. "How do you feel, Mother?"

"Well enough," she replied.

"I must look at your bandages, my lady. You'll need to eat something when we're done. I already…"
She stopped the maester before he could go any further.

"Wait. The man? Who was he?"

"No one knew his name," Robb answered, "but some saw him wander around the castle these days. It seems he came with the Lannisters or the royal party."

"Did Lady Margaery know him?"

"She said she never saw him before. He didn't come with her and Lord Tyrion, to her saying. We asked all her men, but none could give us more information about him than our own."

"The man hid in the stables for the last week. We found the place where he slept. There was a bag hidden beneath the straw, with ninety silver stags in it. He was paid to do it," Luwin completed.
"How couldn't we notice his presence in an entire week?" asked Catelyn.

"With all the horses that left for the Wall and those who followed Lord Stark in the south, a part of the stables is empty."

"Hodor acted strangely lately. Maybe he saw him, but couldn't tell us," Robb supposed. "Still, someone paid this man to murder you, Mother. Who could it be?"

"He didn't come for me. He was here to kill Bran," Catelyn revealed.

"Bran?" Robb asked, unbelieving.

"He kept saying that no one was supposed to be here. He only attacked me when I tried to get in his way. As soon as he thought I was no longer an obstacle, he turned his attention to Bran again. He was here for him."

"But why? Why would someone try to kill Bran? He's only ten, and he's been sleeping for days."

"Lady Stark," Luwin interrupted, "I really have to look at your injuries, and you must rest. I think it would be better to leave these matters for another day, when you'll feel better. Lord Stark and Ser Rodrick will keep inquiring about all this."

Catelyn hated to say that, but the old maester was right. She felt tired, and her mind wasn't clear enough yet. "Is Bran safe?" she asked.

"I have two guards at his door, and one inside, along with two in the stairs leading to his chamber. No one can see him without my warrant," Robb said.

Catelyn felt relieved. However, there was one more thing she needed. "My son, the dagger the assassin used... It was no common dagger. Could I have a look at it?" No common assassin could have used a costly dagger like this one. He wasn't only paid for the murder. Someone else gave him that dagger, and this someone had means to own a very costly dirk.

"I'll send it for you later. In the meantime, rest, Mother."

Robb came and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Then Catelyn was left alone with Maester Luwin who removed her bandages, examined her injuries and wrapped her hands in a new bandage. He gave her some more Milk of the poppy and she fell asleep, thinking of the man who tried to assassinate her son. Her last thoughts were for the costly dagger he used, with a green precious stone on it.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Sansa
Sansa III

Chapter Notes

Let's see how Sansa is doing outside Winterfell... under Cersei's influence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA III

Sansa found Arya on the banks of the Trident, trying to hold Nymeria still while she brushed dried mud from her fur. The direwolf was not enjoying the process. Arya was wearing the same dirty dress she had worn yesterday and the day before. Lady was still beside Sansa, who held her leash. Septa Mordane had told Sansa to find Arya. They were to ride with the queen and the princess today in the royal wheelhouse.

"Arya, you better put something pretty today. We are to travel with the queen and Princess Myrcella," Sansa kindly tried to explain.

"I'm not," Arya said, keeping to brush her own direwolf. "Mycah and I are going upstream and look for rubies at the ford."

"Rubies? What rubies?"

"Rhaegar's rubies. This is where King Robert killed him and won the crown."

Arya had looked at her as if she was stupid. Sansa couldn't believe her ears. "You can't do that, Arya. Not today. The princess is expecting us. We were both invited by the queen."

"I don't care. The wheelhouse doesn't have windows, you can't see a thing."

Sansa tried to be reasonable. She had to try. Arya is your only sister, Sansa. You won't get another one. "Arya, we must be present. We cannot refuse the queen. We have to make a good impression." She didn't want the queen to have a bad opinion of Arya.

"Why? The prince is going to be offended because your sister is muddy? He will call off the betrothal? Good riddance."

Sansa gasped in horror. "How can you say that?" How could Arya say it would be a good thing if her betrothal with Joffrey was called off?

"I don't like him. And I don't like the queen. And Myrcella is a little baby. They won't let me bring Nymeria."

"Princess Myrcella is afraid of them, you know that."

"That's what I said. She's a little baby. Hold on!" Arya yelled to her direwolf.

There was nothing Sansa could do. Arya wouldn't come. "I'll go by myself then. It will be ever so much nicer that way. Lady and I will eat all the lemon cakes and just have the best time without you."
"They won't let you bring Lady either." Nymeria ran away at this moment. Arya threw the brush on the ground. "Bad wolf!"

Sansa couldn't help but smile a little. She turned away and walked off. Still, her smile was a bitter one. She made efforts to make things better between her and Arya, but her sister wouldn't do anything. She was impossible, a desperate case. Sansa walked back to the column. They were about to leave after a night of rest. She left Lady in the care of her friend Jeyne and went to the royal wheelhouse, after promising to Jeyne she would tell her everything about her day later.

Queen Cersei Lannister welcomed her before the entrance of the wheelhouse and Sansa made a curtsy like Septa Mordane taught her. Inside, she was welcomed quite warmly by the princess who almost jumped at her and threw her arms around her neck. The queen had to remind her daughter to behave like a princess. Myrcella apologized to Sansa who accepted them graciously, without any offence.

"When will Sansa marry Joffrey?" the princess asked, all of a sudden, after an hour or two. Sansa didn't see the time pass. She felt her cheeks redden.

"Not before some time, I'm afraid. Sansa must bleed first, and it might not happen before another year," the queen explained to her daughter.

Sansa hoped it wouldn't be long. She wanted to marry Joffrey. Still, she would be patient. A lady had to be patient.

"You'll have an ivory dress for the wedding, you know," the princess told to Sansa. "And a necklace, surely. Joffrey will certainly give you one."

"Of course, he will. Joffrey will never neglect his wife," the queen said.

"I know he will never, your Grace. It will be a great honor for me to be his queen. I will do everything to be a worthy wife," Sansa said.

"I'm sure you will."

"Maybe Joff could give Sansa a necklace like my own," Myrcella suggested.

"Which one?"

"The one like a flower." The princess left her seat and went to a box in a corner. She opened it and produced a gorgeous necklace in the shape of a blue rose, like the winter roses they had in the glass garden of Winterfell. "Could you try it, Sansa? I'd like to see how you look with it."

Sansa was in no place to refuse, and truth be told she didn't want to refuse. The princess allowed her to wear one of her jewels. Myrcella placed the necklace around her neck before she sealed it behind. She seemed to struggle for a moment, but Sansa finally heard a clasp. When she looked down, she realized the rose was red and not blue. It was perfect on her blue silk dress, along with her auburn hair. She realized the chain was made of gold. She never wore something so beautiful in Winterfell. They were never given any jewel.

"You're beautiful with it," the princess exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Yes. It's very pretty," Sansa said. She turned the pendant between her hands and realized the other side was blue, like she thought it was before. It was indeed a very special necklace.

"Aunt Margaery gave it to me for Joff's name day. She has one identical. This one is only a copy,
she has the original. She said it belonged to my grandmother. Uncle Tyrion gave it to her the day they were wed."

Somehow, knowing that this necklace was the copy of one of Lady Margaery's many jewels made Sansa see it less gorgeous. She hadn't entirely forgotten the lady's words concerning Joffrey. That, and the sudden realization that the queen looked with disapproval towards her.

"Thank you, Princess, but I think I shouldn't wear the jewels of a princess of the Realm," Sansa said, pulling off the chain and giving it back to the daughter of the queen very gently.

"Sansa is right. She is far wiser than people give it to her," the queen said. Sansa blushed at the compliment.

"When you'll marry Joffrey, we'll be sisters. Then you can borrow all the jewels you want from me," said Myrcella with a smile, placing back the jewel among her things.

"Joffrey will offer you something very pretty for your wedding. Don't worry, Sansa," the queen assured. Her disapproving look had disappeared, leaving place to a radiant face.

"Thank you, your Grace," Sansa said.

"Why didn't we wait for Uncle Tyrion and Aunt Margaery before we left?" the princess asked.

"We couldn't wait. The king has important matters to attend to in King's Landing," answered the queen.

"I would like them to be with us. Margaery is always very kind to me and Tommen. What do you think of her, Sansa?"

Sansa answered very carefully, remembering her courtesies. "Lady Margaery has been very gentle with me at Winterfell."

"Has she?" the queen asked her.

"Yes, she has. She told me a lot about the Westerlands and the Reach, and about her family too." She also told Sansa to not ruin her relationship with her sister, to no avail. Arya still couldn't behave like a lady.

"Do you know I could marry Ser Loras soon?"

The queen coughed. She just drank some wine from her cup and swallowed it the wrong way. "What did you say?" she asked the princess, between two coughs.

"People say I could be wed to her brother."

Sansa would almost have been jealous of Myrcella if she hadn't been betrothed to Joffrey, but right now she was only happy for the princess. Ser Loras Tyrell was a knight and reputed to be very handsome. The princess deserved to marry him.

"Who says that?" the queen wondered.

"A girl with her. One of her handmaidens. I heard her talk about it. Do you think I could, Mother?"

"We'll discuss about it later. We mustn't bore our guest."

Truth be told, Sansa would have liked to talk more about it, but if the queen said otherwise, she
wouldn't press the subject. They kept talking about many things. The princess did most of the talking and Sansa did her best to follow. They stopped around midday for a halt. A knight wearing crimson came to tell the queen that they would stop here for the rest of the day. The king was gone with the Hand to hunt aurochs.

Sansa left the wheelhouse after thanking the princess and expressing how much she enjoyed her time with her. Everything would have been perfect if the prince had been there. As she began to walk to her father's retinue to find Lady, the queen called for her.

"Sansa, little dove, I need to stretch my legs. Would you care to accompany me?"

Sansa couldn't refuse. In one single day, she had an entire morning with the princess and the queen, and now a walk alone with the queen. She followed Cersei Lannister, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, docile.

"I hope you enjoy your time south so far," the queen said.

"Very much, your Grace."

"Do you miss your home?"

"I knew I would have to leave it one day."

"So did I, when I left Casterly Rock. You remind me of myself sometimes, when I was your age."

"Really?"

"Yes." The queen was smiling kindly to her. "I was about your age when I came to the capital for the first time. For a little girl, it is always a thrilling experience. Every road leads to King's Landing, but few people get to see it in their life, and fewer gets to live in the Red Keep. We are the few privileged by this. I hope you will love your time there."

"I will, your Grace."

"You are very lucky, Sansa. Never forget it. There are many girls in the Seven Kingdoms who would like to be in your place."

"I know." Who wouldn't want to marry Joffrey?

"What do you think of Lady Margaery Lannister?"

That wasn't a question she expected. "She's been very gentle with me."

"I'm sure, but I'm afraid you didn't tell me the whole truth."

"Your Grace?"

"I am the queen, Sansa. You do not remain queen if you cannot see when people are hiding something from you. I saw the look on your face when Myrcella told you you wore a necklace similar to one that my sister-in-law had. You weren't pleased by it." Sansa didn't think the queen would have noticed it. "I understand you didn't want to talk about it in the presence of my daughter, but there's no reason you shouldn't talk about it to me now. You're to be my daughter one day. I don't want to see you unhappy. Has Lady Margaery done something to upset you?"

Sansa was at a loss of words. She felt very touched by the queen's concern, but could she repeat the things Margaery told her. This discussion had been private, but the queen was asking.
"You don't have to hide anything from me, darling. I'm here for you."

Sansa didn't know what to say. Very carefully, she tried to say it the best way she could. "She... She talked to me about Prince Joffrey."

"What did she say?"

Sansa was afraid. How could she say the things that the Lady of Casterly Rock told her? What she said about Joffrey... "She asked me if I knew him well. She told me of the day she and your son met. She asked me if I loved him."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes, I do. With all my heart." She did. She loved Joffrey the moment she set eyes on him.

"What did she say exactly about my son?"

"I... I would rather not say, your Grace."

"Why is that?"

"Some... Some of the things she said... They weren't pleasant."

"In what way?" Sansa hesitated. How could she present it the best possible way? "Sansa, don't be afraid. This is no crime to hear unpleasant things about your betrothed. You can tell me. I'm not going to berate you only for hearing a few words."

Sansa took a breath and spoke. "She said the prince... was spoiled. She said she didn't like him. She said I didn't know him well enough and that... that I shouldn't love him. I didn't agree with her," Sansa added quickly. "I told her she was wrong, but she wouldn't listen."

The queen was looking at her with compassion. "I'm sorry you had to go through this. It must have been hard for you to hear these things about the man you will marry."

"Yes, but I know she was wrong."

"In such cases, all we can do is walk away from these people. They can't hurt us with their words when we can't hear them." Sansa understood the logic of this. "You must know that Margaery looks very kind at first sight, but it's mostly an act. She married my brother because he was rich. Her family prepared her all her life to marry the most powerful and richest man they could find. My little brother craves for love and Margaery makes him believe she loves him, so he eats in her hand and does everything she wants. If there had been someone richer than my brother who was available, she would have married him instead."

Sansa could only agree with the queen. She remembered how Lord Tyrion was at Winterfell. How could someone love him? Except Arya, maybe, but that didn't count. And there was also the way Lady Margaery laughed at everything he said, no matter what it was, and how she kissed him publicly. Sansa's lady mother told her while they were still at Winterfell that a lady should never let her arms bare, and yet Lady Margaery was the only one to do so. Even her handmaidens had their arms covered with sleeves. Still, a doubt lingered in Sansa's mind. She remembered how the Lady of Casterly Rock looked when she told her about the letter Lord Tyrion sent to her.

"Be careful with Margaery. She is ambitious, and ambitious women are the worst of all. Don't let her reach you and keep her as far from you and Joffrey as you can."
Sansa would follow the queen's advice. Lady Margaery Lannister had wanted to marry Joffrey once. She said so herself. Sansa would have to protect Joffrey from her. There was always a woman in stories who wanted to steal the prince or the knight away from his betrothed or his wife. She was always evil. Margaery was evil. She tried to turn her against Joffrey. But she also advised her to make things better between her and Arya. Was Sansa to throw away that advice as well?

"I'm sorry I listened to that, your Grace," Sansa said. "I shouldn't have. I knew she was lying when she said all those things about Joffrey."

"Don't worry, Sansa. I know she was lying, and I know you didn't believe it. I made mistakes myself in my life. I listened to the wrong people more than once. Time will show who you must listen to. Know that I will always be there for you."

"Thank you, your Grace."

"Now, go back to your father's men. I wouldn't want to steal you more than necessary before you're even married to my son."

Sansa curtsied and left, making sure to walk with dignity like Septa Mordane taught her. She had been stupid to listen to Lady Margaery's lies. She should have seen who she was. She was lucky that the queen told her. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

She dined with Jeyne and told her everything about her time with the queen and Myrcella. She didn't talk about her personal discussion with the queen that took place afterwards though. It wouldn't be appropriate. Later, she walked Lady around the inn they stopped nearby. Lady was sweet and kind, always calm. She was all the opposite of Nymeria, Arya's direwolf, just like Sansa was the entire opposite of Arya.

As she walked around, holding Lady's leash, she marvelled at how the trees were rich and green here. The Riverlands were her mother's home, so she had talked to Sansa about them a few times, but she had never seen them with her own eyes. She also marvelled before the knights. There were very few in the North, and they seldom saw them when they came to Winterfell and stayed for a day before leaving to never return. Sansa had seen Lord Yohn Royce when he came to Winterfell with his son, Waymar, a few months ago. Ser Waymar had been very kind with her, just like his father. That was the last time knights came by Winterfell before the king's retinue came to Winterfell. Her father's men, with their leather jackets, looked like peasants next to the Lannisters knights and the kingsguards in their red and gold armor.

Sansa came back to the inn. As she walked toward the carts and horses of her father's men, she heard giggles close to the royal wheelhouse. Three girls arranging sophisticated braids in their hair, ones Sansa wouldn't be able to reproduce, looked at her with a smile at the corners of their lips. Then she bumped into someone she hadn't seen before her.

"Pardon me, ser."

The man who stood before her said nothing. He had clear brown eyes who looked at her with a rigid expression. He was bald and wore only leather. Sansa wasn't sure anymore if he was a knight. Before she could do anything, a hand grasped her shoulder.

"Do I frighten you so much, girl?"

He did, and had since she had first laid eyes on the ruin that fire had made of his face, though it seemed to her now that he was not half so terrible as the other. Sandor Clegane, called the Hound, Joffrey's sworn sword, was the one who had taken hold of her arm.
"Or is it him there making you shake? He frightens me too. Look at that face."

Sansa did as the Hound told her. She understood how even he could be afraid of this man.

"I'm sorry if I offended you, ser."

The bald man who said nothing didn't say a word to her apology and left, looking at her in a fearful way.

"Why won't he speak to me?" she asked.

"He hasn't been very talkative these last twenty years. Since the Mad King had his tongue ripped out with hot spincers," the Hound offered as an explanation, as if it was nothing unusual.

"He speaks damn well with his sword though."

Sansa's heart bumped in her chest as she heard the voice behind her. This was someone she would never be afraid of. Prince Joffrey stood before her, all in red, his blond hair shining in the sunlight, his green eyes clear like the forest surrounding them.

"Ser Ilyn Payne, the King's Justice. The royal executioner," Joffrey explained her.

Now Sansa understood why she was so afraid of the man. Her father once told her that the man who says the sentence should swing the sword, but Sansa couldn't imagine Joffrey killing somebody. She supposed it was normal then that someone else had to carry out the death sentences when one was pronounced. These thoughts made her smile leave her face.

"What is it, sweet lady?" He took her chin in his hand and looked over her. "Does the Hound frighten you?" Yes, he does. "Away with you, dog. You're scaring my lady."

The Hound left. Sansa had no need to tell Joffrey what made her afraid. He saw it just by looking at her and came to her rescue. He returned his attention to her. They were alone with Lady.

"I don't like to see you upset. The sun is finally shining. Come walk with me."

The day couldn't have been better. First a morning with the queen and the princess, then a walk alone with the queen, then another one with her betrothed, the prince. Sansa knelt and told Lady to wait here. Then she walked with Joffrey.

The weather was perfect. Joffrey was right, the sun was shining, and that made him shine even more. Sansa was sure it made her own hair shine as well. She remembered dreaming of someone who said her hair was beautiful in sunsets. They walked along the Trident, a clear stream with silver waves. The prince offered her wine a few times. At one time, Sansa opposed.

"I probably shouldn't have any more. Father only lets us have one cup at feasts."

"My princess can drink as much as she wants," Joffrey told her.

Sansa accepted the skin he offered, but she only drank a little. She knew what could happen when you drank too much. She remembered berating her half-brother once because he got drunk during a feast. She would need to get used to the taste of wine. This one was a little better than those they served at Winterfell. She remembered the Arbor Gold that Lady Margaery served to all of them back in Winterfell. She had never tasted something so rich and delicious. This one was nothing in comparison, but she was sure there would be better vintage in King's Landing. Joffrey just didn't have anything better right now on the road.
She heard strange noises ahead of them. It sounded like wood. She remembered hearing a similar sound one day when she watched her brothers fighting with wooden swords. But why would someone fight with wooden swords here? Was that something else?

"Don't worry, you're safe with me," Joffrey reassured her once again. Still, Sansa kept holding the skin of wine with her two hands as she followed Joffrey. The prince might fear nothing, but Sansa did.

"I'll get you." Sansa heard someone say this.

They arrived in a clearing where two people were fighting with sticks. One was a boy, and the other one...

"Arya!"

Her sister turned to her and received a hit on the arm. "Ow! What are you doing here? Go away."

Sansa could have asked her the same question and given the same order. She recognized the boy she was with, the butcher's boy she spent all her time with.

"Your sister?" Joffrey asked her.

Sansa nodded, ashamed. Arya was all dirty. She obviously didn't wash her face for days. Why did Arya have to spoil everything all the time? She always appeared at inopportune moments, and with a butcher's son now at the top of that.

"And who are you, boy?" Joffrey asked him.

"Mycah, my lord." He didn't even address the prince in the right way. Why did Arya spend time with him? Even more important, why was he spending time with Arya? He had no business with a lady.

"He's the butcher's boy," Sansa precised, not hiding her disdain. He had hit her sister, so she saw no reason to conceal it.

"He's my friend," Arya retorted. When would she learn to shut her mouth? Right when everything had been so perfect, her sister had to ruin it.

"A butcher's boy who wants to be a knight, eh?" Joffrey looked at him. "Pick up your sword, butcher's boy. Let's see how good you are." Joffrey unsheathed his sword.

"She asked me to, my lord. She asked me to," the boy said. That didn't surprise Sansa. Arya spent most of her time with him.

"I'm your prince, not your lord, and I said pick up your sword."

"It's not a sword, my prince. It's only a stick."

"And you're not a knight. Only a butcher's boy. That was my lady's sister you were hitting, do you know that?"

"Stop it!" Arya yelled.

"Arya, stay out of this," Sansa ordered. Joffrey was only defending her. Arya had no reason to complain, and was in no place to do so.
"I won't hurt him much."

Joffrey started to make a cut on the boy's cheek. It wasn't a deep cut, although Sansa didn't like to see it. Then everything went wild in a second. Arya hit the prince with her stick and the butcher's boy ran away.

"Filthy little bitch!" Joffrey swung his sword all around.

"No no, stop it, stop it, both of you. You're spoiling it. You're spoiling everything!" Sansa yelled, forgetting about her manners. Couldn't they stop? That wasn't how it was supposed to be.

Arya fell on the ground, and the prince yelled at her. A grey fur came out of nowhere and bit the hand of the prince. He started to scream.

"Arya!" Sansa screamed to her sister. She was afraid for her. What if the beast attacked her after?

"Nymeria!" As Arya yelled too, Sansa realized the animal was her sister's direwolf. She didn't understand. Lady would never do this.

Arya stood up and pointed the sword at the prince.

"No. No, please no," the prince begged.

"Arya, leave him alone," Sansa ordered and begged at the same time.

After a moment, her sister walked away and threw the sword in the river. Then she ran away with Nymeria. Sansa looked at the prince. He was holding his right hand and blood came out of it. Blood was everywhere, red like his doublet. Sansa approached and knelt beside him.

"My prince, my poor prince, look what they did to you. Stay here, I'll go back to the inn and bring help."

"Then go! Don't touch me!" He jerked away when she tried to touch his forehead.

Sansa ran to the inn and told the first people she met that Joffrey was hurt. They came back to take him and Sansa took refuge in her room. That wasn't supposed to have gone this way. Arya shouldn't have hit him. She shouldn't have been there. What was she doing there again with that boy? Weren't they supposed to look for rubies in the river? They shouldn't have been fighting with wooden sticks, not there. Her father came to see if she was well and she told him everything that happened. He had a grim expression, very different from the one she was used to.

The queen came to see her some time later. Her face was severe.

"Hello, Sansa."

"Your Grace." Sansa stood up and curtsied, remembering her manners at the last moment. "How is the prince, Joffrey?"

"He's with the maester right now. The injury is grave, he may have marks for the rest of his life."

"I'm sorry, I never wanted that. We were just walking."

"You were present, Sansa. Can you tell me what happened? Is it true a direwolf attacked Joffrey?"

"Yes… your Grace. It was my sister's direwolf. She bit his hand. I'm sorry, I tried to tell her to stop, but there was nothing I could do. She wouldn't listen. I swear I never wanted..."
The queen raised a hand. "That's alright. I believe you. Sometimes we see people we love suffer and there's nothing we can do. That was really your sister's direwolf who did this?"

"Yes, your Grace," she answered weakly.

"And your sister? She was with someone else, a butcher's boy?"

"Yes, he hit her with a stick when we arrived, your Grace."

The queen nodded slowly. "I'm sorry for what you had to witness today. Sometimes we must look at things we wouldn't like to see otherwise. This is part of a queen's duties. I'm sorry for that. Excuse me, but I must go back to my son."

"Your Grace, may I see the prince. I want to apologize to him."

The queen had started to walk away, but she turned to look at Sansa. "I'll relay your apologies to him, and I'll ask him to see you once he's better. For the time being, don't leave this room."

The queen left and Sansa found herself all alone for a very long time. She had a quick supper brought to her. One of her father's men told her that they were looking for Arya and her direwolf who disappeared. Sansa didn't understand what had just happened. She missed Lady. She wished she could have her by her side to reassure her. Sansa always felt better when her direwolf was there. She felt a special link to her, like a connection. Lady always seemed to know and understand what she felt, even more than Jeyne.

Sansa went to sleep later, but she was woken up by a man in white armor who told her the queen wanted to see her. She recognized him to be Ser Boros Blount, one of the kingsguards. She was afraid of the man. He didn't look kind, but Sansa followed him. If the queen summoned her, she had to come. They stopped in a corridor before the dining room of the inn, and Sansa heard yelling on the other side. She heard the king's booming voice, Arya, and even Joffrey yell. The prince hadn't wanted to see her again of the day. She wondered how he was. Did he lose his hand? She couldn't support the prospect of it. She was afraid. Afraid of the king, afraid of her father, afraid of the Hound, afraid of Ser Ilyn Payne, afraid of everyone, even the prince. The way he shouted at her as blood spurted from his hand… that was nothing like the other times they spoke, in feasts and as they walked together. The day had looked so beautiful. Why did it have to turn that way?

Sansa heard the queen call for her. Ser Boros led her until she stood before the king. The queen was standing next to him with the prince. He had thick bandages around his arm. She wanted to run to him and ask him if everything was all right, but she was afraid to do so. He looked at her differently. He looked… angry? Was he angry at her? And the queen? And the king? Her father and Arya were also there.

The king was looking at her. He pointed a place right before him. She advanced to stand before him. "Now, child, tell me what happened. Tell it all and tell it true. It's a great crime to lie to a king."

Sansa looked at her father, then to Arya, then to the queen and her prince. What was she supposed to say? She didn't want to speak against Arya, but she couldn't speak against the prince either. *Filthy little bitch!* The prince couldn't have said that. Surely she misheard. If she misheard, then everything that happened… *Arya is your only sister, Sansa. You won't get another one. If you lose her, you are unlikely to ever get her back.* But could she lose Joffrey? Everything was blurred in her head. A voice was telling her something in her head, something she didn't want to hear, but she kept hearing it all the same.

She could only sputter in the end. "I don't know. I don't remember. Everything happened so fast." It
was true. She didn't remember exactly what happened. "I didn't see."

"Liar! Liar! Liar! Liar!"

Arya started to hit her and Sansa struggled to get rid of her.

"Hey, stop it! That's enough of that!" Their father separated them.

"She's as wild as that animal of hers. I want her punished," the queen declared.

"What would you have me do, whip her through the streets?" the king sighed. "Damn it, children fight. It's over."

"Joffrey will bear these scars for the rest of his life." Sansa looked again at the bandages. It looked painful.

"You let that little girl disarm you?" The king was talking to his son. He turned to her father. "Ned, see to it that your daughter is disciplined. I'll do the same with my son."

"Gladly, your Grace." Her father's voice sounded scornful.

"And what of the direwolf? What of the beast that savaged your son?" the queen asked.

King Robert had risen. Sansa was afraid of him. "I'd forgot the damned wolf," he said.

"We found no trace of the direwolf, your Grace," a guard said.

"No? So be it."

"We have another wolf."

The king turned to look at the queen when she said it. Then he resumed to walk forward. "As you will."

"You can't mean it," Sansa's father said.

"A direwolf's no pet. Get her a dog, she'll be happier for it."

Another wolf? No, that couldn't be. Sansa's world crumbled. No, he couldn't mean it. "He doesn't mean Lady, does he?" Her father's expression… "No, no, not Lady! Lady didn't bite anyone! She's good!"

"Lady wasn't there! You leave her alone!" Sansa heard her sister yell with her.

Sansa turned to her lord father. "Stop them. Don't let them do it." She begged him and the queen. "Please, it wasn't Lady."

"Is this your command, your Grace?"

The king walked away when her father asked him this. No, that couldn't be. They couldn't kill Lady. Lady would never hurt anyone. Sansa felt tears all over her face. They couldn't do that. She barely understood anything to what was said afterwards, but she heard that her father would be the one to kill Lady. She felt betrayed. Someone brought her back to her room. She shared it with Arya, but she didn't notice the presence of her sister. Lady. No, not Lady. She kept crying, and all the while, the day went all back to her. She saw it all over again. She couldn't remember the accident, but she remembered how Joffrey looked at her afterwards. A voice said words she heard at Winterfell, words
she didn't want to hear.

_Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you'll realize it before it's too late._

Chapter End Notes

Not much change, I know. Sorry I didn't save Lady. Sansa is a major character of this fanfiction, but like in the books, she must go through a lot before she matures. This is not the last time Margaery's words come to haunt her.

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery
Margaery woke up, gasping and sweating. Her breath was ragged and it took her some time to steady it. When she looked next to her, it was to have the dreaded confirmation that her husband wasn't there. She dreamed of him, and that was a marvellous dream, but she preferred to have him with her in person. Sometimes in mornings like these, they would stay in bed together for some more time. She raged after him. Why did he leave her here alone? She loved Tyrion, but to lose months in the North only to visit the Wall? She sighed and rolled on her side. He would be back before long. He wouldn't spend an eternity at the Wall. He would stay long enough to look at it, then he would come back. She preferred it if he didn't stay there for long. Many of the recent recruits of the Night's Watch were people Tyrion sent himself to the Wall, with the habit he took to send criminals there instead of killing them. Surely standing over the Wall and pissing off the edge of the world wouldn't take ages. It couldn't be longer than their wedding night, as long it was.

After some time, Margaery decided to leave the warmth of her furs and donned a nightgown. Her room was quite warm. The Starks had allowed her to move in a warmer section of the castle after the king and his retinue left. Truth be told, Winterfell wasn't much colder than Casterly Rock, at least inside. Outside was another matter. The glass garden was pleasant enough, though he didn't equal those of Highgarden or Casterly Rock in the least. It was quite small, and made to grow fruits and vegetables during winter rather than leisure. The godwood of Winterfell was far better than the one they had at Casterly Rock, though not as beautiful as the one they had at Highgarden with its three weirwood trees. However, Margaery felt like a stranger whenever she walked in it. There was something threatening with the weirwood tree there, and the whole place. All in all, Winterfell was no horrible place, and Margaery supposed it was even a paradise for most of the people in the North, but there wasn't much to do all the same. Living here was like living away from the world. The Winter Town could barely be called a town. The smallest town around Highgarden was more populated. She was afraid she would get bored with time if she lived here forever.

Sera entered at this moment. "Good morning, my lady."

"Good morning, Sera. I'm glad to see you." Margaery sat before the glass she brought with her from Casterly Rock and let her handmaiden begin to brush her hair for the day. "Anything interesting going on among the servants?"

"Not really, my lady. They all talk about the assassin."

Of course, they did. Two weeks after the events, she could still scarcely believe it. Someone had tried to kill Lady Stark. Some of her men said they saw the footpad wandering inside the castle when the royal party was there, but they couldn't tell more about him. Apparently, he came with the king and his family. Margaery found it quite suspicious. First Varys's message about Jon Arryn being killed, now this. If the man came with Robert and Cersei… Why would she try to kill Catelyn Stark?
The Lady of Winterfell was no danger for her. The only possible explanation that Margaery found would be that she may do this to force Eddard Stark to come back to Winterfell and not take the position of Hand, but who could be sure that he would do that? After all, when Tyrion tried to convince him to not go in King's Landing, Ned Stark replied he would do his duty to his king. The death of his wife may delay the time he would assume his office, but nothing more. If Cersei really wanted to get rid of Ned Stark, she would have killed him, not his wife. It didn't make any sense. Unless Cersei wasn't the one behind it and someone else sent this man.

"And Lady Stark left her chamber this morning," Sera added.

"Really? Well, that's good news." Catelyn Stark had stayed shut behind a door, first with her son, then alone with her wounded hands, for weeks. Margaery had visited her each day since the assassination attempt. The Lady of Winterfell had looked better than when she watched over her son. Margaery was glad that she felt better, but she regretted that she needed an assassination attempt to come back to reality.

"I'm eager to leave this place," said Margaery. She missed Casterly Rock, and there was her cousin's wedding too.

"Me too, my lady."

"So, no man in Winterfell showed an interest in you?" she teased her handmaiden.

"You're the one to speak, with Robb Stark chasing after you."

Margaery laughed out loudly. "He's not chasing me, Sera."

"Then you haven't seen the way he looks at you."

Of course, she saw it. "I'm married. Robb Stark can chase me as much as he likes, he won't get anything from me. Anyway, he's been more distant lately, with his mother who almost died and his duties. I'm not going to complain about it."

"I find him quite handsome, me. And gentle, too."

"He is, but he's dull. Kind and handsome, but dull." She thought about Tyrion and his bawdy japes, which brought a smile back on her face.

"I wouldn't say no if he proposed to marry me," Sera said.

"Do you think he would?"

"No, no, of course. I just meant... In the eventuality he did, I would accept," Sera explained, blushing. Margaery laughed inwardly at the expense of her friend.

"Well, I already have a husband, and I'm not going to set Tyrion aside for a Stark. Anyway I can't, even if I wanted to. Could you please fetch me a breakfast, Sera? I'll take it alone today. And then have a bath prepared for me."

"Of course, my lady."

Sera ended arranging her hair, falling over her shoulders in curls. Then she brought her breakfast. The Starks let her eat with them at their high table, but today she preferred to take it alone. As soon as Margaery was done with the meal, her bath was ready. She sent all her handmaidens and servants away to be alone. In the hot water, she wondered about the assassin again. Who hired him? Cersei
always came first to her mind as a suspect. She tried to have Tyrion poisoned after all, but it looked so unlikely this time. Catelyn Stark was the last person Margaery imagined that Cersei Lannister could think about killing. Perhaps it was someone else, but then who? Robert Baratheon wouldn't have the wife of his best friend and Hand murdered. Maybe it was someone from the exterior who paid the footpad to commit the murder. The Starks had enemies. Her family had her own after all in the Reach.

Margaery was careful to not let her hair drench into water, but after some hesitation, thinking it wouldn't be kind for Sera to have her arrange her hair all over again, she thought something Tyrion would have been proud of and engulfed her head into the hot water. She emerged, her brown hair falling heavily over her face and pushed it aside with her hands. Tyrion liked to do it himself when they took a bath together. But instead of being with her, he was freezing his balls at the Wall. She would make him regret to have let her all alone in Winterfell when he would come back, warming his balls at the same time. That brought her to laugh uncontrollably. It didn't bother her so much that Tyrion decided to visit the Wall, but this was the first time they were separated since their wedding. She missed him. With most of her friends still at Casterly Rock, Mira visiting her family at Ironrath and her husband far away, she felt more alone than she had ever felt in many years. And she missed her nights with Tyrion. No wonder she made dreams about him, and not only about the nights they could have spent together, but also about the other moments they shared.

Margaery remained in the steaming water until it wasn't steaming anymore and turned lukewarm. Then she left it. Sera wasn't very pleased when she came back and found out that she had to start all over again with her mistress' hair, and all wet on the top of that. It was more difficult to brush wet hair. Still, she did it without complaining… too much. Then Margaery left her room to take a quick walk around Winterfell.

Everyone was busy all around her as she walked through the corridors and courtyards of the castle. Winterfell competed with Highgarden for the size of the castle and easily defeated the Red Keep at it. Of course, it couldn't beat Casterly Rock. The entire castle was a mountain. No castle was bigger than it through all the Seven Kingdoms.

She wore a thick green gown that even covered her arms. She would rather let her arms bare, but despite her claim that Tyrell blood ran warm, she felt cold without sleeves here. She managed to wear gowns without sleeves when she could spend most of the day inside the castle, or when she only went to the glass garden, but this morning she wanted to take a walk around the castle all alone, to clear her mind. She didn't bother to be accompanied by a guard. She had two following her for the first days following the assassination attempt, but afterwards she decided it was useless. She wasn't the target and risked nothing from the Starks. She was under the protection of the guest rights and the Northerners had the reputation to honor them with zeal. Moreover, she had good relations with all the Starks still at Winterfell, and it was very unlikely that another assassin would hide somewhere, waiting for the right moment to kill her. Her men and the Stark men were everywhere.

Margaery decided to pay a visit to the godswood. Although she always had a strange feeling in there, she wanted to walk and the glass garden wasn't large enough for that purpose. The godswood was large enough, and very few people went inside. For a solitary walk, it was ideal.

Again, she felt out of place in Winterfell's godswood, even though her gown matched the color of the surroundings. The glass garden and the godswood remained the places in Winterfell that reminded her the most of her home, but although the godswood was all green and nature, it looked like a grim place all the same. It seemed to deliver her a warning, to tell her she didn't belong here. Still, she kept walking. She wouldn't turn her back only because the place gave her chills. There was no reason to fear it.
She arrived before the weirwood tree, white trunk and branches with red leaves. His face and eyes were bleeding. Some of these trees bled, others didn't. Those at Highgarden seldom did it. There were trees with an open mouth, but this one's was shut. No, it was slightly open, as if it whispered something. Margaery looked at it closely. She never believed in the Old Gods. Everyone south of the Neck believed in the Seven, and she had always prayed to them. She didn't know much about the religion of the Northerners. The godswood of Highgarden was meant for pleasure, not for the practice of faith, and neither was the one they had at Casterly Rock. Before Mira, centuries had certainly gone since the last person prayed in these godswoods. Tyrion or Willas certainly knew more about these Old Gods than she did.

Margaery frowned all of a sudden. She was sure she heard something, a whisper. A man's voice, who said something about a sister. She wasn't sure she understood well, but she thought it said something about protecting her. She swore it came from the tree. Then another voice, a woman this time, came from the same direction.

"What I am about to tell you must remain between us." Margaery looked at the face. Was it really speaking to her? "I don't think Bran fell from that tower. I think he was thrown."

She knew this voice. Lady Stark. She turned around the tree and saw her not far away with four other people. She recognized her son, Robb, the maester, Luwin, a knight called Ser Rodrik, their master-at-arms, and someone else. She hid behind the tree again. They obviously didn't know she was there, and she didn't think they would be pleased to discover her presence.

"Someone tried to kill him twice," the Lady of Winterfell resumed. "Why? Why murder an innocent child? Unless he saw something he wasn't meant to see."

"Saw what, my lady?" the man who Margaery didn't know asked.

"I don't know. But I would stake my life the Lannisters are involved. We already have reason to suspect their loyalty to the Crown."

Her heart stopped. Margaery couldn't believe what she just heard. The Starks believed they were working against the king, and that they tried to murder her son. But, didn't the assassin try to kill Catelyn Stark? Unless he was targeting Bran and his mother was in the way. But why would someone kill a boy of ten, a boy who was sleeping?

"Did you notice the dagger the killer used?" a male voice said. "It's too fine a weapon for such a man. The handle is made of silver. Someone gave it to him."

"They come into our home and try to murder my brother?" That was Robb Stark. "If it's war they want…"

"It it comes to that, you know I'll stand behind you," someone else said.

"What, is there going to be a battle in the godswood? Huh?" the old maester asked.

"I will put all the Lannisters under arrest," Robb declared. "We will question them one by one and discover who did this."

"I don't believe Lady Margaery is behind this," Catelyn Stark said all of a sudden.

"But you said the Lannisters were behind this."

"Her husband, maybe, and his brother and his sister, but I doubt she's part of this. The assassin believed I wouldn't be there. He said so. He started the fire to create a distraction so no one would be
there when he would kill Bran. Margaery knew I was always with him. She wouldn't have sent someone to kill Bran without telling him that I would be present."

"Maybe she believed you would leave the room when the fire would start."

"The fire was at the other side of the castle, across the bailey. You told me yourself to stay here, Robb. The plan wasn't devised by her. Her men helped to extinguish the fire. The people behind it didn't know I would be present. Furthermore, she is not entirely a Lannister, she is a Tyrell, and she's been married to him for only two years. Maybe she doesn't know about her husband's plans."

"Still, we shouldn't let her and her men wander through the castle as if they owned it."

"What would you have us do, my lord?" Luwin asked. "Throw her and her men into our dungeons? Accuse them without proof? Too easily words of war become acts of war. They are our guests here. We don't know the truth yet. But I agree we should be more careful with our visitors from now on, and that Lord Stark must be told of this."

"I don't trust a raven to carry these words," Lord Stark's wife said.

"I'll ride to King's Landing," her son declared.

"No. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. I will go myself."

"Mother, you can't."

"I must." Even though Margaery couldn't see her, it was obvious she let no place to discussion.

"I'll send Hal with a squad of guardsmen to escort you," the knight declared.

"Too large a party attracts unwanted attention. I don't want the Lannisters to know I'm coming."

"Let me accompany you at least. The Kingsroad can be a dangerous place for a woman alone."

"What about Bran?" Robb Stark wondered aloud.

"I have prayed to the Seven for more than a month. Bran's life is in their hands now. Prepare our things, Ser Rodrik. We leave within the hour."

"What about the Lannisters? Won't they find it strange to see you leave so suddenly?"

"We'll tell them that I'm going to visit your grandfather at Riverrun. He's ill and the letter Lady Margaery brought said he didn't have for long."

"And the others who are with the king? Won't they find it strange to see you arrive like this?"

"It's too late to catch them up on the road," she heard the old maester say. "They probably already crossed the Trident. It would be better to follow the White Knife and then to take a ship at White Harbor. You'll have to use false identities, of course. No one will be expecting you in the capital. You may even manage to arrive before Lord Stark and the king."

"It's decided then," the Lady of Winterfell stated.

Margaery had remained hidden from their sight by the weirwood tree for all the exchange. She remained there, unmoving for some time, as they left the godsdow. By chance, she wasn't between them and the exit and none looked behind or thought about going around the tree. She stayed there for some more time afterwards. They believed she and Tyrion tried to kill Bran. That was completely
stupid. Even for Cersei, it seemed entirely foolish that she would try to kill Bran. Unless he saw something he wasn't meant to see. Could Cersei go that far? Murder a child while he was asleep because he heard something? Bran fell from a tower in ruin, near the First Keep.

Margaery left the godswood, trying to remain unnoticed when she went back into the courtyard. She walked to the tower in question. She remembered where they found Bran. She was among those who arrived not long after the tragedy happened. She remembered seeing him, all pale and his legs entirely broken and twisted in an unnatural way as guardsmen and squires brought him to the maester. For a moment, she had the impression to see Willas again, after he fell from his horse. He was only a boy. There was nothing to see at the base of the tower, where he fell. She looked up. There were crows flying all over. Probably some built their nests in it. It looked abandoned for a long time.

Margaery walked into the tower. The stairs were still in very good state, though the stone looked about to crumble in several places. She was careful of where she put her feet. The first floor was almost intact, but it was all in darkness. The only light came from a small square entrance that an arm could barely fit in. The second floor was much more lighted. There was a huge breach in the wall. When Margaery looked down though the breach, she realized after a moment that it was right over the place where they found Bran. She looked around the room. **A perfect place for a secret meeting. An abandoned tower that no one would care to visit... except a boy who would climb it.**

Lord Varys told them that Jon Arryn may have been assassinated, and by the same poison that Cersei tried to use against Tyrion. If she was behind this... What if Bran surprised a discussion between the queen and someone else about that? They could have pushed him in the hope it would kill him. Everyone would believe this was an accident. When they realized the boy wouldn't die, they hired someone to kill him once they would be gone. Maybe they hoped the blame would fall on her. After all, Margaery was present, waiting for Tyrion who was visiting the Wall. Cersei wanted her dead. I'll have you strangled in your sleep. Why not use it to get rid of two nuisances at the same time?

Tyrion couldn't have done this. The Starks were wrong about him. He had no reason to kill Bran, and Margaery knew Tyrion would never order the murder of a child. He wasn't like his father. He was capable of cruelty, but he directed it towards criminals or people who deserved it, not against innocents, and when necessary. Robb and Catelyn Stark were making a mistake by suspecting him. But she couldn't tell them. She couldn't tell them her suspicions concerning Cersei. The queen was Tyrion's sister. If they ever suspected she was responsible of Jon Arryn's death and the attempt of murder against their son, Tyrion would be associated as a member of her family. And what about Tommen and Myrcella? They could be in danger too. She had to talk to Tyrion. She had to warn him. But how? She couldn't send a raven to Castle Black. The maester of Winterfell would read it before it was sent, and even if he didn't, the one at Castleblack may read it, and the Lord Commander was a Mormont, a former bannerman of the Starks. The people of Winterfell would find it suspicious if she sent a rider to her husband. Maybe she should join him, or leave Winterfell immediately, but again, people would wonder why she left so suddenly, before her lord husband returned. They would become more suspicious about her, and she couldn't allow it. They already suspected her and Tyrion, wrongly. They had nothing to see with all this. No, she couldn't transmit a message to Tyrion. She had to wait for him to return, and maybe win the trust of the Starks in the meantime, convince them she had nothing to see with the attempt of murder against Bran, and all that without revealing anything. Damn, Tyrion, why did you go to the Wall? We should have headed back to Casterly Rock immediately. We are needed in the south.

Margaery left the tower, resigned to the fact that for now, she could do nothing. Well, not entirely nothing. She had to make sure the Starks lowered their guard and stopped believing she was an enemy. There was something else she could do. She knew how to warn her husband.
returned to her rooms, the young man who said he would fight without hesitation with Robb Stark if there was a war intercepted her.

"My lady. Lady Stark requires your presence." His eyes, his face, and the way his hand rested close to his sword showed he didn't trust her. He wasn't good at hiding. Margaery highly doubted he saw her in the godswood.

"Very well, where may I find her?"

"With her son, in his chamber. Please follow me."

It was said in quite an imperious tone. "What if I don't? Are you going to force me to come, sword on my back?" she asked loudly.

A few people around her had heard, and there were three of her knights from the Reach who were close. They came as soon as they heard. "My lady, is there a problem?" one of them asked. The three of them had their hand on the pommel of their swords too. "Are you bothering Lady Lannister, Greyjoy?"

So, that was it. He was Theon Greyjoy, the son of Balon Greyjoy, a ward to the Starks since his father rebelled. Both in the Reach and the Westerlands, the people from the Iron Islands were despised, and as far as she knew, the people of the North felt the same. The young man looked at her knights. All assurance and pride had left his face. It wasn't difficult to see what kind of person he was. Great words, small doings. She burst into laugh.

"It was a joke. Please forgive me, Theon Greyjoy. You may leave, sers." The knights did as she told them, not without glaring at the son of Balon Greyjoy both in disdain and suspicion. "So, shall we go?" she asked with a pretty smile.

He nodded and walked forward. She had just reminded him of who she was, and that her men would protect her, without rising any suspicion. Many people had seen it, and maybe it would reach the ears of the Lord of Winterfell. They would remember to be careful with her, as much as she was to remain careful with them.

Catelyn Stark was in her son's bedroom, just like the Greyjoy told her, and she was looking at him. The wooden ring she worked on for weeks was hanging over his head. Margaery knew what it was. Willas's mother had made one similar when he was injured. She never made one. She never had sons or daughters to pray for, not yet.

"Catelyn, you wanted to see me?"

The Lady of Winterfell turned to look at her. "Yes. Thank you. It was to tell you that I'm leaving."

Margaery faked surprise. She was very good at it. "Leaving?"

"I'm going to Riverrun, to see my lord father, before it's too late."

"What about your son? Bran?"

"Maester Luwin says he will recover, but my lord father doesn't have this chance if I am to believe his words. I must go. I prayed for my son long enough. His fate is in the hands of the Seven now."

"Very well. I understand."

Margaery realized they were all alone in the room. The guards were all at the entrance. It was
strange, considering Robb Stark had ordered a guard to be next to his brother at all time.

"There's something I would like to ask you," Lady Stark resumed.

"Go on."

"Could you watch over Bran while I'm away? Just to make sure he is well?"

"Of course, there's no problem." Catelyn Stark said she didn't think she was guilty in the godswood. It seemed she sincerely believed it.

"I gave instructions to the guards to let you see him at any time. I want someone to be there for him when he wakes up."

"You can count on me."

"I thank you, Lady Margaery, for your help. You were right. I spent too much time only worrying about Bran and I neglected my other children and my other duties. Thank you. I'm sure you will be an excellent mother one day."

"I hope so. Well, I wish you a good journey, Catelyn."

The Lady of Winterfell left and Margaery was all alone with her son. If they expected her to betray herself and try to murder Bran right now, they were wrong. She would never try to kill him. She looked at his inanimate body, his chest rising very slowly. He made her think so much about Willas right now. She remembered how she stayed for days at his bedside before he woke up. How would she react if it was her son who found himself in this situation? Maybe the same way than Lady Stark. She knew how her grandmother was ready to do everything for her and Loras, and for her son, despite the fact he was an oaf, so what would she be ready to do for her own children?

She pulled a chair so she could sit right next to Bran. She knew she was certainly watched, and maybe this would give to the Starks the opinion that she, at least, had nothing to do with the attempt of murder. She didn't touch the little boy, and only stayed there. She hoped he would wake up. He was only a child, an innocent child, and if he woke up, then they could know the truth. But if the truth was that he saw Cersei discussing Jon Arryn's death, or something else dangerous… She had to convince the Starks before that she was entirely innocent and that she only wished for Bran's recovery, and then she could convince them Tyrion had nothing to do with that either. Catelyn Stark may trust her, but she didn't think the others shared her views.

She leaned towards the boy, as if to whisper him something, and that's what she did. "We're alone now, Bran. Your mother is gone, but I'm here. Don't worry, everything will be all right. You're safe."

She kissed him on the forehead and left. She would pray for him to wake up. Later, she watched Lady Stark leave with Ser Rodrik and half a dozen other men. She suspected they wouldn't follow her. Maybe they would go to Riverrun while she went to White Harbor with Ser Rodrik, or simply come back to Winterfell in secret after a few days. This was only to give the impression that she left with a good escort.

Later, Rickon came to her. "Why has Mom left?"

"Your mother had to go somewhere. She will come back soon," Margaery reassured him. She had spent weeks consoling the boy of six who didn't understand what was going on, who never saw his mother and whose brother was too busy keep him company. She felt powerless many times as she saw him cry.
"When?"

"Soon."

"When soon is?"

Margaery smiled. "Don't you think you should go back to your lessons? Shouldn't you be sparring right now?"

"I'm not sure I want to spar."

"Afterwards, I'll give you pastries."

It took nothing more to convince Rickon to go to the training ground. He fought his opponent, one of the guardsmen of Winterfell, with ferocity, but his blows often missed their target. He was enraged as a fighter and had no technique at all. One of Margaery's knights from the Rock tried to teach him a few tricks, but he was too impatient. She felt the gaze of all the guardsmen of Winterfell as they looked at Rickon with a man who had the lion on his shield. They had nothing to fear. They fought with wooden swords.

"My brother likes you." The acting Lord of Winterfell stood next to her, watching his little brother fight, but she was sure he was watching her as much as him.

"He does, but I'm sure he loves his mother much more."

"He does, and you're not his mother."

"No, I'm not," Margaery recognized. "I'm sorry, but it's difficult to send a little boy away when his mother and his two brothers are locked in their rooms or too occupied to see him and that he doesn't understand what's happening."

Robb Stark nodded. Margaery was sure he meant to get her as far away from his little brother as he could. "My lady mother told me she asked you to look after Bran."

"Yes, she did."

"There will be a man with you each time you'll visit him. After the footpad tried to kill him, I don't want to take any risk."

A veiled threat. "I thought he tried to kill Lady Stark."

"No, it was my brother he wanted to kill. The next one who tries to kill him will have to deal with me."

He looked at her. None of his hands were on the pommel of his sword, but Margaery could see he was being serious. "Well, in this case, I pity the one who would try again, but I think your brother's direwolf will deal with him before you can. It's sad that the man isn't alive. We could have questioned him and known who sent him."

"We'll find out who did this."

"If you want, my men can assist you," she offered.

"Thank you, but I'll manage with my own. I wouldn't want to abuse from your presence."

"I'm afraid I'm abusing of your hospitality much more than you are abusing of my presence, but who
am I to question the opinion of the Lord of Winterfell under his roof? Thank you for allowing me to stay."

"We could hardly throw you off."

"You could. This is your home, your castle, your lands."

"My father is Lord of Winterfell. I'm only acting lord in his absence."

"But you will be Lord of Winterfell one day. Are you betrothed yet?"

That startled him. That was the reaction Margaery looked for. "No, I'm not."

"I'm surprised, at your age and handsome like you are, I expected you would have an army of young maids following you everywhere."

This time, she made him blush. "I... One day, I will marry."

"Then I suggest you start to look right now. I hope you will make the right choice." She looked straight into his eyes and put a hand on his. "I'll go and pray for your brother in the sept. If you ever need me, don't hesitate to ask."

She walked away, conscious of the effect she had on the future lord. Her talents could still be useful, even after she stopped using them with Tyrion. Making Robb Stark uncomfortable about her would make him hesitate to take actions against her. At the sept, she prayed for Bran, but also for her family, for her husband, her friends both in Highgarden and Casterly Rock, for her nephews and her niece, and for Lady Stark's children. She thought about the young Sansa, who would marry Joffrey, her nephew, one day. She was glad she wasn't the one to marry the prince. She could hear Tyrion saying better her than you. She couldn't have agreed more.

During the afternoon, Margaery went to the Winter Town like she did most of the days. She left Winterfell with ten men, all on horse, and came back with nine.

Next morning, Margaery was reading one of the few books that were saved from the library that took fire weeks ago. Tyrion loved to read. Sometimes they would read a book together, and as their foreheads touched each other, they would do something else from time to time. Sera burst into her room.

"My lady. It's Mira. She's back."

A smile immediately came to Margaery's lips and she followed her handmaiden outside to welcome her friend. Mira was dismounting when they arrived in the courtyard. She wore furs, but had her dresses of the Reach underneath. She curtsied, but Margaery pulled her into a hug and kissed her on the cheek. Mira then went to present herself before Robb Stark since she just arrived. He granted her the hospitality of Winterfell since she was a handmaiden to the Lady of Casterly Rock who was already a guest here. Then Margaery had a good discussion with her in the godswood.

"How is your family?" she asked Mira.

"They are fine. Ryon grew so much, I didn't recognize him. He was only a baby when I left. And Talia and Ethan... Talia's voice is more wonderful than ever."

"I hoped you would bring her here. I hoped you would bring all your family here, for your wedding."
Mira blushed. "Well, I learned Lord Tyrion was visiting the Wall, so I didn't want to make them wait weeks in Winterfell."

"But they will come for your marriage, won't they?"

"Of course, they will."

"This time, I won't let you find an excuse to delay, Mira. Willas is very eager."

"I know." Mira had a timid smile. She was always like this when the subject of her wedding came. She didn't want to talk about it. Margaery decided to not press the matter.

"A lot happened in your absence."

"Lord Eddard Stark is now Hand of the King."

"Yes."

"The last time a Stark was named Hand, he only remained at the office for a day, then he went back in the North."

"I doubt this is what will happen this time. Robert Baratheon won't let Ned Stark leave so early, if he ever allows him to leave at all."

"Well, I hope Lord Stark will make a good Hand."

Margaery wasn't sure she wanted the Lord of Winterfell to be a good Hand. On one hand, if Cersei was behind Jon Arryn's death, someone had to stop her, but if the Starks believed the Lannisters were all plotting against the king, then she, Tyrion and Ser Kevan were in danger as well. If only Tyrion had succeeded to convince Eddard Stark to not go in King's Landing. They may have put enough pressure on King Robert afterwards to have Ser Kevan named as Hand, or even Tyrion if that was necessary. Now, if the Starks suspected them, they risked a war. Robb Stark had been ready to go to war in the godswood.

"Mira, there are a few other things you should know."

Margaery told her about the assassination attempt and Bran's fall. However, she didn't mention the discussion she surprised in the godswood or the doubts the Starks had about House Lannister. Margaery had always trusted Mira, but her handmaiden was loyal to her family, and her family was loyal to the Starks. No situation had ever happened where she may have to choose between her loyalty to Margaery or to the North, so it would be better to keep her in the dark.

Mira was shocked by the revelation. "Who did this?"

"We don't know. Robb Stark is still trying to discover who could have sent this man."

"But who would want to kill a boy of ten?"

"I don't know." That wasn't completely a lie. They didn't know for sure who was behind the attack yet. Maybe it would have been better to send a message to Ser Kevan in King's Landing. "But someone obviously wanted him dead. Are there people in the North who have a grudge against the Starks, or an interest to have them dead or deposed."

Mira seemed to think about it for a moment. "I would only see the Boltons. They have been the main contenders of the Starks to rule the North for centuries and they still cause them problems from time
to time. The Whitehills are their bannermen. But it's been very long since they caused any real problem. They fought loyally with Lord Stark during Robert's Rebellion and Lord Roose Bolton never seemed willing to try anything against them."

"No other house could wish for them to disappear?"

"The only other houses who would be powerful enough to hope to gain anything if the Starks were in difficulty are the Umbers, the Karstarks and the Manderlys, but these three houses are fiercely loyal to the Starks. The Karstarks even share blood with them, they were a minor branch of the Starks of Winterfell at the origin. I don't see them trying to kill Eddard Stark's son. Anyway, if someone wanted to to fragilize the position of the Starks, they would target Robb Stark, the heir. If he was to die, the acting Lord of Winterfell would be a boy of ten that no one knows if he will ever wake up and his heir would a six-years-old child. It makes no sense to murder Brandon Stark."

"No, you're right. It makes no sense."

Mira had the truth of it. Catelyn Stark probably deducted well when she said that the only reason why someone would try to murder her son would be that some people wouldn't want him to wake up. It seemed more likely than ever that her dear sister-in-law had something to do with it. Perhaps Tyrion's brother had a hand in this as well. She needed to speak with him, and as quickly as possible.

"We'll have to be careful, Mira," Margaery said. "Someone tried to kill a boy of ten. I think it is unlikely that someone would try another murder, but no one knows."

"Of course, my lady. Is Lord Tyrion going to come back soon?"

"I hope he will. I don't hate this place, Mira, but I would feel better at home."

"I understand, my lady."

"It's quite cold here, too."

"Just like it's quite warm in Highgarden."

They smiled at each other. Margaery knew Mira hadn't enjoyed the weather of the Reach at first, even if she never complained about it. They stopped before the weirwood tree, where Margaery heard the discussion between Lady Stark and the others.

"I suppose you want to pray," she said to her friend.

"If it doesn't bother my lady."

"Of course not. Take your time. It's not all days we can pray in the godswood of Winterfell."

"It doesn't matter which godswood we pray in, as long as there is a weirwood tree in."

"Come back to see me later, when you're done."

Margaery left her friend to her prayers with the gods of the North. The rest of the day went without problem, though she could feel that the guardsmen of Winterfell were more suspicious and eyed her and her men carefully. She went to the maester's turret, where two ravens from Casterly Rock were waiting for her. Lord Westerling had asked for one of his children to be returned to him. Margaery had to give a refusal. The other matter concerned troubles in Lannisport, in one of the orphanages Margaery had opened. There had been reports that some children were abused by servants working there. Genna asked if she should inquire on this. Margaery gave her full consent, though she also told
Genna to remain as discreet as possible. She wouldn't let the children to who she gave shelter be mistreated, but she couldn't let more nasty rumors run about her charity works if they were unfounded. They would deal with this in secret and try to not attract attention.

Many days later, in the evening, she was with Bran. He was still sound asleep and didn't show any sign of recovery. His direwolf was with him, and there was a guard as well in the chamber. Margaery just sat there, reading. She didn't think it would be a good idea to make needlework here. The Starks could believe she waited for the right time to plunge it into Bran's throat. The direwolf was as quiet as the boy. Margaery had been afraid of the animals at first. This one ripped a man's throat after all, but he never showed any hostility towards her, no more than Rickon's or Robb's direwolves. It was as if they could feel she was no danger. She really had the impression sometimes that they could see through her. The only other person who gave her a similar impression, and far greater, was Tyrion. It was as if he could read her mind like an open book sometimes. She didn't dislike it. To have a caring husband who could guess what you wanted and what you thought had many benefits. It would have been all the opposite if Tyrion had hated her or only saw her as a broodmare, but he didn't.

"My lady, it's quite late. You should go to sleep," the guard told her at one time.

"Lady Stark asked me to watch over her son while she was away. I'm not tired yet. I'll stay a little while longer."

The guard didn't look very pleased. It seemed he was tired as well since not long later, he was drowsing. So much for protection. Anyway, there was the direwolf and two other men at the door. They were outside, so they didn't see their comrade had fallen asleep. Margaery wouldn't like to be in his place when someone would come to replace him.

Time went on as Margaery kept reading, casting a glance at Bran occasionally. *The Lady of the Lake* was quite an interesting story, very original when compared to those people usually read. She wondered how it ended in the library of Winterfell. It may have been there before Eddard Stark was its lord. She didn't think Lady Catelyn or her daughter Sansa had read it. Maybe the little Arya did. She thought not without amusement about the discussions her husband said he had with the youngest of the Stark girls. Tyrion would always be more comfortable with outcasts and rejected individuals. Probably it was because he was one of them himself. Margaery wondered how Tyrion would be if he wasn't a dwarf. Would he still be the same man, the man she loved? She never really wished for him to be different. She loved him like he was, and didn't see any harm with his stature. He was a man, like any other, just shorter than most.

She went back to her reading, captivated by the story. She didn't see the time fly. She yawned at some moment. Ladies weren't supposed to yawn, but she couldn't care less. There were so many things ladies were not supposed to do, all more stupid than the others.

"Summer."

A voice came from nowhere. A child's voice. Margaery looked up from her page and saw the boy lying in his bed, his face turned to his direwolf, his eyes opened for the first time in weeks. Brandon Stark just woke up.

Chapter End Notes

Please review.
Next chapter: a new POV
"Welcome."

Wind whistled around his ears. It was colder here than Winterfell. They were far in the North. If they went farther than that, they would no longer be in the North. And here he stood, Jon Snow, the bastard of Winterfell, looking at his future. Solid ice that stretched to both sides at the horizon, seven hundred feet tall. Ice and rock. Nothing more. That was all. It was only ice, and yet it was impressive. The First Men built it to protect the North from the White Walkers. Jon wondered how they did.

There were clouds that reached the top of it. The space between them and the Wall was empty, only snow and earth. There was only the Kingsroad, roughly shaped and leading to Castle Black. Jon could see smoke coming from, and something that looked like a ladder from its base to the top of the wall. It had to be the winch elevator his uncle told him about and that allowed to take men and supplies from Castle Black to the top of the Wall.

"Well, I read *Wonders Made by Man* by Lomas Longstrider, and he included the Wall among his nine wonders. He doesn't do it justice enough."

Tyrion Lannister stood on his horse next to Jon and his uncle Benjen. He looked quite impressed as well. Jon spent a lot of time with him during the last weeks, talking and drinking around campfires. He also spent some time with the forty men the Lord of Casterly Rock had brought with him. They were much better company than the men Yoren had brought and who would soon be his sworn brothers. As for the Lord of Casterly Rock, Jon had gotten used to his arrogant attitude and insulting manners. The good thing with the Imp is that he allowed people to insult him as well, so Jon could tell the great lord whatever he thought about him, and all he would do was smile and laugh. That made him feel well, to be able to say whatever went through his mind, pleasant or not. Sometimes, Lord Tyrion would only sit by the fire and read, and Jon would just sit around saying nothing, and the little lord wouldn't mind his presence. When Jon asked him why he read so much, he answered that his brother, Ser Jaime Lannister, had his sword, and that he had his mind, and that a mind needs books like a sword needs a whetstone.

Most of their travelling party was made of men in crimson armor, with the golden lion on them. Tyrion Lannister had come with a part of his men. Jon, his uncle Benjen, Ghost, Yoren and four more recruits made the rest of their company. When Jon looked at the men who came to join the Night's Watch, and to those who only came to visit it, he thought the roles should have been reversed. The knights of the Westerlands would be much more useful to the Watch than the rapers and poachers Yoren brought.

They moved forward along the Kingsroad they barely discern. As they approached, Jon realized how tall the Wall really was. The highest towers of Winterfell were like dwarves in comparison, and
Castle Black was no better. Jon knew there were nineteen castles along the Wall, but that only three of them were manned right now: Castle Black, Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and the Shadow Tower. Castle Black was the main one, where the new recruits were trained and were the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch lived. Jeor Mormont was the actual 997th Lord Commander. Formerly Lord of Bear Island, he had abdicated his seat to join the Night's Watch and let his son Jorah rule in his stead. His father had once talked to Jon about Ser Jorah Mormont. He sold poachers to slave traders, then ran away to Essos instead of facing his father's justice. However, Jon's lord father always spoke highly of the Lord Commander.

The gates opened before them and they arrived in a frozen courtyard. There were few sections of Winterfell that were in ruins, like the broken tower from where Bran fell, but Castle Black, from its appearance inside, looked half in ruins. His uncle Benjen told him that they lacked men. It seems he was right. There weren't many people in the courtyard. It was far less busy than Winterfell. At the center of it, half a dozen men were waiting for them, all wearing black. The one in the middle of them, a burly and tall man white of hair and beard, with a heavier cloak, marched towards them as they dismounted.

"Welcome back, Benjen." He and his uncle clasped their arms. Then the old man turned to Yoren. "What have you brought us, my brother?"

"Two rapists, two poachers, and Benjen's nephew. Five new recruits all in all."

Jon felt the gaze of the Lord Commander wandering on him for a few seconds. He stepped forward and faced them all. "Welcome to Castle Black. Here, it doesn't matter who you were before. You're beginning a new life, free from everything you've done before. Don't expect it to be easy, but you'll find your place. The Night's Watch has a place for everybody." He turned to the recruiter. "Yoren, bring these lads to the barracks and settle them. Then report them to Ser Alliser Thorne so their training may begin."

Yoren nodded. "Come, everyone."

Jon followed, bringing what few belongings he had with him. From behind, he heard the Lord Commander welcome the Warden of the West.

"Lord Lannister."

"Lord Commander Mormont."

"Welcome to Castle Black." Jon, looking over his shoulder, saw them shaking hands.

"Normally, when an important lord comes, he has a bigger welcoming party waiting for him."

"I'm sorry, but here we can't allow it. Our men are quite busy."

"No matter. I'm not that important, and I merely made an observation, not a reproach."

Jon didn't hear more since he entered the barracks at this moment. It was a huge building filled with beds and couches, all identical. Things were thrown all over the floor, and it smelled from hundreds of men who never bathed. Jon knew a sister who would hate this place, and another one who would love it. This brought a sour smile upon his face.

"Look who's here," Yoren said loudly. Three men who were already inside stood up immediately. "Get back to work before I tell the Lord Commander." The three men left immediately without discussion. "Find yourself an unoccupied couch and make sure to place anything valuable
somewhere no one will think looking into. Then go back into the yard with Ser Alliser. He's impossible to miss."

The others did so, and Jon followed them. He didn't have much. Mostly, he only had his sword. That was the only valuable thing he had on him. He found a couch that seemed to belong to no one in the back of the room and placed what few things he had with him there, including his cloak. This way he would remember where it was. Jon wasn't used to sleep with others. He had his own room in Winterfell. He would have to get used to it. There were worse things in the world. *If that's what the Night's Watch is, that's what it is.* He said the same to Lord Tyrion on the road when he told him the Watch was a place of exile for sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, bastards and fourth-born sons. *That's good, bastard. Most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it.* The words he told him on the road kept playing back in his head. Jon tried to accept the situation. It could be worse. Here, he could start anew. He was no one. The fact he was a bastard didn't matter here.

When he got back into the courtyard, Jon almost heard his name immediately. "You there, bastard! Come, and quickly!"

Jon looked at the man who called after him. He was wearing black him too, had short hair and seemed around his forties. Some recruits were with him, and other men too. Jon supposed this had to be Ser Alliser Thorne.

"Slow, aren't you, Lord Snow," he said, full of disdain. "Well, you'll have to learn to be quicker here. This is not your father's castle where your food is being brought by a fair maid. Welcome to the real world. All of you, go to the armory and see that Noye gives you blunted swords and armors of your size. Get on, now."

Jon gritted his teeth. He had barely arrived after the others, and there was even someone else who came after him. He was always here at time when they had lessons with Ser Rodrik at Winterfell, and he was a better sword than Robb and almost everyone else there. Jon would show the knight how slow he was. He would have to change his mind.

Jon came back before all the others, and the welcome Ser Alliser reserved for him was as warm as before. "Well, you learn quickly, I have to give you that, but don't expect any special treatment." When all the recruits were here, they began the training. "All right. Grenn, Pyp, show them."

They watched as two men of Jon's age sparred. Jon looked around and saw the recruits were mostly very young, but some of them were older. He supposed they were all in training and that those who didn't travel with him on the Kingsroad were probably recruits who arrived not long before him. He watched Grenn and Pyp fight each other. Grenn was immobile. It was as if he had his two feet stuck into stone. As for Pyp, he made a lot of useless movements. Both would be too easy to defeat, or to kill. They didn't even hold their swords properly. They wouldn't stand a chance against a trained knight.

"That's enough," Ser Alliser said after a moment. "As you probably can't see, they're useless. My job is to make you useful before you die, so you better listen and do what I tell you to do. You two, show me how you can fight."

The two rapers stepped forward and began to spar as well, holding their weapons in a clumsier way than the previous ones. It went on like that for some time, two of them fighting while the others watched. None knew how to fight. Jon saw that the Lord Commander and Lord Lannister were both looking at them from afar. He was eager to fight, to prove himself before everyone's eyes, but Ser Alliser never called him.

The one called Pyp just defeated a poacher when his name was finally called. "All right. Now it's the
time to see how worthless the bastard is. In place, Lord Snow. Grenn, show him what you farm boys are made of."

Jon had noticed how Grenn barely moved. He tried to end a battle with one or two powerful blows all the time. Jon let him attack. He ducked the first swing easily, and when his opponent, unbalanced, tried another blow, he diverted it without effort, he hit him in the stomach with the fist holding his sword, then swung his sword in a lateral movement. Grenn's hand covered his face, blood spurting out of his nose. He turned away, using his sword as a stick to keep himself on foot.

"If that were a real sword, you'd be dead," the knight sarcastically commented. "Lord Snow here grew up in a castle spitting down on the likes of you. Pyp. Do you think Ned Stark's bastard bleeds like the rest of us?"

Pyp stepped forward. He was much slimmer than Grenn. The fact he tried to use speed to his advantage showed he wasn't completely a fool, since he was more likely to win with swiftness than with brute force, but he didn't know how to use this speed. Worse than all, he warned Jon of his intention to attack with a shout. Jon only had to back down a little to avert the swing, then he dove the blunted sword forward right in the man's chest. If it had been a real sword, the pointy end would have pierced through his heart. He thought about Arya and the thin sword he gave her.

"Next!" Ser Alliser shouted as Pyp was coughing on the ground. His opponent could only try to reach him three times before Jon took him by the shoulder and sent him rolling away on the ground.

The next opponent was one of the rapers. Jon blocked his attacks easily. Why did they all shout when they attacked? It made it too easy to predict their movements. The other raper tried to attack him from behind, so Jon stepped aside and the two rapers' swords met. Jon then set them out, one with a kick in the belly, the other one with a fist in the face.

Jon looked at Ser Alliser Thorne who cocked his head. "Well, Lord Snow, it appears you're the least useless person here. Go clean yourselves up! There's only so much I can stomach in a day."

Jon walked away furiously. He had just defeated easily five men, and all he got was to be told he was less useless than the others. He didn't look around as he went to the armory to put back into place his practice armor and the blunted sword. In the armory, as he was about to give back the sword, someone called him over his shoulder.

"You broke my nose, bastard!"

In no time, he found himself hands tied behind his back and a dagger on his throat. He doubted it had blunted edges. One of the rapers was holding his hands into place. He tried to get free, to no avail. His heartbeat quickened.
"If we threw you over the Wall, I wonder how long it would take you to hit," the one bleeding said.

"I wonder if they'd find you before the wolves did," the slim one, Pyp, said.

Where was Ghost when he needed him? The door opened behind and a small shape appeared in the frame.

"What're you looking at, half man?" The raper said that.

"I'm looking at you, and so are my friends." The Lord of Casterly Rock whistled and the door burst open. Jon could see at least four men fully armed behind him. "You know that speaking like that to a lord would mean death in most cases. But you're lucky, I don't pay attention to that. Instead, I make sure every raper is gelded before I send them to the Wall. Have you been gelded?"

Even if he only saw half of his face from where he was, Jon noticed how the man had blanched hearing this. He released Jon, and Grenn followed.

"You have very distinctive faces," the small lord resumed. "All of you. I think they would look marvelous, decorating spikes at Casterly Rock. Or I can still arrange for them to be in Lannisport or King's Landing, or Highgarden. Which would you prefer?"

They all abandoned. The raper left with a tail between his legs. Lord Tyrion's men let him go, but Jon heard him stumble once outside.

"We'll talk later, Lord Snow," Grenn said, threatening.

He and Grenn went to remove their combat garb. Jon leaned against the support of the swords. It was close. He had never been so happy to see the Lord of Casterly Rock. The little man approached, his face even, but Jon couldn't care less at the moment.

"Everybody knew what this place was and no one told me," Jon said. "No one but you. My father knew and he left me to rot at the Wall all the same."

"Grenn's father left him too," Lord Tyrion said, looking at the man in question. "Outside a farmhouse when he was three." So Grenn was no recruit. "Pyp was caught stealing a wheel of cheese. His little sister hadn't eaten in three days. He was given a choice: his right hand or the Wall. I've been asking the Lord Commander about them. Fascinating stories."

He looked at Jon as if he reproached him something this time. "They hate me because I'm better than they are," Jon burst. He remembered Lady Stark always looking at him with disapproval whenever he did something better than Robb. All that because he was a bastard.

"It's a lucky thing none of them were trained by a master-at-arms like your Ser Rodrik. I don't imagine any of them have ever held a real sword before they came here."

The Lord's eyes were hard as they looked at him, but they changed to something like pity when he turned to Grenn and Pyp. Jon felt it wasn't fair, considering they were the ones who were ready to kill him just a moment ago, but at the same time he felt wrong for what he just did. He took pleasure at beating them. It made him proud, gave him the impression he was finally better than other people, even if he was a bastard.

The Lord of Castely Rock turned on his heels, but before he was at the door he looked back at Jon. "Oh. Your brother Bran. He's woken up."

Then he walked away after Jon seized the raven scroll he handed him. He untied the thread that kept
it closed and read what was written inside. Bran had indeed woken up. That was almost enough to erase everything that went wrong today. His little brother was alive.

"Don't think you'll smile for long, bastard." Green said that as he left the armory and Pyp followed him.

That evening, the common hall was crowded, but despite this Jon felt like he was alone in an empty room. His uncle and Lord Tyrion were eating at the high table with the Lord Commander and the other officers of the Night's Watch. He, the bastard of Winterfell, was away from everyone else. He ate the venison that was prepared by the cook, a man everyone called Three-Finger Hobb, without tasting it. The Night's Watch wasn't at all what he expected it to be. Your brother Robb gets Winterfell and you get the Wall. And your father… he must have good reasons for packing you off to the Night's Watch. He hadn't wanted to listen to Lord Tyrion at the time, but he saw more truth in his words than there were in his father's. There's great honor serving in the Night's Watch. You are a Stark. You might not have my name, but you have my blood. For all the good it made. Having his father's blood caused him more problems than anything else. Lady Stark would have ignored him instead of despising him if he had been the cook's son.

"All alone." His uncle came and sat next to him. "Not joining your brothers. Well, they're not your brothers yet, but they will be soon."

"I don't think they want to see me, let alone speak to me."

"Really? Or is that you who doesn't want to see them?" Jon looked back at his uncle. "You don't make it easy for them. Ser Alliser told me what happened at the training, and Noye told me about the accident in the armory."

"Ser Alliser is a prick."

His uncle gave a humorless chuckle. "Maybe, but don't say that again, especially not in his presence. The man is hard, but he's served here for as long as me, and he's loyal to the Watch. Come back in fifteen years, when you've spent as much time here as he did and went as often beyond the Wall, and then we'll see who's the prick. Those men will be your brothers soon. Either you're ready to be killed for them, or you're killed by them."

He patted Jon's shoulder and left him. Jon barely caught his smile. Ghost rubbed against his leg. He decided he wasn't hungry and gave his bowl to his friend who licked it until it was empty. His father was wrong. He wasn't a Stark. His brothers and sisters' wolves had been found together near their mother, while his own was apart, all alone. The white wolf. The lone wolf.

Jon stood and went to the door. It was already dark outside, and snow was falling. It was much colder than Winterfell. He didn't want to imagine how it was for the Lord of Casterly Rock, used as he was to hot weather. He thought about that as he walked to the barracks and was called by the very man he was thinking about.

"Going to sleep already?"

Jon turned to face him. "Aye, what's the problem?"

"None. I just wondered if you'd like to see the top of the Wall. I'm going there, and I hate to see things alone."

"I've not been ordered to guard the Wall yet," Jon retorted. He only wanted to be alone.

"You don't have to receive orders. You're my guest. I can go wherever I want in Castle Black, with
whoever I want."

Tired of trying to find a way out, Jon accepted. He didn't see why the Imp wanted him for company. He wasn't a good one right now, and he already had a quarter of his guards with him. That was more than enough company for Jon's taste. Still, he followed them to the winch elevator. They were about ten to enter it, which meant they fully packed it. Jon had to tell Ghost to stay behind.

"So, enjoying your new life as a sworn brother of the Night's Watch?" Jon didn't answer to the question. "I see you do. Daren, you had a brother who went to the Wall a few years ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, my lord," one of his men answered.

"He wanted to serve the Realm, find honor, or was it something else?"

"He was given a choice between the headsman or the Wall."

"For what crime?"

"He stole a chicken leg from Lord Tywin's personal store while he accompanied him on some trip."

"A horrible crime." It was obvious from the tone that the Lord of Casterly Rock didn't think so. "My father must have been in a very good mood to give him the choice. Is he still serving here?"

"He died on his first journey north of the Wall, my lord." The man called Daren kept his voice even, but Jon could feel the regret behind it.

"All that for a chicken leg. I suppose there are worst crimes. Like being a bastard. Wouldn't you agree, Snow?"

Jon gave no answer. The cage was moving slowly, creaking all the way upward. They finally reached the top. The wind was strong there, and it was colder than below. One of the men opened the cage.

"You may stay here," Lord Tyrion said to his guards. "I think I'm safe enough with the bastard of Winterfell. He proved times again today that he was capable of defeating anyone here."

So they went forward, the dwarf and the bastard. The Lord of Casterly Rock was wrapped so heavily in furs that he looked twice the seize he was.

"Do you want to try them all at the same time?" the lord asked after they walked a certain distance.

"What?"

"If you want to prove yourself, I'm sure that defeating single-handedly ten knights of the Westerlands would prove your worth in the face of everybody. Perhaps your new brothers would appreciate you better, knowing you kicked some southern asses."

"No one would see it here," Jon said with gloom.

"No, but they saw you beat down everyone else."

"For what good it did."

"Did you really expect the Lord Commander would come and shake your hand after that? Or that the one with with a broken nose would hug you? Especially after you were the one to break his nose? That your uncle would congratulate you as the possible future First Ranger?" Jon wasn't unhappy
that someone finally acknowledged he could climb high in the Night's Watch. "Do you think you'll live long enough for that day to come if you behave that way?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'd try to make sure I survive, if I were you. Life is full of possibilities. Death is so final."

"You told me to not care what the others think of me."

"I never said that. We can't ignore their japes, or their mockeries. All we can do is learn to live with them, and make these japes ours."

"That's easy to say for you. People don't jape about you. No one ever mocked Jon's lord father, and no one would ever mock his brother Robb. Lord Tyrion was the only one to do that.

"If you think so, then you know nothing, Jon Snow. They might not jape or mock me in my face, especially since my father died, but they do it in my back, when I'm not listening or not looking. It's the same for my brother. Do you think my brother Jaime likes it, to be called the Kingslayer all the time? We're all an object of mockery, bastard. And the fact my father died changed nothing. If there's something after death, then I know my father thinks of me nothing different than before. I was always a bastard in his eyes, and I'll always be a bastard for him, even in death."

The two bastards went on, keeping their cloaks tight around them. They came at an observation point, and for the first time Jon saw the north of the Wall. The moon was full and the Wall reflected it, so they could see far away before them. It was nothing particular, trees, forests, a frozen lake there and there, and barren lands closer to the Wall. But this was the world beyond the Wall, and from there, it had a beauty like Jon couldn't describe it.

"Here it is, the lands of grumkins and snarks, White Walkers, giants and wildlings. Doesn't look that terrifying from there. The view is very good, and we stand taller than everyone else in the Seven Kingdoms."

"I stand taller than you even here," replied Jon. They both laughed. "I thought you didn't believe in snarks and grumkins."

"I don't. But I was your age once. I dreamed of having a dragon of my own, back then."

"You did?" Jon asked, suspicious.

"Oh, yes. Even a stunted, twisted, ugly little boy can look down over the world when he's seated on a dragon's back. I used to start fires in the bowels of Casterly Rock and stare at the flames for hours, pretending they were dragonfire." Jon listened carefully to Lord Tyrion's words. How could he...? 

"Sometimes I'd imagine my father burning. At other times, my sister. Don't look at me that way, bastard. I know your secret. You've dreamt the same kind of dreams."

"No," Jon denied, horrified. "I would never..."

"Never? Well, no doubt the Starks have been terribly good to you. I'm certain Lady Stark treated you as if you were one of her own. And that your sister, our future queen, always saw you as her brother..."

"Stop it!"

He couldn't hear more about it. That was more than enough. Lady Stark had never been kind with him, but Jon never expected her to see him like her son. He wasn't her son. She could have been
much worse. She was never cruel, and neither Sansa was. He was always very close to Arya, and
Bran and Rickon never saw him differently than Robb. As for his father, he took care of him, even if
he made sure to not give him more time than to Jon's brothers and sisters. He never dreamed to see
any of them burning. He made other dreams, but never that kind of dreams.

"Do you know what everyone here at Castle Black has in common with us?" the Imp asked all of a
sudden.

Jon thought about it for a moment, but couldn't come up with an answer. "I don't know."

"Some of them are rapists and murderers. They were punished for their crimes, but many others are
poachers or thieves who had nothing to eat, or orphans with no family, or bastards and fourth sons
who have no other way to gain honor. They ended at the Wall because there was no place in the
world for them. Do you think Pyp or Grenn chose who they were, anymore than you?"

Jon was at a loss of words. Before he could say anything or think further about it, the Lord of
Casterly Rock resumed. "Still, even if there was no place in the world for us, we were quite lucky.
We had a roof over our heads, our fathers were powerful, we grew up surrounded by wetnurses,
master-at-arms, maesters, servants, squires and cooks. Most of the people here didn't have this
chance. When they look at us, they envy us, and they fear us, and they hate us. Especially if we
make them think we are better than them. How many of these men do you think were sent to the
Wall by your father, or by one of his bannermen? And for what? For a wheel of cheese, a chicken
leg, or a loaf of bread. Do you think Daren's brother deserved to die this way, this far north, away
from all those he loved?"

"No," Jon answered after a moment.

"No, and that's the same for almost every man here. I sent some here myself. Mainly rapers and
murderers, but still. I have to take precautions." Now Jon understood better why Tyrion Lannister
went everywhere with so many guardsmen. "Here at the Wall, it doesn't matter who your father is.
All these men will hate you if you give them reasons to hate you. So give them reasons to value you
instead, and they won't want you dead."

"How? They already want me dead."

"Things can change. You'll find something. We all have something to offer to the others."

They stood there, watching the white landscape that laid below them, the icy wind getting into their
lungs and freezing the air they expired as it left their mouths. They stood there, side by side, the
bastard of Winterfell and the Imp of Casterly Rock. It was strange to think this way about one of the
most powerful lords of the Realm, but that was the way Jon thought about him after weeks spent in
his company.

"Your family is right," Lord Tyrion said. "Winter is coming." On that, they could agree without any
debate.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter uses a lot of material from the show when Jon arrives at the Wall. It is more
of an introduction to Jon's character, and his second chapter will be much more
interesting.
Please review

Next chapter: Eddard
Ned shook his head in disbelief. Littlefinger had brought him a resume of the Crown's debts. The situation was worse than he feared. The creditors of the Crown were listed according to the amount Robert owed them. At the very top was the Lord of Casterly Rock, to who the Realm owed three of the six million golden dragons of its debt. Then came Lord Mace Tyrell of Highgarden, the Iron Bank of Braavos, Lord Leyton Hightower and many more. Most were bannermen of the Tyrells and the Lannisters.

Ned still couldn't believe Robert had brought the Realm to the brink of bankruptcy. His childhood friend had always been fond of fight, wine and women, but with Jon Arryn to advise him, Ned thought his excesses could be kept under control. It seemed he was wrong. The Crown's debts were so huge that Ned didn't see how they could reimburse them. He tried to corner Robert into a meeting with Littlefinger, to explore possible options in order to bring back the finances in good state, but Robert escaped every attempt he made. Ned was stuck with the Master of Coin for hours as a result, trying to figure out a way to erase the Crown's debts. Littlefinger had produced sufficient evidence that the revenues had doubled since the beginning of Robert's reign, but despite this and the large amounts of gold the Mad King left behind at his death, the financial situation only got worse as Robert emptied his coffers, then began to spend money he didn't have. The recent concession of the Crown concerning some taxes in the Westerlands and the Reach didn't make things better. Littlefinger said he could still find some new revenues, but that wouldn't be enough. Ned needed to talk to Robert about reducing the expenses of the Crown, if Robert ever wanted to talk about it.

Jory came inside. The Master of Laws wanted to talk with him. Ned let him come in. Ser Kevan Lannister was a man of average stature with blond hair turning grey. Ned didn't know the man very well. They seldom met, one of the few times being the Sack of King's Landing when the Targaryen children's dead bodies were presented to Robert. The knight was much younger back then, closer to Ned's actual age. Ned hadn't found the man disagreeable at the time. He had even offered his sympathies to him once, for his father and brother's deaths, and Ned thought he remembered seeing him not looking very proud when they the dead children were presented in crimson cloaks. At his arrival in King's Landing, the man had welcomed him with decency and he fulfilled his duties very well. He even came to apologize personally for the accident with the wolf, saying this should never have happened. Still, Ned was careful about him. He was a Lannister, so he may have had a role to play in Jon Arryn's death, and Ned had been informed later by both Littlefinger, Varys and Pycelle that he replaced Renly at his office after the Lord of Casterly Rock demanded that a Lannister be named on the small council. Robert can no longer choose his advisors, and the Lannisters force him to expel his own brother for one of their own.

"My lord Hand," the knight said as he entered the solar.

"Ser Kevan. Please, sit." The Lannister knight accepted the offer. "Do you have something to report
to me?"

"Well, a few people already arrived for your tournament."

"This is the king's tournament. Putting my name on it doesn't make it mine."

Ser Kevan ignored the remark. "There won't be enough room in the city for everyone. We have problems to expect. Janos Slynt is already asking for more men in the City Watch."

"Is it necessary?"

"Useful, maybe. Necessary, I wouldn't say so. And of course, if we hire more gold cloaks, we'll have to pay them."

Ned sighed. More expenses. "What do you think we should do?"

"We have the red cloaks, and your household guards. Let's send them to assist the City Watch during the tournament. It won't cost anything to the royal treasury."

"Very well, we'll do that."

Ser Kevan's face took a concerned look. "Lord Stark, I think I should warn you to not trust Janos Slynt."

Ned frowned. "Why is that?"

"Because the man is corrupted."

"Corrupted?"

"Yes, my lord. Since I arrived, I kept a close look on the gold cloaks. Most of them give a part of their wages to their Commander."

"What? Why would they do that?"

"The Commander hired his gold cloaks with that condition. If the men are to hope to keep their place in the City Watch, they must pay their part. Most of them. And the officers pay even more."

"How could you let that happen?"

"I've only entered in charge recently, my lord Hand. It was Lord Renly who chose Janos Slynt."

"I apologize, ser." Renly. It had been a long time since Ned saw him. Renly had never been a soldier like his two brothers, but Ned remembered him as a kind young man with good manners. He didn't think Renly would have allowed something like that to happen.

"You must know, Lord Stark, that this practice existed before Janos Slynt. It was already in place in the time of my brother's tenure as Hand. He kept it within certain limits, but I'm afraid King Robert and Lord Renly weren't as concerned about this situation as they should be. Slynt went farther than anyone else we can remember. Varys believes over half the men in the City Watch are paying for a gold cloak."

"This is unacceptable. Janos Slynt must be replaced."

"The tournament is very soon, my lord. It would do no good to place a new Commander at the head of the gold cloaks. We will need someone with experience. Janos Slynt is corrupted, but he's not
"You want to keep this man to lead the City Watch, after everything you told me?"

"It might be the lesser evil. His successor would certainly do the same than he did for years, and most of the officers owe their rank to him. We would need to purge the City Watch entirely for this to work. Jon Arryn himself tried to have the man dismissed, but the two witnesses he had were found killed the day before he brought them before the king. And I'm afraid his Grace is aware of the situation, but he doesn't want to do anything."

"Why?"

"He fears Slynt's successor could be worse. I didn't come to ask you permission to remove Slynt, my lord. I merely wanted to warn you against him. Don't take what he says as granted."

Ned managed to maintain an impassive face, or so he thought. Where was he? A place where bribery was standard and no one did anything against it. "Thank you, Ser Kevan. Is there something else?"

"No. I only came to tell you this."

"Very well. You may leave." As the knight stood up and headed for the door, Ned thought about something. "Ser, were you there when Jon Arryn died?"

"No. I was on my way to King's Landing. I was told he was dead the day I arrived." His expression turned regretful. "I know you were his ward at the Eyrie. I'm sorry. He was a good man."

He seemed sincere. Ned tried to see any trace of Tywin Lannister in his brother, but right now he couldn't see any. All he could see was a man who offered his sympathies.

"Was there…" Ned tried to find the right way to ask. "Was there something strange about his death?"

"That depends what you mean by strange, my lord."

Ned sighed. "I can't shake the feeling that he died very suddenly. I knew Jon. He was old, but he was also in very good health."

"Indeed, but people die of fever every day. Lord Arryn was old, his constitution wasn't what it was before, and he had a lot on his shoulders. My brother himself resigned because of health problems. A shame he died so quickly. When you die slowly, you have the time to say goodbye to those you love. Lord Arryn didn't have that chance. Is that all, my lord Hand?"

"Yes, ser, you may go."

The knight bowed, but he added something else before he left. "If you want to know more about Jon Arryn's last hours, you should ask Pycelle. He was the one who tried to treat him."

Ned was alone in his solar again. He would need to ask the Grand Maester about this later. So far, his efforts to find out something about Jon Arryn's death had been in vain. Most of his household had left when his wife went back to the Eyrie. He couldn't trust anyone on the small council. Ser Kevan was a Lannister, so he couldn't share his thoughts with him, which was quite problematic since he was the Master of Laws and responsible of the justice in King's Landing. He didn't trust the Spider and Littlefinger a single second. Pycelle may be the one he distrusted the less, but even so, Ned didn't know what to think of the old maester. Now he just learned that he had to be careful with the Commander of the City Watch.
He turned his attention back to the reports he had before him. The tournament was causing him headaches. He tried to talk Robert out of it, but his friend didn't want to listen. And to add to everything else, Sansa hated him for her direwolf's death, and Arya had a sword hidden under her bed. Ned had prepared a surprise for her. He hoped she would like it.

Ned could barely recognize Robert. He spent his days inside his rooms, drinking and whoring and eating. No wonder he became so fat. The young man full of life who Ned had known during the war was only a shell of who he had been. He let Sansa's direwolf be executed without lifting a finger, just because his wife asked him. Ned knew what really happened. Sansa told him the whole story when he visited her after the accident. It didn't start well her betrothal with Joffrey. Lord Tyrion told him at Winterfell that he was sending his daughter into a horrible marriage. Was he right, just like when he warned Ned that the king would propose Joffrey to marry his eldest daughter? Lord Tyrion Lannister was the uncle of the prince. He surely knew him. The prince lied. But Robert proposed him to marry his son to his daughter. What could he do against that?

Later, at the meeting of the small council, the discussion was mostly about the preparations for the tournament. The Realm was going bankrupt, the gold cloaks were corrupted, the Hand of the King may have been murdered, and here they were, discussing a tournament. Pycelle brought them a reprieve when he talked about reports he received recently.

"The maesters of the Citadel say that most observations indicate that days are growing shorter. It seems this long summer is coming to an end," he said with his quivering voice.

"Winter is coming," Ned said, repeating his house's words. "Do we have enough food in reserve to last through winter."

"If this winter lasts less than five years, yes," Littlefinger answered.

"And if it's longer?"

"We'll have fewer peasants."

Ned wanted to slam his fist on the table. That's what Brandon would have done. "That's not something we can allow. This summer lasted for nine years. I want granaries to be full. Buy more crops."

"We don't have the money."

"You found money for a champion's purse, you can find money to feed the people," Ned replied harshly. The Master of Coin turned his attention back to his ledgers and took notes. "Is there anything else?" No one spoke. "Good."

Ned left the small council chamber as quickly as he could. His place wasn't here. His place was in the North, beside his wife and his children, at Winterfell. That's where he was the most useful. He would find out what happened to Jon Arryn, and then he would probably head back north. He was beginning to reconsider the arranged marriage between Sansa and the prince.

"Lord Stark." The wheezing respiration of the Grand Maester couldn't be mistaken. Ned turned to face him, the Iron Throne only a few feet from him. "I meant to give you this earlier. So forgetful these days. A raven from Winterfell this morning."

Ned took the scroll and began to unroll it while hearing the clicking sound of the chains as the Grand Maester walked away.

"Good news?" Yes, but he wasn't about to divulge it to Littlefinger. He didn't know if he hated his
presence more than he hated the Kingslayer's presence. Ever since Ned arrived, Ser Jaime had been looking for trouble with him, always provoking Ned. He certainly hoped that Ned would take the bait and draw his sword against him, but he wouldn't give that satisfaction to the Kingslayer. Ned finished to read the message. Bran had woken up. However, his legs were now useless. Luwin said he could never walk again. It was expected. At least, he was alive. "Perhaps you'd like to share it with your wife?"

"My wife is in Winterfell," Ned informed Littlefinger, as if the Master of Coin didn't know it. At least Bran had his mother to watch over him.

"Is she?" With a smirk, he walked past him. "If you want to see her, follow me."

Ned didn't trust Littlefinger at all, but he decided to follow him all the same. He would get to the bottom of it. Why did he say Catelyn was here?

They had to make quite a long way through the streets of King's Landing. On their way, the Master of Coin told Ned that his wife had arrived in King's Landing yesterday and he kept her hidden for her safety, somewhere no one would think to look for her. Finally, they stopped before a place where Ned never went.

"I thought that she'd be safest in here. One of several such establishments I own."

Ned tackled Littlefinger to the wall of the said establishment. Did he really bring him here all this way to visit one of his brothels? "You're a funny man. Huh? A very funny man." He would show him how funny it was.

"Ned!" He never thought he would hear this voice here. He looked up and saw Cat looking down on him from the balcony, along with many other women. He let go Littlefinger's throat and ran into the brothel. Inside, he fell upon his master-at-arms.

"Ser Rodrik?"

"My lord, your lady awaits you upstairs," the knight said.

Ned had to go through a common room where young girls were pressed against their lovers and three floors before he found his wife behind a closed door, all alone. She ran into him immediately when he entered and embraced him fiercely.

"Cat, what are you doing here?" Ned asked in wonderment.

"I'm glad you recognized her." Littlefinger had followed them and closed the door behind him.

"What is she doing here?" Ned's voice was angry. "Why did you bring her here?"

"No one will think to look for Catelyn Stark in such a place. I own the place, which allowed me to arrange everything."

"He helped me, Ned," his wife explained. "He's a friend."

"Why are you here? Is it Bran?" No, that couldn't be. He just received news of their son.

"Yes, but not the way you think."

"Perhaps you should tell her the news," Littlefinger suggested.

Ned hated to be told what to do by this man, but he was right this time. Catelyn had to know. She
almost burst into tears when he told her Bran had woken up, but of joy and not of grief. After she composed herself, she asked him if Luwin reported anything Bran would have said when he woke up. He didn't remember the maester mentioning anything about this in the message. He gave it to Cat so she could read it herself. She sighed at the end.

"He may not have trusted a raven with this information. I'll have to ask once I'm back at Winterfell," she said.

"Why wouldn't he trust that with a raven? What shouldn't he say?"

"Let me explain to you. It will be quicker this way."

She told him everything, from her suspicions concerning Bran's fall to the attempt of murder and their journey to King's Landing. Littlefinger had told her about he problems they met on the road and the direwolves.

Ned put his hand on his chin and rubbed it. "Why would they try to kill Bran? He was sleeping, and he's only a boy."

"I think he saw something he wasn't supposed to see. I don't know what, but I think that's what happened. Someone didn't want him to wake up. I think the Lannisters are behind this," she said.

"The assassin used this dagger, my lord." Ser Rodrik Cassel showed him the weapon. Ned unsheathed it. The blade was made of good steel, but what brought the attention was the green pearl at the pommel and the silver handle it was made of. This was no common dagger. Only someone rich could own it.

"I saw that dagger, many months ago," Littlefinger declared. "At Prince Joffrey's name day. There was a tournament. He received the dagger as a present, then he placed a bet on it during the final tilt on Ser Jaime, like half the court. I bet a lot of money me too. Imagine both our surprise when the Knight of Flowers unseated the Kingslayer. I lost my money, and the prince lost the dagger."

"Who did he lose it to? To who belonged this dagger?" Ned asked.

"Tyrion Lannister. The Imp, and the Lord of Casterly Rock."

Anger flared inside Ned. "He comes at Winterfell, asks me to give him my son as a ward and tries to kill another. Why?"

"There's no way to know. Your wife told me about your doubts concerning Jon Arryn's death. Maybe this could have a link, and maybe not."

"I must go back to Winterfell," Cat said. "I must speak with Bran and know what he saw there."

"You won't be able to come back. The next time you try to sneak into King's Landing in secret, I may not be able to stop the Spider from whispering it to Ser Kevan or the queen."

"It doesn't matter. I'll go to Robert and tell him what happened," Ned declared.

"You realize, I hope, that the mere suggestion that the queen's brother tried to kill your boy would be considered treason."

"We have proof. We have the blade," Catelyn opposed.

"Which Lord Tyrion will say was stolen from him. The only man who could say otherwise has no
"The Lannisters are still in the North. Lord Tyrion has gone to visit the Wall. We could arrest him on his way back."

"And Robert will order you to release him immediately."

"What if Bran could testify?"

"The king will never give more weigh to a boy of ten than to the Warden of the West, and you'll have broken the sacred law of the guest rights by arresting Lady Lannister while she was welcomed under your roof and shared your bread."

"They broke the guest rights themselves by trying to kill my son," Ned declared.

"Maybe, but you don't have enough proof of that."

"When I go to the king and tell him…"

"The king will not listen to you, Lord Stark. He will not want to listen."

"Not want to listen? I don't think Robert will let go the attempt to kill a child."

As he said that, Ned realized that he didn't believe it himself. Robert had let Cersei Lannister have the death of Sansa's direwolf, just because she wanted it. He had turned away from this, allowing the Lannisters to do as they wished, just like with the Targaryen children fifteen years ago.

"I think you should sit. Both of you," Littlefinger said. He indicated chairs to them. Ned and Cat both took one. "It would be better that you are sitting while I tell you this." Littlefinger sat as well and folded his hands. "Robert Baratheon IS NOT the king."

"What are you saying?" Ned asked, uncappable to believe what he just heard.

"And Cersei Lannister is not the queen either. Right now, the most powerful man in Westeros is Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, and his wife, Lady Margaery Lannister, is the most powerful woman in all the Seven Kingdoms. They are king and queen of Westeros in practice if not in words. Robert cannot allow to have them against him. His wife is Lord Tyrion's sister and his three children are his nephews and niece. Pycelle has been loyal to the Lannisters ever since the time Tywin Lannister was Hand, Ser Kevan sits on the small council, and I'm afraid Varys is closer to the Lannisters than he is to everyone else. I know he sent a secret message by rider to the Lord of Casterly Rock not long after Jon Arryn died. The Lannisters control the government of the Realm, and they have the might of the Reach behind them. There is even talk actually about marrying the Princess Myrcella to Ser Loras Tyrell, the heir to Highgarden. This would make the ties between the Lannisters and the Tyrells stronger than ever and strengthen their hold on the Crown."

"I don't think Lady Margaery had any part in this," Catelyn said. "The assassin thought I wouldn’t be here when he came to kill Bran. She knew I spent all my time with him. She can't have sent this man."

"Maybe, but how well do you know Lady Lannister, Cat?"

"I know her well enough. She's spent more than a month in Winterfell."

"Margaery Tyrell is the granddaughter of Olenna Tyrell, Lord Mace's mother, also known as the
Queen of Thorns. She's the one who truly rules Highgarden and she educated her granddaughter herself. The two are the most dangerous among the Tyrells. They hold Lord Mace's balls in their hands, if you permit me this small obscenity. I have met the Lady of Casterly Rock when she came to King’s Landing. She's much more dangerous and cunning than appearances let appear. She and her husband didn't get abrogation of taxes and a seat on the small council from Robert with kind words, and believe me when I say she played a major role in that. And she's entirely loyal to her husband. If you accuse the Lannisters in one way or another, both the Reach and the Westerlands will declare war against you."

"They wouldn't dare," Ned said.

"They would. They have the means for it. Their coffers are full while Robert's are empty. They can muster enough men and enough ships to conquer each of the Seven Kingdoms one by one, or to face them all together. They can buy the loyalty of lords from the other kingdoms, and get the Iron Islands on their side if need be. The king cannot allow a conflict with them. You know how indebted he is towards the two families. If you come to him only with a dagger and the word of child, he will turn you down."

Ned had to admit that Littlefinger was right, as much as he loathed to admit it. Robert wasn't the man he used to be.

"What if we arrived with more proof, something indisputable, that proves without any doubt that the Lannisters are behind Bran's attempted murder, or behind Jon Arryn's death?" Ned's wife asked.

"He may do something then, but only then. Right now, you don't have enough proof, and the more you will dig into this, the riskier it will get for you. My counsel is to drop the knife in the river and forget that it was ever forged," Littlefinger declared.

Ned regarded the man coldly. "Lord Baelish, I am a Stark of Winterfell. My son lies crippled, and may have died along with Catelyn if it wasn't for a wolf's pup found in the snow. If you truly believe I could forget that, you are as big a fool now as when you took up sword against my brother."

"A fool, maybe, yet I'm still here, while your brother is dead. I would rather not join him if I were you."

"Petyr. We need your help," Catelyn told him. "You must help us to uncover the truth. You're the only one who can help us here. The king is in danger. We can't let the Lannisters act against him."

"I don't believe it is in their intentions, for now, to harm or overthrow Robert. I think they rather like him as a king. Our good Robert is practiced at closing his eyes to things he would rather not see."

"In the meantime, the Lannisters will keep plotting in the dark, corrupting men to their cause and sending assassins against unharmed boys. I can't let that happen, Lord Baelish," Ned said, more serious than he had ever been. He stood up. "Robert asked me to come here because he needed my help. He rode for months to ask me to become his Hand. I will not let him down, and I will not let the Lannisters murder people and endanger my king's life."

"Petyr, please," Cat pleaded once more. "My son was almost killed. My two daughters and my husband are here. They are in danger. I beg you. Help us, for me, if it's not for my family or for the king."
Littlefinger stayed quiet for a moment, looking at Cat in a very serious way, thinking. Then he smiled, sadly, fondly. "I've never been able to refuse you anything. It is a fool's task, but I'll try to keep you safe, Lord Stark." He said the last words while looking at Ned.

"I won't forget this. You're a true friend."

"Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain. But the Hand and I should now return to the Red Keep, before our absence is noted. The last thing we need is someone suspecting your presence in the capital. They will learn about your son's fate soon enough and wonder where we are."

"He's right," Ned agreed. He never thought he could agree so often with Petyr Baelish within a single day. "You should go now, before someone can suspect anything. Ser Rodrik, prepare the horses."

The knight went to his task. Littlefinger rose from his seat. "I will go now. It would be better if we didn't come back together. Safe journey, Cat."

Ned accompanied his wife outside a moment later. The day was getting darker, evening was coming. "Once you are home, send word to Helman Tallhart and Galbart Glover under my seal," Ned told her when they left the brothel. "They must raise a hundred bowmen each and send them to Moat Cailin. Instruct Lord Manderly that he is to strengthen and repair all his defenses at White Harbor, and see that they are well manned. And from this day on, I want a careful watch kept over Theon Greyjoy. If there is war, we shall have sore need of his father's fleet, and make sure that he doesn't side with the Lannisters."

"You think there's going to be war?" Catelyn asked, fear plain in her voice and on her face.

"I hope not, but after what Baelish said… We must take precautions. I won't be unprepared if the Lannisters and the Tyrells declare war upon us. Do you really think Lady Lannister had nothing to do with that?" he asked after a moment.

Catelyn sighed. "I know Baelish is well informed, but… I don't see her trying to kill Bran. She wouldn't have sent an assassin knowing I was there. It makes no sense. She probably ignores everything. Her husband may be lying to her. Maybe if we told her the truth…"

"No, that's a risk we can't take. The Lannisters cannot suspect we know they are behind the failed assassination. Lady Lannister would tell her husband and it would make things worse. Let them leave Winterfell unharmed. Once they'll be south of the Neck, they won't pose any threat in the North."

"I must go and see my father before."

He had forgotten that. "Of course. Go to Riverrun, before it's too late. Send my instructions to Robb by a raven there, and warn your father about all this. But make sure he does nothing stupid."

Cat laughed. "Something stupid? You're the one who nearly killed poor Littlefinger." He joined her in her laugh. They were holding their hands now.

"He's right. I can't do anything without proof."

"And if you find the proof?"

"Then I bring it to Robert… and hope he's still the man I once knew. You watch yourself on the road, huh?"
His wife bowed her head. "I wish I could see the girls."

"It's too dangerous."

"Just for a moment," she pleaded. Ned wished he could grant that, but children talked and he couldn't take the risk of anyone knowing that Catelyn had come here. She covered her departure from Winterfell with the pretext of visiting her lord father, but they couldn't blow it up.

Ned had to shake his head. "Until we know who our enemies are…"

"I know they did it, Ned. The Lannisters. In my bones, I know it."

"Are you truly sure Lady Lannister has nothing to do with that?" he asked again.

Cat hesitated. "I know she didn't. Her husband did this. She probably knows nothing of it. Let me take the dagger with me. If I meet her, I can show it to her and prove that her husband is conspiring against the Crown."

"If we are to believe Baelish, she's loyal to him."

"She doesn't know her husband. She never met him before their wedding. She doesn't know the truth about him. We have to tell her. If we could convince her, the Lannisters would lose the Tyrells' support."

If the Tyrells weren't with the Lannisters on this, this would make things a lot easier. They would hesitate to attack Robert without the Reach at their side. "Are you really sure?" he asked her again.

"I am, Ned. Let me talk to her. Let me convince her. We must reveal the treachery of the Lannisters to the light of day."

"Not yet." He thought for a moment. "But maybe it's worth the risk, with Lady Margaery. The Lannisters will be aware soon that Bran is alive. At worst, it will be like Littlefinger said and the Tyrells will remain with the Lannisters, but if it's not the case… It might be worth the risk." He took the dagger from his belt and gave it to his wife. If he found proof that Jon Arryn was dead, he wouldn't need the dagger. "Be careful."

They shared a strong embrace and a very long kiss. Then she broke it, climbed on her horse and rode away, sending him one last long look that said so much. After sixteen years of marriage, he loved her more than ever, more than he could ever imagine, and tears threatened to leave his eyes as he saw her disappear far away. He hoped he would see her again, once all this was over.

Chapter End Notes

So, Littlefinger is trying to spread havoc like always. His conversation with Ned and Catelyn is quite similar to the show, but it is also a little different, because this time he is accusing the Lord of Casterly Rock himself. We will see in future chapters if Catelyn follows the instructions of her husband.

The passage I liked to write the most in this chapter was the discussion between Kevan and Ned. I remember only one fanfiction I read where Ned had interactions with Tywin's brothers, and it was quite interesting to see. The only thing Ned had to blame Kevan for was that he always followed his brother's orders, and Ned found out that they
had many common points. He actually appreciated Kevan. I will explore the dynamic between these two further in the future chapters that will take place in King's Landing.

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

Tyrion IX

Tyrion at the Wall. In this chapter, a new great divergence from the canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION IX

Tyrion watched two lads fighting through the gap of the door. Though he never wielded a sword, Tyrion spent more than enough time reading about sword fighting and looking at his brother and other siblings practicing in the yards of both Casterly Rock and King's Landing to know enough about the best fighting techniques. One of the men was obviously better than the other one. He just waited for him to make the first strike, then launched a counter-attack he could do nothing against. Only this time, instead of breaking a nose or a fist, he just brought the sword at his throat. The two laughed and a third lad who watched them joined the laughing. Tyrion was too far to understand what Jon Snow said to the orphan and the cheese thief, but from the way they trained in the last days, it wasn't hard to guess he was giving them advice about how to fight. Their eyes met and Tyrion gave an approving look. We all have something to offer to the others. He closed the door, leaving the lad to his training and forging friendships.

"You've taken an interest in Lord Stark's son, my lord," an old voice said.

It came from a frail man, hairless and wrinkled, blind and older than any other person Tyrion had ever met. Even the Queen of Thorns couldn't compete with his age. Maester Aemon Targaryen was the eldest member of the Night's Watch. He served as maester of Castle Black for more than sixty years under a dozen of Lord Commanders of the Night's Watch and everyone here respected the man. When he spoke, everyone turned silent to listen to him. He was the entire opposite of Jeor Mormont who sat at his side at the high table, the two alone in the common hall with Tyrion. The Lord Commander was still a very strong man despite his advanced age and commanded as much respect as the old maester.

"I have some fondness for the lad, considering our shared origins," he said. Then he added before the perplexed expression of the Lord Commander, "Dwarves are always bastards to their family."

Mormont seemed to understand. "Jon Snow will make a nice addition to the Night's Watch. All we seem to receive these times are stableboys, sneak thieves and rapers. And the Westerlands sent us quite a lot since your father died."

"I've never been fond of death," Tyrion said, approaching the table. "Better to freeze your balls at the Wall than to die, though some I send here have no balls left."

"Sometimes I fear you do mock our noble purpose here, my lord."

"We all need to be mocked from time to time, Commander Mormont, lest we start to take ourselves too seriously. Do you think no one mocks me in the Westerlands, or even in my own castle? Believe me, I know very well my men make fun of me when they want, and they are much happier with it than when my father ruled. He didn't tolerate anyone to mock him."
"Your father was well respected," the former Lord of Bear Island politely said.

"A respected man, yes," Tyrion said, not without bitterness. *Respected, but not loved.* "Some would go as far as to call him a great man, even a just man, or a beloved one." *Only fools would say the latter about the Old Lion.*

"I never met Tywin Lannister, but if I could say if any Lannister was a great man, I would say you are, Lord Tyrion," the maester said.

"I've been called many things, maester, but a *great man* is seldom one of them."

"Nonetheless, I think it is true." He stared with his blind eyes at Tyrion.

Tyrion didn't really know what to say to that. "You are too kind, Maester Aemon."

The man who could have set aside his chains to become king smiled. "I have been called many things, my lord, but *kind* is seldom one of them."

The three laughed loudly. Tyrion sat before them and asked for more ale. The Lord Commander filled his horn and Tyrion drank it. It wasn't very good, but he didn't complain. The Night's Watch seemed to be in a poor state, and both wine and ale in the North were of poor quality. And he drank much worse stuff in his life.

"Are you certain you must leave tomorrow?" the Lord Commander asked him after a good swallow.

"I'm afraid I must. I already spent too much time in the North. I must return to Casterly Rock, and I can't let my wife linger alone at Winterfell any longer. She will start to think that I abandoned her to take the black."

He missed Margaery. These last weeks had been the first he spent away from her since they were wed, and so far they had only helped him to realize more than ever how much he deeply loved her. He was eager to see her back, to see her smile and her curly brown hair. It was also true he had extended his stay in the North more than he should have, but he hadn't been able to resist the temptation to visit the Wall. He may never have another chance in his life.

"And my brother too will worry the same," he continued. "Only my sister might find some solace in that. It would probably be the best news she had in years."

"Then I wish we could make the queen happy. You're a cunning man, my lord, and we have need of men like you here."

"I'm afraid they have need of me in the Westerlands as well." Although Tyrion had come to respect the men of the Night's Watch, he wouldn't abandon his life with Margaery at Casterly Rock for the Wall. He loved his life right now, and Cersei was a far greater danger for the Seven Kingdoms than the wildlings and all the imaginary creatures that supposedly populated the lands beyond the Wall. He had found a purpose to his life.

"Are you a man of duty, Lord Tyrion?"

The question from the maester surprised him. Tyrion never really asked himself this. He did his duty towards his family, towards his wife, towards the people he loved, and he tried to do his duty for the Westerlands as its lord paramount. "I suppose I am."

"Do you want to know what I think?"
"I don't see any reason why not?"

"I think you are a man who fights for the things he believes in." The maester had a gift to surprise him. "Tell me, my lord, how many winters have you seen?"

"Eight. No, nine."

"All of them brief?"

"They say the winter of my birth was three years long, Maester Aemon." Though his earliest memories were of spring. He never saw a long winter.

"This summer has lasted nine. But reports from the Citadel tell us the days grow shorter. The Starks are always right eventually. Winter is coming. This one will be long and dark things will come with it."

Tyrion listened attentively to the old man. He spoke with gravity, seriously, as someone who had seen more than any other living man. "We've been capturing wildlings, more every month," the Lord Commander said. "They're fleeing south. The ones who flee say they've seen the White Walkers. The fishermen near Eastwatch have glimpsed them on the shore."

"Yes, and the fishermen of Lannisport say they see mermaids."

Tyrion was used to those tales. He heard them more than enough through his time in the taverns and brothels of Lannisport. Sailors often came back from the sea with tales of how they saw mermaids, some going as far as saying they laid with one, or with many, to impress their friends over cups of ale, or a whore just before or while they fucked her. As if the girl would give any attention to their story. All she wanted was their coin, but again, Tyrion couldn't blame these men. He did the same than them once, making crude jokes that girls laughed at only to give him the impression he was funny. Sailors could spend months at sea without seeing a single woman, so he couldn't blame them for going to a whore and fantasize she found them extraordinary as soon as they touched land. For those who really believed they saw mermaids, their eyes could often trick them into seeing things they wanted to see.

"One of our own rangers swore he saw them kill his companions," Mormont resumed. "He swore it right up to the moment Ned Stark chopped his head off. I knew this ranger. He was at the Wall for very long. I would never have believed Ned Stark when he said he deserted if he hadn't sent us his head."

"The Night's Watch is the only thing standing between the Realm and what lies beyond," Maester Aemon declared. "And it has become an army of undisciplined boys and tired old men. There are less than a thousand of us now. We can't man the other castles on the Wall. We can't properly patrol the wilderness. We've barely enough resources to keep our lads armed and fed."

Tyrion knew where they were going with that. He expected it. The Wall seldom received visits from lords of the southern kingdoms. The last king or queen to visit it was Alysanne Targaryen more than two hundred years ago, and Tyrion suspected he was very likely the first lord paramount who wasn't a Stark to visit it in the whole century. He had seen the sorry state of the Watch.

"You are one of the most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms, my lord, and your sister sits by the side of the king. We need help," the Lord Commander begged. Tyrion had never seen Mormont so serious or desperate.

"When winter does come, gods help us all if we're not ready." The maester was deadly serious as
Tyrion pitied them, and in the right way. Both had spent years of their life, maybe half of it, at the
Wall, fighting against the wildlings, taking vows to protect the Realm from the dangers beyond the
Wall. Mormont had joined the Night's Watch after his wife died, leaving his son Jorah to rule in his
stead, but Jorah Mormont had been removed for selling thieves into slavery by Eddard Stark and fled
to Essos to escape justice. Now Lady Maege Mormont, the Lord Commander's sister, ruled Bear
Island. As for Maester Aemon, he refused the crown and went to Castle Black to let his younger
brother, Aegon, become king. They had spent so many years here that Tyrion couldn't blame them
for trying to give a sense to these years. Except for the rapers and the murderers, and even then, he
had quite a lot of sympathy for those who ended at the Wall. They hadn't chosen this.

"I'll help you, I promise," Tyrion said. "And I will talk to my sister. And I thank you for your
hospitality."

"Just helping us will be more than enough thanks," the former Lord of Bear Island replied.

Tyrion would help them. He would keep sending them as many men as he could by offering any
criminal of any sort the choice to go to the Wall. He could send them food as well to survive through
the coming winter. He had Casterly Rock and his bannermen stock enough food in prevision of the
coming winter to send some to the Night's Watch. He could also send them steel, to forge weapons
and armors. Better, he could send them already forged weapons. The blacksmiths of Lannisport and
the Westerlands were renowned through all Westeros for the quality of their work. He could even
send them gold, so they could buy what they needed. If the Lannisters didn't lack something, it was
gold. However, he couldn't send them the military help they probably hoped for. He couldn't send
his knights, his soldiers, his men to the Wall for a danger that didn't exist. And he would speak to
Cersei, though he knew for certain that she would ask if he had taken leave of his senses. And if he
dared to speak to Robert about it, he would just ignore him.

In the evening, Tyrion dined with all the officers of the Night's Watch at the high table. They ate
crabs that had arrived from Eastwatch this morning in a barrel of snow. They were succulent and the
mood was quite good. Tyrion japed with the other men, and when Ser Alliser defied him in duel for
jokes he didn't like, Tyrion dueled him at the table with his crab fork, which made everyone in the
common hall, from the recruits to the Lord Commander, laugh to death.

Leaving the common hall, he found himself in the cold of the night. His balls were really freezing.
He would have to ask Margaery to warm them when he got back to Winterfell. He thought about the
bed waiting for him in the King's Tower. It wasn't far. His wife, however, was far away. Strangely,
he was sad to leave Castle Black in the morning. He didn't know why, but he was. He looked at the
Wall. He was there. That was his last chance. That was probably the only worthy reason why he
came here. He ordered half of his men to go to sleep. Five guards would be enough for tonight. They
climbed into the winch cage and it brought them seven hundred feet up.

Tyrion asked to the two men in service when they stepped outside the cage where he was, and they
indicated him the path west. His section began where a catapult that hadn't been repaired for quite
some time stood abandoned. Tyrion knew the men guarding the Wall were assigned a particular mile
and were instructed to walk along it back and forth, so he only needed to wait for him. In the
meantime, Tyrion looked at the lands that stretched below him. In the dark of the night, they looked
terrifying. Were wildlings lurking among the trees, waiting for the next patrol to leave the Wall so
they could kill them as soon as they got out? Or were there other things hiding in these thick woods?

*It's not the wildlings giving me sleepless nights. You've never been north of the Wall, so don't tell me
what's out there.* Benjen Stark's words came back to him. He was out there, somewhere. Right now,
Tyrion felt these stories about White Walkers were true. *When winter does come, gods help us all if we're not ready.* The cold wind rose and almost made him fall on his back, but he could catch his feet in time. Winter was coming, for sure.

"Who goes there?" One of his men behind saw something, but he quickly put back his sword into the scabbard. Jon Snow walked past his guards. His men knew they could trust the bastard of Winterfell.

"I was hoping I would see you," Tyrion said.

"My lord, what are you doing up here?" Jon Snow looked much bigger in his dark furs and cloak of the Night's Watch.

"Looking from the top of the Wall one last time. Care to look with me?"

"No."

They stood there, just like the first day they arrived, looking at the empty wilderness. A wolf howled from far away. Jon Snow's direwolf was standing next to them as well. He was about to reach Tyrion's height. Soon the wolf would look down on him. *The wolf who looks down on the lion.*

"Getting along well with your sworn brothers? Well, they're not your sworn brothers yet, but things seem to be much better with them now."

"Aye, thanks to your help," Snow replied.

"Help? I only offered you words, Snow. You did all the work."

"Without your words about their heads on spikes, Grenn and Pyp would have killed me the first day. Maybe they were only words, but without them I would be dead."

They stayed silent for a moment. Tyrion looked at the bastard through and through. He had more of Eddard Stark in him than all his brothers and sisters. He may be a bastard, but he was more a Stark than any of his father's legitimate children. He remembered Kevan telling him a long time ago that his aunt believed he was his father's real son, and that Jaime was not. The same was true about Jon Snow and his siblings.

"I'm sorry to see you leave, my lord," the bastard said.

"It's either me or this cold, and it doesn't appear to be going anywhere. Are you sure you want to stay here?"

"I have a place at the Wall. There's no place for me anywhere else."

"I wouldn't say that so quickly if I were you."

"I can't go back to Winterfell," Snow said, brooding. "Robb will be Lord of Winterfell one day, our brothers will be his bannermen or his advisors, Sansa will be queen and Arya will marry a great lord."

"Arya Stark? I wish good luck to the man who will find himself with her."

They both chuckled, but the bastard's demeanour turned sour again quick enough. "I have no place at Winterfell. Even if Robb wanted of me, Lady Stark would never accept my presence. She made it very clear when I left. *I want you to leave.* These were her final words to me, as I said goodbye to
Bran.”

Tyrion sympathised with the boy. His own father certainly would have wished that he took the black as well. "You know, Snow, I never knew my mother, but the day my father died, he told me that the last thing she asked of him was to let me live. That was the only reason why he let me live. I lived thanks to this woman, and I never had the chance to know her." Tyrion saw Jon Snow looking at him with a clearly horrified expression. "Don't make that face, bastard. I told you. All dwarves are bastards in their father's eyes. As miserable as you are, at least your father is a good man. The same cannot be said for mine. Your father is right to hate mine, and to hate the Lannisters. My family is not known for his kindness."

An awkward moment passed before Jon Snow said something else. "At least you saved my life. I suppose you're better than your father."

Tyrion shrugged. "Maybe, but my aunt used to say that I have more of my father in myself than my brother and my sister have."

"Then maybe there was some good in Tywin Lannister."

"Maybe." Again, Tyrion shrugged. "Though he never showed it to me." His uncle Gerion once told him all joy left his father the day his wife died. Maybe Tywin Lannister had been different before, when his lady wife was still alive, though Jaime and Cersei never told him anything that led him to believe it.

"Will you stop at Winterfell on your way south?" Jon asked.

"Of course, I will. I must pick my wife and the rest of my men there."

"If you see my brother Bran, tell him I miss him."

"Why don't you come with me and tell him yourself?"

"I can't go back to Winterfell."

"Well, I'm sure Lady Stark wouldn't complain too much if you were to stay only a day before heading south."

Jon Snow frowned at this. "South?"

It was time. That was why Tyrion sought out the bastard. "The Wall is not the only place where you could go. Have you thought about the Westerlands? You could follow me and Margaery as we head back there."

"What would I do in the Westerlands?"

"Depends on what you want. I can offer you a place in my household. You can fight outlaws or pirates, serve in the City Watch of Lannisport as an officer. You could also eat, drink and fuck, we can do all that in the Westerlands as well. You could be knighted in time. I saw you fight in Winterfell and here. It wouldn't take you long." Tyrion was quite amused by the bewildered expression on Jon Snow's face. "You could even marry."

On that the bastard burst into a dry laugh. "Me? Marry? I'm a bastard. A Snow. Who would want to marry me, and what lord would like to marry his daughter to me?"

"You may be a bastard, but you're still the son of the Hand of the King. Your brother will be Lord of
Winterfell one day and your sister will be queen. The lords will not marry their first daughter to you, true, especially the powerful ones, but they might consider you for their second, third or fourth daughters. They won't see it a bad thing to have the brother of a queen and a lord paramount as a son-in-law, no matter he's a bastard." Jon Snow was listening attentively to him, he could see that, more surprised every second. The lad didn't expect this. "Bastards can rise high, Snow. Two were Hand of the King before your father got the job, three if Orys Baratheon was Aegon's bastard half-brother. Bastards have been part of the Kingsguard, some even commanded it. Some tried to be king as well, but since they all failed I wouldn't suggest you this path."

"Why?" he said after a moment. "Why are you offering me this?"

Would you believe me if I said it was to give you a chance? Because I feel pity for you? "I'm always looking for men of talent. You're good, Snow. Better than your own brother in some aspects. I feel your gifts may be wasted at the Wall. And… our two families don't get along very well thanks to my father's habit to kill babies. I don't really wish for this to last any longer. To have you at Casterly Rock could be a step in the right direction."

The boy was speechless. Tyrion smiled at him and resumed to speak. "Well, that's your choice. We leave tomorrow at dawn. If you accept, come and join us. I just want to tell you one last thing. Once you've said your vows, you'll be bound to the Wall for the rest of your life. You will never marry, you will never have children, you will never owe anything, not even the clothes on your back. And you will spend your life guarding the Wall from threats that may not exist. I can't promise you will enjoy the Westerlands, but if you don't like it you can still come back here and take your vows. You won't have this possibility here. And personally, I'd like to see some of the world and have a life before I decide to freeze my balls for the rest of my life. Think about it. You have the night. You take care Snow."

He patted the lad's arm and walked away, leaving him to think about it. Ned Stark had refused to give his bastard son as a ward for Casterly Rock, but now he had nothing to say in Jon Snow's decision. His family had given up on him, let him go to the Wall. He was free to take his own decisions. Tyrion walked back with his men to the winched cage, but before they entered it, he stopped in his motion.

"Wait. I have something to do."

He walked to the border of the Wall, then opened his breeches and let a yellow liquid drop on the other side of the world. This was his last night at Castle Black, and he wouldn't leave without doing everything he came for. He couldn't wait to see Jaime's uncontrollable laughter when he would tell him this, or Cersei's annoyed face. His guards would have good stories to tell each other on the road. He went back to the cage and noticed some amused looks among his men, others that looked troubled by what they just witnessed.

What would you think of me right now, Father?

The cage slowly moved down. Tyrion Lannister had stood taller than almost everyone else in the Seven Kingdoms a moment ago. Soon, he would be smaller than most men again. He thought of Margaery. She was taller than him, yet she always made him feel taller than he really was. He didn't feel taller than her though, just the same height. He never saw Margaery as someone he could dominate, but he felt like she was his equal, and he loved her. He could never consider himself over the woman he loved, the woman who changed his life and made him a happy man. He could trust her, confide in her, tell her everything that bothered him. Well, almost everything. He hadn't told her about Jaime and Cersei. How could he? She wouldn't understand. That was something to have a brother who spent his nights fucking other men, but incest was something entirely different. That was the one thing he could never tell her. He regretted that, but he couldn't tell her.
Castle Black was black as night. Only a few lights remained. He noticed one in his chamber during their descent. Ty had kept a fire lit. He was a good squire. Tyrion tried to imagine his father acting as a squire for a moment, but he couldn't. Tywin Frey may be named after his uncle, but that was the only common point between them. They arrived on the level of the ground and Tyrion went to the King's Tower while his men went to the barracks for the most part, except for the few who were on guard duty tonight. After he climbed the stairs and walked into his chamber, he found his squire reading near a candle. He stood up immediately.

"My lord." He came to help Tyrion to get rid of his cloak, boots and furs.

"What were you reading, Ty?"

"One of your books about dragons, my lord. I hope it doesn't bother you."

"Of course not. Books are made to be read. You can bring it with you if you want to read it tonight, but bring it back to me on the morrow. We leave at dawn."

"Yes, my lord."

Tyrion was ready to sleep in no time and Ty was gone with the book he read. Once in bed however, Tyrion couldn't find his way to fall asleep. His sleep had gotten better these last two years, but it was in no small part thanks to Margaery, and she was miles away. He longed for her. They would need to make some catch up when they met again. He missed the familiar scent of one of the many perfumes she used, and the sensation that she was close to him.

Giving up on sleeping, Tyrion went to the desk he had at his disposition and lit a candle. He resumed to read the book he borrowed at Winterfell from Septon Sapkowski. He kept reading late in the night and didn't see the time go on. Jon Snow was probably still freezing at the top of the Wall. Tyrion wondered what decision he would take. He offered the lad to come in the Westerlands. Now, he had to choose. If he preferred to stay at the Wall, it was up to him, though Tyrion wouldn't understand that. From his reaction, Tyrion highly doubted that Eddard Stark had told his son about the offer he made him. That could play in his favor.

Tyrion thought he began to see a few first shades of daylight. They would have to go soon. No sign of the bastard yet. A knock resonated at his door.

"My lord, one of your men is here. He came from Winterfell. He says he has an urgent message to deliver you," Ty announced from the other side. It wasn't the bastard. Not yet.

"Let him in," Tyrion said.

The man came in, all dirty and covered with sweat. "My lord, I rode day and night to reach you in time." That was obvious from his state. "Lady Lannister gave me a message for you. She told me to give it to you and only to you."

Tyrion took the long scroll the man handed him. "Thank you. You may leave. Ask Ty to give you something to eat."

The messenger left Tyrion alone. The seal of his lady wife was on it, a green rose with a red lion. If she sent him a message by rider, and with the order to only give it to him, then it had to be serious. She didn't trust her words with a raven. Tyrion broke the seal and opened the letter.

Tyrion, you must come back to Winterfell immediately. Someone tried to kill Brandon Stark. We don't know who was the assassin, but it seems he came with the king to Winterfell. He started a fire in the night and tried to kill Bran at this moment. The poor boy was only saved by his wolf.
The Starks are suspecting us. I surprised a conversation where they said they thought we could be behind this. They believe Bran was pushed from the tower instead of falling. Catelyn Stark has gone to King's Landing to warn Lord Stark. I doubt they will arrest us, but we must leave the North as quickly as possible.

I examined the place where Bran fell. I think it's possible that he was pushed and I think the assassin might have been sent because someone didn't want him to wake up. If that's the case, I have an idea of who could be behind this. I don't think I need to give you a name.

Come back, my love.

Margaery

Someone tried to kill Brandon Stark. Indeed, Margaery didn't have to give him a name. There was one that came immediately to Tyrion's mind. Cersei. Tyrion saw nothing, and he didn't ask his siblings about it, but he knew them well enough to know what happened. The Stark boy surprised them together. Cersei could send an assassin to kill him. She wouldn't hesitate to kill a child if he was a danger to her interests, but back at Winterfell, Tyrion didn't think she would do it. Catelyn Stark was always at her son's side. There was no way for someone to kill the boy without being spotted immediately. Tyrion doubted Jaime had a hand in this. If his brother had wanted to kill the boy, which he surely did, he would have killed him himself. Jaime didn't send others to do his dirty work. Cersei, however… He agreed with his wife. How stupid it was of his sister. Send an assassin would make the Starks suspect them immediately. House Lannister was known to not back up before the killing of children. It would have been better to let the boy wake up. If he told the truth, they could say he misremembered or made dreams. After all, Bran was only ten, and he would be recovering, coming out from a deep sleep that lasted weeks.

But now, they had the Starks thinking they tried to murder their son. And Margaery was stuck among them, a lone rose among wolves. A rose with thorns, admittedly, but a lone rose nonetheless. The men he left with her wouldn't be able to stand before the whole garrison of Winterfell, even with all the people Ned Stark brought south with him. Tyrion cursed himself. He should never have gone to the Wall. They should have gone back to Casterly Rock with Robert and his retinue, to the price of spending weeks with his sister. The morning was perking up. They should go now.

Tyrion burnt the message with the fire of the candle. No trace of it could be left. Margaery's words couldn't be found. Tyrion went outside his chamber and told his guard to order Ty to bring his breakfast. They would probably leave in an hour, but Tyrion couldn't allow to leave any time late. Tyrion ate his breakfast much quicker than usual, then had himself prepared for the road. He also sent two of his men to bring a gift to the Lord Commander. Quite a heavy gift.

Not all Tyrion's men were ready when he arrived in the yard. He sent Vylarr to make them hurry and waited on his horse. Mormont came to say his farewells.

"Thank you for the present, Lord Lannister," he told Tyrion.

"Consider it my first help to the Watch as well as a token of my gratitude for your hospitality. I know that's not what you need the most, but you'll be able to buy things you need with it."

"Aye. Marsh is already in the Seven Heavens."

"He probably never saw a chest full of gold in his life before," Tyrion commented. And that was a big chest he gave to Mormont.

The Lord Commander seemed to chew on something for a moment. Tyrion wished he said what he
needed to say. They had to go. Margaery may be in danger. People could say the Starks were
honorable, if they believed Margaery had anything to do with the assassin sent after Bran Stark, she
was in big trouble. "Jon Snow came to see me last night."

"Really?" Could he come to the fact?

"He told me about your proposition."

It took a few seconds for Tyrion to remember. With Margaery's message, he had almost forgotten
about his discussion with the bastard last night. "I see. And?"

Mormont turned to look at the stables. "I think you have your answer." Jon Snow was coming out of
it with a horse, all saddled and ready for the road. He stopped near Tyrion.

"Is your offer still valid?" he asked.

Tyrion hesitated for a moment. "Of course." He wouldn't come back on his word.

Jon Snow smiled. He looked excited, something Tyrion hadn't seen in him so far. He made his
farewells to the Lord Commander and mounted his horse. This was good and bad news that he came
with them. They would have a Stark with them for all the road to Winterfell. With a sign of head,
Tyrion indicated him to join their group.

Tyrion looked back at Mormont. "I'll send you more men, Mormont. I promise."

"I hope so." He didn't need to hope. A Lannister always pays his debts, and Tyrion Lannister was a
man of his word. Mormont was certainly unhappy that Tyrion stole him one of his most promising
recruits, but he would make up for it. "Safe journey, my lord."

A minute later, all the men were there. Vylarr shouted To Casterly Rock, and they rode forward,
leaving Castle Black behind for Winterfell. Ned Stark's son was with them. They rode to Winterfell,
to Margaery. For the first time in his life, Tyrion Lannister was worried about his wife. He wouldn't
let the Starks hurt her or his family. He wouldn't let them harm his blood, but above everything else,
he wouldn't let them harm the woman he loved.

Chapter End Notes

So, for those who asked about this in the comment section and who hoped so hard for it,
your patience has been rewarded. Jon Snow is heading for the Westerlands! This means
future changes fo the storyline at the Wall, but also for the events in the south. Jon will
meet several people down south, encounters that I hope you will like.

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery
Sorry, everyone. This chapter should have been uploaded a few days ago, but technical problems with my computer delayed me, so here it is, the new Margaery chapter. I hope you'll like it, since we get to see two people we haven't seen together for a very long time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XII

"I don't want to follow lessons," the small boy said.

"You have to. You haven't followed any since you woke up, Bran. You must resume them," her handmaiden told him.

"I don't want to follow lessons," he repeated firmly.

"It's all right, Mira. Leave us alone, please."

Her friend obeyed and left with the book she brought to teach something to Bran. Ever since the day he woke up, he refused to do anything. He didn't follow his lessons with Maester Luwin, refused to leave his chamber, and he almost refused to eat. He only left his chamber for suppers, when Robb Stark ordered him to be with him and his little brother at the high table, but even then he didn't speak and barely swallowed anything. He was pale and had lost weight since his fall, and he didn't seem to recuperate any since his sleep ended. He was way worse than Willas after the accident that left him lame.

Margaery looked at her friend leaving the room before she reported back her attention on Bran. Lady Stark asked her to watch over him, and that's what she did. She came to see Bran twice a day, but so far it didn't improve his morale in any way. Nothing seemed able to improve it. She had asked Mira today to make him follow his history lessons, hoping a different face than Maester Luwin could make a difference, but to no avail. She had thought about trying on her own, but Mira was better when it came to learning and teaching.

"You can't continue this way forever, Bran," she told him.

"Why not?"

"Because that's no life."

"It's not a life to live without legs," he said bitterly.

What was she to do with him? "Have you ever heard of Doran Martell, Bran?"

"The Lord of Sunspear."

"Exactly. Do you know he's been forced to move in a wheelchair for years now, because of the gout? And he's still Lord of Sunspear."
"What does he do of his days?" Bran didn't show any interest, but at least he asked a question, so maybe somewhere he was interested by what she said.

"He rules the entire kingdom of Dorne, he speaks to men and women from all this territory and from the entire world, he wanders in the Water Gardens, and he eats, he drinks, he sleeps and he awakes every day to live."

"Can he ride?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

"Can he shoot arrows? Can he climb to walls? Can he run?"

"I think his main interests were not in these things, even before he got the gout."

"Then he's lucky, but I'm not Doran Martell. Maester Luwin says I'll never get to use my legs again. I'd rather be dead."

"Don't ever say this, Bran."

"I'd rather be dead." He said it again, clearly, detaching every word from the other. Margaery didn't like to see him like this.

"Look, Bran." She took a chair next to his bed. His direwolf was quiet, laying innocently on his legs. Margaery sometimes wondered if that was really the beast who killed the assassin. "I have a cousin who is lame. He cannot run, he cannot climb, he can only ride with a very special saddle, and although he can walk, he walks slower than everyone else."

"At least, he can walk."

"Yes, but like you he wanted to be a knight. He will never be one now, but he still lives, and he loves to live too."

"What does he do?"

"He raises hounds, dogs, horses and hawks. He writes. He reads. He helps my father to administer Highgarden and the Reach. And very soon, he will be married."

"But he can walk."

Margaery closed her eyes, sighing inwardly. Were all the Starks so stubborn? Catelyn Stark needed an assassination attempt to get out of this room. What would it take for her son? "You still have a family who loves you, Bran. If you don't want to live for yourself, then at least live for them. It would break their hearts if you died. And it already breaks their hearts to see you like this."

"Even my mother?"

"Your mother loves you very much, Bran."

"Then why isn't she here?"

"Your mother had to leave Winterfell."

"Why?"

She gave him carefully the official reason. "When I stopped at Riverrun, on my way to your home, I
met your grandfather, Lord Hoster Tully. He wasn't well. His health was declining. He doesn't have long to live. Your mother went to him before it was too late."

"Did she think I would die?"

"Your mother prayed by your side for weeks before she left you, because she was afraid to lose you, even if Luwin assured her you would survive. She knew you would wake up. That's why she left, because she knew you would come back. But her father will not have your chance."

"Chance? I envy him. I'd like to be dying just like him."

"You say that because you're not dying. Because you think you can't be happy without your legs, but that's not true. There are plenty of people who have no use of their legs, and they still manage to make a living without that."

"I don't want to live like that," Bran shouted.

"It's not your call, Bran," Margaery said with a sad voice. "We don't get to choose the life we have. All we can do is make the best of our circumstances."

"What good can come from the fact I can't walk?"

"You may not have your legs, Bran, but you still have your arms, your head, your mind, and everything else in your body. There are soldiers who lose their hands or their arms and they still manage to live without them. And you're still luckier than many people who have their legs and arms intact."

"I don't see how."

"I know boys of your age who would gladly give one of their legs or both to have a family like yours." She thought of all the orphans who were taken care of in her orphanages in Lannisport.

Bran didn't seem convinced. She tried everything, but no matter what she tried, he still remained bitter, in a dark and fool mood. It hadn't been so difficult with Willas. He had managed to recover from the loss of his leg quite quickly. Then, Bran was right on one thing. Her cousin could still walk.

"You want to be alone, don't you?" she asked him. Without surprise, he looked away from her at the ceiling. "I'll come back to see you tomorrow." She kissed him on the forehead and walked away.

Margaery pitied Bran. He wanted to be a knight, a kingsguard one day maybe, but now it would never happen. It was grave, indeed. The poor child couldn't go from one place to another without being carried by someone else. Tyrion was a dwarf, he was limited as well, but he didn't depend on someone else for the daily tasks. Bran did.

The image of Cersei smirking came to Margaery's mind. She balled her fists. How could Cersei do something like that to a child? She had children too. Tyrion told her that his sister loved her children, her one redeeming quality if she had any. How could she try to kill someone else's child, one who was the same age than Tommen? What was the problem with Tywin Lannister's children? Only Tyrion seemed to have inherited some goodness when he came into the world. Had Lord Tywin corrupted the two children he relied upon to continue his legacy, his eldest son who he destined to be his heir and his daughter because he destined her to be queen, while Tyrion escaped that because he was never supposed to be given any position or any responsibility? The Starks could see the results of her father-in-law's ruthlessness and suffered from them. She hoped, not for the first time, that he would burn in the Seven Hells forever.
She reached a balcony from where she watched men sparring in the courtyard. One of them was Robb Stark. He was quite good with a sword, though not as much as Loras or Garlan. Since his father left for King's Landing, he carried out the duties of Lord of Winterfell the best he could. No one could accuse him of laziness.

He managed to bring his sword at the neck of his opponent, ending the duel. He removed his helmet, all sweating, despite the coldness of the air. Margaery wore a deep red gown to prevent any chill. She was eager to go back to Casterly Rock. The acting Lord of Winterfell looked up and she knew he saw her. She smiled sweetly, then walked away to the godswood.

She wandered among the trees. Again, if she wanted a quick walk, or a long one, this place was much better than the glass garden. She spent time in there with her friends each day, sewing and gossiping, but when she wanted some time alone, and she needed more of these lately, the godswood was the perfect place. She arrived near the place Lady Stark spoke with the others weeks ago. No wonder she chose it to hold a secret discussion. Not many people came here. The Starks hadn't tried anything against her yet, and she didn't have the impression they would try anything. She felt the surveillance around her weaken these past days. Sometimes, when she went to see Bran, they left them together only with an old woman everyone called Old Nan. They couldn't hope she could do anything to stop her if Margaery tried to kill Bran.

The tension had lowered, but she would still feel better once they were far from Winterfell, on the way home. She thought about the great garden she had built on the northern hill, the gazebo carved in the rock and giving on the Sunset Sea, the other gardens all over the castle, her charity houses she built in Lannisport, the watery caverns in the depths of the castle where she used to swim. She missed it all, and she missed Tyrion as well. He couldn't be that far from Winterfell now. She wouldn't forgive him if he'd lost his way into Mole's Town brothel.

"Lady Lannister."

She turned to see Ned Stark's son walk to her. He had tried to wash his face after the duel, but she could still see the marks left by his training. She replied with her sweetest smile.

"Lord Stark. How helpful can I be to you?"

"Nothing. You already helped more than enough these past weeks."

"You flatter me, Lord Stark." She had the satisfaction to see him redden.

"My lady, I want to give you my apologizes for the behavior of my house towards you since you arrived. We've been somewhat rude and you didn't deserve it. My family simply has a tendency… to not entirely trust the Lannisters… because of past experiences."

"What past experiences?" She feigned ignorance.

"There are certain things that Lord Tywin Lannister did during the last war that my father witnessed, and he disapproved of these... actions."

"I suppose this is about the Targaryen children and their mother."

"Aye," Robb Stark conceded reluctantly.

Margaery nodded. "Believe me, no one in House Lannister is proud of this. Me and Tyrion the last. I never got to know my father-in-law. From what Tyrion says, he was everything but a good man. The father and the son didn't get along at all."
"No?"

"No. If Tyrion had been the one leading the Lannister army to King's Landing that day, Elia Martell and her children wouldn't have died. My husband is unable to order the death of children."

"Really?" Robb Stark asked her.

"Really." She confirmed, keeping an innocent face, knowing the effect it would have.

"Are you sure about that?"

"I am." Robb Stark looked at her queerly, intrigued. She let nothing appear. "Would you like to walk with me a little?"

"Of course." He hastened to accept and followed her.

"Your godswood is very impressive, I must say."

"It is ten thousand years old. No one has ever touched it."

"I hope the Old Gods are not insulted with my presence."

"I'm sure they're not," he babbled. She smiled at him once again. They kept walking in silence for some time. "I hope you appreciated your stay here, my lady."

"I did, but as soon as Tyrion comes back, I must leave."

"I will regret your departure." She had no difficulty to imagine it.

"I had a good time here. Winterfell is a fascinating place, I must admit, but as much as I may like it, my place is at Casterly Rock, and I don't hate it either."

"How did you happen to be married with Lord Tyrion?" She could see how interested he was in the answer she would give.

She smiled, thinking of her first meeting with her husband. "Our family organized the marriage. That's how things are done."

"And your parents just decided like that to marry you to him?"

"Oh no. That's a decision that requires time to think about. But in the end, they did accept. And I've never regretted their decision a single moment."

"Never?"

"Never."

She looked straight ahead of her, leaving the young lord to ponder her words. "Do you know your husband well?"

"I hope so. I've been married to him for over two years now, after all."

"And you say he's not like Tywin Lannister."

"Not at all. I'm quite happy to be married with him. He's a very caring husband."

"And yet he leaves you behind for months in order to visit the Wall."
She shrugged. "A whim of his. Tyrion always wanted to travel. When he was young, he wanted to travel through Essos, visit the Free Cities, but his father forbade him."

"Is that one of the reasons why your husband didn't like Lord Tywin very much?"

"No. Believe me, there are many good reasons why the father and the son hated each other."

"What reasons?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. This is private. I'm one of the very few to who Tyrion told this, and I don't want to break his trust."

"He trusts you?"

"Of course. We have no secret for each other."

Before Robb Stark could say something else, one of the servants of Winterfell came running.

"My lord! My lady," he added once he recognized her. "There are people coming. Red banners."

Her heart bumped in her chest. "Finally," she said. She almost ran past the man and went out of the godswood.

They arrived about one minute after she stopped before the gates in the yard. A long column of Lannister men with her husband at the head. She had never been so happy to see him. He was well, from what she could see. He only looked a little more beefy with the furs he wore, but aside from that, he was just like when he left.

On purpose, she hugged him tightly as soon as he was off his horse. "Are you all right?" he asked her in a whisper only she could hear.

"I am. Nothing happened to me," she replied in the same kind. They would talk more about it later, when they would be alone. She released him. She was really happy to see him, and relieved too.

"Lord Lannister." Robb Stark had arrived to welcome him. He didn't seem happy to see Tyrion. Margaery suspected there was more than one reason for this, and she could only grin inwardly.

"Lord Stark. Thank you for watching over my wife while I was away," her husband replied. She saw Robb Stark turn blank for a second. Tyrion's choice of words may have suggested something.

"That was no problem, my lord." She could see in Tyrion's eyes that he had noticed the reaction of the acting Lord of Winterfell.

"We will only stay here for tonight. We're riding for Casterly Rock tomorrow at dawn."

"Very well." Robb Stark looked behind her, and his eyes widened. "Jon?"

Margaery turned to see Jon Snow standing there with their men. "Hi, Robb. Glad to see you again," he said.

"What are you doing here?" He obviously didn't expect to see his half-brother, and Margaery neither.

"Jon Snow is riding with us to the Rock," Tyrion explained.

"What?"
Margaery understood immediately. Tyrion hadn't only gone to the Wall to piss off the edge of the world. Still, he could have told her, though she wouldn't have expected he would succeed. Maybe she underestimated her husband, which hadn't happened quite often during the last year.

"Lord Lannister offered me a place in his household at Casterly Rock," Jon Snow said. "And I accepted."

Robb Stark was looking at his half-brother in utter consternation, then his expression turned entirely serious. "We'll talk about this later. Do you need anything, Lord Lannister?"

"No, just some rest," Margaery's husband replied. "We have a long road ahead of us."

"I can arrange for supper to be brought to your chambers, if that is your wish."

"No, no need," Margaery intervened before Tyrion could answer. "We'll sup with you in the Great Hall. This is our last night here, it wouldn't be appropriate to not show you our gratitude by leaving you alone."

Robb Stark looked troubled again. "Thank you, Lady Lannister." She really worked well with him. He probably didn't have the chance to meet many girls. The North was a large land and few lived here. It wasn't like Highgarden where all their bannermen came at least four times every year for various celebrations.

"So it's true."

Margaery followed Tyrion's gaze as he said these words and saw the great man named Hodor standing there, holding someone in his arms. "Bran!" she exclaimed. "It's good to see you out, finally."

"I had no choice," he said gloomily. He looked at his brother. Robb Stark forced him to come out.

"Bran, how are you?" Jon Snow asked.

"I'm right. What are you doing here? They told me you were gone, to take the black." For a short moment Margaery saw Bran's eyes shine, but it was all gone in a second.

"Turns out I'll be heading south, finally."

"Hello, Bran," Tyrion said. "Do you remember anything about what happened?"

"He has no memory of that day," Robb said, on an accusing tone.

"Curious."

If Tyrion noticed Robb Stark's tone, and he certainly did, he showed no sign of it. He simply seemed to find it curious, like he said, that Bran remembered nothing. Margaery had tried to know if he remembered anything the moment he woke up, but Bran really couldn't remember how he fell… if he fell.

"Would your charming companion be so kind as to kneel? My neck is beginning to hurt," Tyrion said to Bran then.

"Kneel, Hodor," Bran told the giant, and he did as he was told.

"Do you like to ride, Bran?"
"Yes. Well, I mean I did like to."

"My brother has lost the use of his legs. He can never ride again," Robb Stark said again with the same accusing voice.

"Nonsense," Tyrion scoffed. "With the right horse and saddle, even a cripple can ride."

"I'm not a cripple," Bran protested weakly.

"Then I'm not a dwarf. My father will rejoice so much to hear it, he will come back to life and dance on his own tomb. I have a gift for you." He handed a long scroll to Bran. "Give that to your saddler. He'll provide the rest. You must shape the horse to the rider. Start with a yearling and teach it to respond to the reins and to the boy's voice." He explained that as Bran was looking at the design he gave him.

"Will I really be able to ride?" Bran asked.

"You will. On horseback you will be as tall as any of them."

"Is this some kind of trick?" Robb asked. "Why do you want to help him?" He obviously still had a bad opinion of her husband.

"Your brother Jon asked me to help him, and I'm a man of my word. A Lannister always pays his debts. And I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards and broken things." For the first time since he woke up, Bran was smiling. Tyrion had succeeded within seconds what she failed to accomplish for weeks. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm tired."

He walked away and Margaery followed him, shooting one last glance to Robb Stark, one that said I told you. They found their way to their chambers without problem and Tyrion closed the door as soon they got inside. He took her by both arms and looked at her, worried.

"Are you all right? Are you really all right?"

"I am," she assured him. "The Starks tried nothing against me. They don't believe they have enough proof to arrest me, or you, for the time being."

He sighed in relief. "Good. Tell me everything."

She told him all that happened, all the details of the attempt of murder and the conversation she surprised, and what she did afterwards. Bran effectively had no memory at all of his fall.

"He really remembers nothing?" Tyrion asked her.

"Nothing. I tried to discover what it was, tried to see if he would remember, but he doesn't."

"Possibly a consequence of the shock he had when he fell. I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Cersei could be behind this, Tyrion, you know."

"I know." He winced. "She could do that, if Bran was a threat to her."

"Tyrion, I've been thinking about this. I discussed with Jon Arryn about the possibility of marrying Loras to Myrcella. What if he talked about it to Cersei afterwards, and she decided to kill him for this reason? Lord Arryn wasn't completely opposed to the marriage, from the way he spoke to me."
"Cersei would be capable of killing for her children," Tyrion recognized. "That's not impossible."

"Lady Stark seemed to believe he saw something he wasn't supposed to see. What if he surprised Cersei in a discussion with someone? Someone who helped her to kill Jon Arryn?"

Tyrion seemed surprised. "That would explain a lot of things. In this case, it's probably better that Bran remembers nothing."

"What do you mean?" she asked. She didn't expect her husband would say that.

"If that's really what happened, if Bran Stark was to recover his memory, then imagine what would happen. We would all be in danger."

"We are in danger with Cersei," Margaery countered. "She tried to have you killed. She tried to turn our bannermen against us. Now she murders the Hand of the King and tries to kill a boy of ten in his sleep!"

"We don't know that for sure. Not yet. There are strange events going on in King's Landing, for sure. We must warn Kevan so he can keep an eye on everything there."

"Can we trust him?"

"He knows Cersei tried to murder me. He's on our side. The one I don't trust is Pycelle. And Varys. And Littlefinger. There's almost no one we can trust in this city. We'll send a rider to King's Landing as soon as we leave Winterfell."

"We must deal with Cersei, Tyrion."

"I know, but how?" He went to the table and poured himself a cup of wine. He also served her one. "If Robert was to discover that she murdered Jon Arryn, he would execute her immediately."

"Would that be a bad thing?"

Tyrion looked at her. His eyes were expressionless for a moment. Then he looked away. "She's my sister."

"She tried to murder you," Margaery reminded him.

"I know, but Cersei is not entirely evil. She is power hungry, selfish, vain, cruel, but she's a mother too. She loves her children. No matter what we can say about her, she would never do them any harm. And... there have been some good times between us. Not many, but there have been some."

He made a pause, lost in his memories. "You remember, I told you I used to tumble all over Casterly Rock when I was six. That made the septons, the squires and the servants smile everywhere. Even Cersei laughed when she saw me do it. There are times... I can manage to see the sister I'd like to have."

That was Tyrion's greatest weakness. He hid it well, but he craved for people to love him. She had seen it firsthand with herself. He had wanted her to love him the very moment they met, and his wish had been granted. However, it wasn't enough for him. He wanted to be loved by the rest of his family, and by all the people around him. He didn't do much to be loved. He wasn't crawling on the ground, begging for people to love him, quite the opposite, but deep inside, he wanted people to love him. Even his sister. Margaery came to sit by his side and placed her hand on his.

"I understand she is your sister, Tyrion, but she's a danger. If she really assassinated Jon Arryn, and if she tried to have a boy of ten killed in his sleep, who knows what else she could be capable of?"
She may even be trying to start a new uprising against you as we speak," she told him very softly, to make him understand.

"I know she is dangerous, but if Robert commands her execution, I can't stand by while he takes her head off her shoulders."

She withdrew her hand from his. "You would go to war for her?"

"Of course not!" She was reassured by his answer, and by the tone of it. He reacted as if it was the most stupid thing he ever heard. "I won't start a war to save Cersei from her crimes. I'm not Jaime. But I won't do nothing while she is executed either. I know my brother. He may try something foolish if Cersei is in danger. The best course of action would be to take her away from King's Landing and send her somewhere she can no longer pose a threat."

"Where?"

"I don't know. There are a few lords in the Westerlands who may be willing to welcome her as a guest. Preferably some in isolated mountains. Minor lords who wouldn't be powerful enough to give her any power if she tried to use them. An island could be good as well. One of the Shield Islands maybe, on your father's lands. She wouldn't have any influence there."

"Maybe." It could work. There was only one great problem. "But how will we do this? Cersei is the queen."

Margaery may be more powerful than Cersei, but she didn't have the power to send the queen to an isolated castle far from everything. Not without good reasons to expel the queen from court. They needed the consent of the king to start.

"First, we must discover Cersei's part in all this. We don't know for sure if she's behind Jon Arryn's death or the attempt of murder. It could be someone else. King's Landing is a place of schemes. Everyone is plotting against everyone there. Let's find out the truth first, then we will take action. We have a few weapons we can use against my sister if need be."

Indeed, they had. Tyrion was right. They knew a few things about the queen that may cause her great harm if she wasn't careful.

"For now, better to keep a low profile until we leave at dawn. We'll be far from Winterfell tomorrow and leave the damn North behind," Tyrion concluded while taking a sip of wine.

"If only you hadn't visited the Wall," she said with a voice between exasperation and sorry. She took a gulp of her cup as well and relaxed. "You could have told me you were going there to convince Jon Snow to follow you."

"I didn't know if I would succeed. I was surprised when he followed us at the end. I thought he would remain at the Wall. Starks are hard to convince."

"He's not a Stark. He's a Snow," Margaery corrected with a smile.

"He is more Stark than his siblings. They look more like Tullys, except his little sister."

"Are you sure this is a good idea to bring him to Casterly Rock, when the Starks believe we tried to murder one of them?"

"Maybe not, but he will be alone there. He won't be much a threat, and it could be useful if problems arise to hold a Stark at the Rock."
"You're planning to use him as a hostage?"

"No. But the Starks will think twice before trying anything against us if they know one of them lives in a castle surrounded by Lannisters and men loyal to us. Even if he's a bastard." His face showed something like sadness.

"You pity him, don't you?" she asked him.

"He didn't choose to be born a bastard."

No more than Tyrion chose to be born a dwarf. Tyrion was quite generous and merciful with people who never had a chance in life or who were mistreated without deserving it. Once, a man at the head of a theater troupe came as they held court because a merchant had men destroy their stand near his business. The merchant said their show wasn't good for his shop nearby. One of the members of the troupe was a dwarf girl of maybe fifteen. Tyrion had made her advance and tell everything that happened. When she was done, he asked very strange questions.

"How many people were watching your piece when it happened?"

"About a hundred, my lord, for each day since we arrived," she had shyly answered.

"How much was the price for an entrance?"

"Two copper coins."

"And how much longer were you planning to stay in Lannisport?"

"A month, maybe two if the people liked the show enough."

The next thing Tyrion did was to sentence the merchant to pay the troupe what they would have gained if they had remained for two months in Lannisport. When the man protested, Tyrion stated that whether he learned to live with dwarves nearby, or he had to pay them to go away.

"So, how was Mole's Town?" she asked him, returning to the present time.

"Didn't have much time to see it. We rode next to it, but never stopped."

"You surprise me." She feigned the said surprise. "I thought you would take the opportunity to visit its famous brothel."

He looked straight at her. "After spending so many nights with you, I can't imagine myself with another woman." There was no trace of sarcasm in his voice or his face. "So, what about Robb Stark?" His mocking demeanour was back.

"Do you really think I would fall for a Stark?" She made sure from the way she said it that this would never happen.

"I don't know. He's quite a handsome boy. And I saw his reaction when I talked about you."

Margaery laughed at that. "I just used my personal charms, to make him think of me in a better way. I doubt he believes I had something to do in the attempt of murder now." She explained to Tyrion how she brought Robb Stark to have a better opinion of her. He knew why she discreetly seduced him.

"Let's hope the plans for the saddle I gave to his brother will convince him I didn't either."
"Thank you for that," she told him. "Bran has been in a horrible mood ever since he woke up. You don't know it, but it was the first time I saw him smile in weeks when you told him he could ride again." She took a sip of wine. Her husband was looking at her closely.

"You're fond of the boy, aren't you?"

"He's only a child." Whoever tried to kill him, that was unforgivable. She noticed that Tyrion's eyes had dropped on the floor. She knew why. They both knew why.

They had been over this before and didn't need to tell each other anything else about that matter. They were married for more than two years, and still they had no children. Despite her mother's reassurances, she began to be afraid that she was barren. The first time she confessed her fear to Tyrion, he had replied that if someone was the problem, it was him. After all, he had been with many women in the past, and none of them got pregnant from him as far as they knew. However, that meant nothing. Tyrion wasn't Robert Baratheon. The king was laying with almost every woman he crossed, from highborn ladies to whores in the brothels in Flea Bottom. Margaery knew he had twins from a servant at Casterly Rock, one of the weapons they had against Cersei, and another bastard son at Silverhill. Tyrion, on the other side, only slept with whores before their wedding. They often took moon tea, which prevented them from getting pregnant most of the time, and even if they got pregnant, there was no way to tell if their children were Tyrion's or one of the many other possible fathers. As for his first wife, Tyrion hadn't been long enough with her to know if he got her with child, and the girl in Kayce had no child from him by all accounts. There was no way to tell who couldn't have children of them two. Maybe they both couldn't.

No, Margaery. You will have children. You only need time. Your mother needed time before she got you. She wouldn't give up. She and Tyrion needed children. They needed an heir for Casterly Rock, unless they wanted to let Cersei's children get their hands on it. She liked Tommen, this sweet boy who always held a cat in his arms, but she didn't want him to end Lord of Casterly Rock. He was still Cersei's son, and the queen would do anything to control the Rock through him. Margaery wouldn't make any compromise on that. The future Lord of Casterly Rock had to be her son, and no one else. A few more sons and daughters could also help them to fortify their position through alliances. And Joffrey was betrothed to Sansa now. If Margaery could have a daughter, then she could arrange when the time was right for her to be betrothed to Joffrey's heir. Her nephew may not like her, but no one would be stupid enough to not realize how the support of the Lannisters and the Tyrells were vital to the Crown. King Robert was wed to Cersei Lannister because maintaining the Lannisters on his side was of the utmost importance, and that was before they were allies with her family. A girl whose father happened to be the Lord of Casterly Rock and whose grandfather was the Lord of Highgarden would be the best match for a future king.

Apart from the political benefits she would gain from them, Margaery just wanted children. She loved Tyrion, and she wanted to start a family with him. She wouldn't care if they were dwarves. Tyrion was a dwarf, but he was still one of the most brilliant man she ever knew, and the man she loved. She looked at him, and she couldn't see any of the ugliness some people said they saw in him. He kept looking down, the fingers of his right hand playing with the cup he laid on the table. They were late in the afternoon, but they had some time.

Slowly, Margaery stood up and came to stand right before Tyrion. She took his cheek in her right hand and turned his head until he faced her. Then she leaned and kissed him. He had been gone for so long. A moan escaped her throat as soon as their lips connected, and her husband sighed as well. A warm feeling spread through all her body, the same she had each time they shared a deep kiss. This time, however, it also came along with an urge. She climber over him as he still sat in the chair and placed her legs around his hips. Her husband had shorter legs and arms than the other men, but the rest of his body was completely normal, no different from any usual shaped person. Height didn't
She deepened their kiss further. She could feel the taste of wine on his lips. Of course, he didn't forget to bring a lot of it while he was at the Wall. Quickly, her hand confirmed that Tyrion had enjoyed wine far more than women while he was away. She kissed him with passion, running her hands through his hair, over his face, and began to unfasten his doublet. All the while, his own hands didn't remain idle. Short arms didn't stop him from using them and his fingers caressed her hips, her back, her arms, her shoulders, her face, her legs. An energy she hadn't felt for too long filled her entire body.

"I missed you."

She broke their kiss just long enough to say the words, but Tyrion used the pause to move his mouth on her chin, then trailed it along her neck until he reached her collarbone and began to kiss the surface of her skin near the neckline of her dress. His breath was hot against her skin, a welcomed warmth in this cold place, as he spoke the same words in an infatuated whisper.

"I missed you too."

Chapter End Notes

For those who hoped for a lemon here, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there are none in this story.

On a sad note, I must announce you that "A Rose and a Lion" will go back to its slower pace of one chapter published every two weeks instead of every week. The reason is simple: I'm starting to update "A Shadow and a Wolf" on a regular basis once again, two chapters per week, beginning on Saturday. I regret that I can't update these two stories together more often, but I'm only human after all. :) Still, my master is coming to an end, and to a real end now, so it should be easier now for me to update these stories frequently. Don't worry, I'm not abandoning any of these two fics.

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
Jon II

Chapter Notes

So, about 45 hours before the first episode of Season 7 can be watched, here is a new chapter with Jon as the main protagonist. Discover how Jon reacts to the failed attempt on Bran's life, and watch him meeting two more people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON II

"That's impossible, Robb. Why would Tyrion Lannister try to kill Bran?"

They were in their father's solar, now Robb's, and only Maester Luwin was with them. His brother just told him what happened while he was at the Wall. Jon was intrigued, but not disappointed when he saw that Lady Stark wasn't at Winterfell. She never liked to see him, or to know he wasn't far. However, when Robb told him the reasons why she rode to King's Landing and about the attempt of murder on Bran, Jon had almost jumped to the ceiling. Robb even told him his mother received a letter from Lysa Arryn claiming that her husband was murdered by the Lannisters.

"My mother believes that Bran saw something he wasn't supposed to see," Robb explained, "that he was thrown from the broken tower, and that when the person who did this realized he wouldn't die, he sent an assassin after him. The dagger was too costly. It could only be given to him by someone wealthy. Like the Lannisters."

Jon tried to assimilate what he just learned. Someone tried to kill Bran, and his brother believed the Lannisters could be behind this. But why? Nothing of this made sense. "If Lord Tyrion wanted Bran to die, then why give him the plans for a special saddle so he can ride again?"

"Maybe to dull our suspicions. He doesn't want to look guilty. I wouldn't be surprised if these plans were tricked and the saddle breaks while Bran is riding."

"I doubt it, my lord," Luwin said. "I took a look at the plans and there's nothing strange about them. I feel ashamed that I didn't come up with this idea myself. Any good saddler who follows these plans has no chance to make a saddle that could kill Bran."

"And why would he threaten men who were about to slit my throat at the Wall?" Jon added.

"What?" Robb asked, unbelieving.

"Other recruits. They tried to kill me on my first day at Castle Black. Lord Tyrion threatened to have their heads for that. Why he would do that after he ordered a man to kill Bran?"

The maester cocked his head. "Lady Lannister spent a lot of time with Bran after Lady Stark was gone, and she never tried anything against him. Maybe we were wrong about her husband as well," he said.

Robb seemed like he was thinking a lot. "I don't believe Lady Margaery had any part in this. Mother herself didn't think so, but Lord Tyrion… Though she told me today that he could never order a child's death."
"There! We know it's not them," Jon declared.

Jon had spent a lot of time with Lord Tyrion on the road between Winterfell and the Wall, and on the way back he spoke a lot with his men. Since he was going back to the Westerlands with them to join Lord Tyrion's household, they had welcomed him instantly. There was even one of the knights in their group who was a bastard, a Hill, son of a cousin of Alyssanne Lefford, the Lady of the Golden Tooth. They didn't seem to have any problem with him or the fact that he was a bastard, or a Northerner for that matter. He found out that many knights who escorted Lord Tyrion weren't even highborn. Not most of them, but about a dozen of the forty who followed the Lord of Casterly Rock to the Wall. They reached knighthood from personal accomplishments, and not because of their birth. Jon already got along with many of them.

"Jon may be right," Luwin said carefully. He seemed to think about each word he said. "The assassin hid in the stables. He hid from everyone here at Winterfell, including the Lannisters. Why hide from them if they were the ones to hire him? And it looks strange that the attempt on Bran's life took place after the king left while the Lannisters remained behind. With the type of man they sent after Bran, we would think they would wait to be far from Winterfell before trying something."

"You mean the person who sent this assassin left with the king, and Lord and Lady Lannister know nothing of this?" Robb summarized.

"Possibly. No one saw Lady Lannister or anyone in her service going into the stables after the king left. They probably never knew the footpad was there."

Robb seemed to think about all this for a moment. "We don't know who tried to kill Bran. We will let the Lannisters leave, but I want a close watch on Bran during all the supper tonight." He turned to Jon. "And I think it would be better if you didn't go to Casterly Rock."

"I left the Wall to go there, Robb, and you just said Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery didn't try to kill Bran," Jon opposed.

"I said no such thing. I don't think as certainly as before that they had a hand in this, but they could still be involved. It's too dangerous for you to go there."

"What if they're not involved at all?"

"What if they are? You'll be surrounded by Lannisters in the Westerlands, without help."

"I don't believe they are behind the assassination attempt."

"I believe they could be. We can't take the risk."

"And what about Father? What about your mother? And Arya, and Sansa? They are all in King's Landing, and the Lannisters are powerful there as well. It didn't stop Father from going there, even after the letter from Lady Arryn," Jon countered angrily.

"Father went there with an entire household and a full guard."

"And Lady Stark? Do you consider Ser Rodrik to be a full guard? Our father doesn't even know she's coming to see him."

"My mother went to the capital because she had to. It was necessary to warn our father about everything that happened. It is not necessary for you to go to Casterly Rock. You won't be of any use there."
"What if I could discover something useful there? Something that could help us to enlight what happened to Bran? If the Lannisters had a hand in this attack, I could learn something useful while I'm there. And if they had no part in it, I won't be in any danger. I will be far more useful at Casterly Rock than at the Wall."

Jon highly doubted Lord Tyrion and his wife tried to murder Bran, and he wouldn't give up on going to the Westerlands. He had a chance to do something of his life. The Westerlands offered him possibilities he thought he could never have. He couldn't turn his back on them. He wouldn't let Robb force him into returning to the Wall.

"Jon could learn something about all of it in the Westerlands," the maester reflected. "However, how would you send us the information? The maester at Casterly Rock won't let you send a raven with compromising information concerning the Lord of Casterly Rock or his family, and finding a rider willing to travel all the way to the North will be impossible."

"I'll ride myself for King's Landing then, or find someone else to do it. I'll bring the news to Father. The Lannisters won't find it strange that I pay a visit to him and my sisters."

Robb and Luwin looked at each other, and the maester seemed to agree by the movement he made with his head that Jon was right. However, his brother shook his head, dead serious. "I can't approve this."

Anger flared inside Jon. "And what would you have me do? Where would you have me go? I just left the Wall. You think the Night's Watch will welcome me back happily after I just turned my back on them?"

"There's no reason to yell," Luwin said with an appeasing gesture.

"You could stay here, at Winterfell," Robb said. "I'll find a place for you here. With all the people who left with Father, there are many positions that need to be filled."

That was tempting. He could stay at home, with his brothers. Everything would be like before. However, that involved someone who wouldn't accept that he remained here. "What about Lady Stark?" he asked.

Doubt showed on his brother's face immediately. He then tried to gain back his assurance. "I am the acting Lord of Winterfell. My mother will not tell you or me who can stay and who cannot." They both knew it wasn't true. Jon spoke the plain truth.

"The first thing she will say as soon as she comes back will be that I must leave, and she will talk about it as long as I'm here. And if you don't do what she wants, she'll write Father and he will give you the order to send me away. I can't stay here, Robb. I have no place at Winterfell."

"Jon is right," Luwin said. His voice was sad, tired. "Lady Stark will never tolerate his presence, no matter what you do, my lord."

After a moment of hesitation, Robb looked down, conceding defeat, then looked back again at Jon. "Very well. If that's what you want. I do hope you enjoy the Westerlands, and that you're not wrong about Lord Lannister."

"I don't imagine Tyrion Lannister sending an assassin after Bran," Jon said.

"We didn't touch to your rooms, so you can go back in them for the night."

"Thank you."
Jon went back to the said room and placed his cloak and his sword there. The fire was lit. In normal circumstances, he lit his own fires, but it seemed a servant took care of it this time. That would be his last night in Winterfell for a very long time. He may not come back here for years. He thought something similar when he left for the Wall, though he believed he would certainly never come back to Winterfell at the time. He wouldn't be entirely bound that time. He could leave the Westerlands if he wanted, and surely Lord Tyrion would allow him to visit his family once in a while. Not before a few years, but he would come back. He then went to visit Bran.

He found his little brother reading a book in his bed, with Old Nan sitting next to him. He looked much better than when he was asleep. This time, Jon could say goodbye while he was awake.

"Hi, Bran," he said when he entered. "Nan," he added for Hodor's mother. She bowed lightly.

"Hi, Jon. Look. I've searched in this. I found a saddle very similar to the one the Imp drew."

Jon came to his brother's side. His direwolf was next to him in the bed. Jon had left Ghost outside to play with Rickon and Shaggydog. He looked at the pages of the book his brother held and saw the plan of a saddle. He had seen the Lord of Casterly Rock work on some drawing on their way to Winterfell, but he hadn't known what it was until today. The dwarf lord had helped Bran much more than Jon expected.

"It seems he didn't create the saddle out of nowhere," Jon commented.

"I'll be able to ride again." Bran sounded very excited.

"Yes, you will." He sat on the bed next to him. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up."

"You're going in the Westerlands?"

"Aye, I am." He couldn't hold back a smile.

"Will I be able to follow you one day?"

"You could visit me. Maybe I'll be a knight when you do."

Bran's face fell. Jon hadn't thought when he said that. Bran wanted to be knight, but that would never happen now. There were knights who lacked a hand, even an arm, but none who missed legs, except if they were knighted before losing them.

"I can never be a knight now," his brother said gloomily, exactly as Jon reflected on it.

"No," Jon recognized. It was hard for him to accept the fact, so he didn't dare to imagine how hard it had to be for Bran. He was leaving for a life of adventure in the south while Bran was stuck to his bed. "But one day you could be lord of a holdfast for Robb. You won't be able to walk around the castle without help, but you'll be able to ride around your lands, with that saddle you'll soon have. Robb won't let you down."

That brought a smile back on Bran's face for a quick moment. "I won't be able to hold a sword either, or to shoot arrows. All I can do is read."

Bran had never been a great reader. He was so fond of running and climbing that he could barely hold on a chair through Maester Luwin's lessons. It was strange to actually see him reading in his bed. "Well, a wise man once told me that if you're going to be a cripple, it's better to be a rich one." That wasn't necessarily the best thing to say, but it had come to his mind. "And now that you can ride, who knows? You could learn to wield a sword on horseback, and to shoot from there as well."
"You think I could?" Bran asked, hopeful.

"Maester Luwin once told us about people across the Narrow Sea where boys learned that when they are five or six-years-old. If they can, so can you. You’re older than them."

His brother smiled back. "How was the Wall?" he asked. Jon went on to describe Castle Black and the Wall in its smallest details. Bran asked him all sorts of questions, about the brothers of the Night's Watch, the Lord Commander, the tunnels under the Wall, if it was really hundreds of feet high, and about the winch cage and the stairs that led to the top of it. He also made Jon promise him to write to them while he was at Casterly Rock.

Jon spent hours with his brother, and in the end Old Nan began to tell them stories about the White Walkers, the snarks, the giants, the First Men, Brandon the Builder and all the other northern tales. She even came up with some stories from the Dothraki, the people where boys of four learned to shoot arrows while riding. They stayed together until time for supper arrived.

The supper was pleasant enough. Bran was in a very good mood after he learned he could ride again even if he couldn’t walk, and Lord and Lady Lannister proved to be very courteous. Robb was courteous enough, though Jon had the impression he was somewhat cold with the Lannisters. He didn’t fully trust them yet. Rickon was noisy as ever and asked Lord Tyrion many questions about the supposed monsters populating the caves of Casterly Rock. His wife was also very kind, though her tongue wasn’t as sharp as her husband’s. Jon could sit at the high table this time, since Lady Stark wasn’t there. He wished Arya had been present though, and Sansa too. Jon spent a very peaceful last night in his chamber.

In the morning, they left very soon. Jon went to say his goodbyes to Bran, this time as he was awake. He also said goodbye to Rickon and told him he could have his things while he was away, to which Rickon was euphoric. He also made his farewells to Robb in private. Although Robb didn't approve his choice to go in the Westerlands, he wished him good luck.

Just before he left, Jon went to the godswood. He wanted to be in the presence of the Old Gods one last time before he left. He would be far from the North soon, and far from them as a consequence. He knew there was a godswood somewhere in Casterly Rock, but the men riding with the Lannisters didn’t have much to say about it. Most didn’t even know where it was, and many more had never set foot in it. There were even some who claimed there was no godswood in the castle. Anyway, he had to say goodbye to the Old Gods here in Winterfell. He wouldn't come back before a long time.

Jon knew he would be alone this morning. None of the people leaving worshiped the Old Gods and everyone else in Winterfell was helping for the departure of the Lannisters. There would be no one else in the godswood. Only him, with Ghost. He could have made his farewells to the Seven as well, but he never worshiped them. Although his siblings were taught both faith by their mother and their father, Lady Stark had never cared for instructing him in the New Ways. He wasn’t her son. The gods of the North were his only gods. If he had taken his vows for the Night's Watch, he would have gone north of the Wall to a nearby weirwood tree to recite the words, instead of the sept at Castle Black. He remembered times long ago, when his father used to bring him and Robb in the godswood and make them kneel before the weirwood, talking to them about the Old Ways and the ancestral faith of the First Men and the Children of the Forest. They were very young at the time. With years, people had added to their group as their father brought all his children together. Sansa had been the first to join them, then Arya had followed. In the recent years, Bran and Rickon had joined them as well. Even Rickon was quiet as their lord father talked to them about the Old Gods. Not long before the king came to Winterfell, his father had brought Bran to his first execution. A man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. He wouldn’t forget these words, but despite the fact he heard them from his father only a few months ago, it seemed like an eternity had gone since. What would that be
after a year or two in the west?

To his great surprise, Jon was wrong. Ghost wasn't the only one with him here. When he approached the weirwood, someone already was already kneeling before it, between the pool and the carved face. He only saw her back, but her hair was a dark brown arranged in a bun that let a tail fall over her back. It was a girl and she seemed to be praying. What Jon found queer were her clothes. These weren't from the North. He saw a blue dress under her cloak, and this was no dress made for the North. The only people he saw with that kind of garment were the ladies who came with Lady Margaery Lannister. He moved silently around to have a better look, Ghost on his trail, mute like his own shadow. Her fingers were folded. Her skin was pale and her face was long. Jon had seen his sister Sansa pray from time to time. This one was older, around his own age, but her position was about the same than his sister's when she prayed. Calm and serenity seemed to emanate from her as much as from Sansa when she did the same. There was something familiar about her.

Ghost growled discreetly, but it was enough to ruin his precautions. The girl opened her eyes immediately and turned to look at the origin of the sound. She jumped on her feet immediately and made a few steps backwards.

"Ghost, quiet," Jon ordered. His direwolf stilled and he looked again to the girl. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's a direwolf?" she asked.

"Aye, but don't worry. He won't hurt you. He only hurts the people who are threats." Just like Summer when he saved Bran. He was trying to reassure her.

She was now looking at Ghost with interest instead of fear. "I knew there were direwolves north of the Wall, but I didn't expect to see them in the Seven Kingdoms."

"We found him near the Kingsroad, with his brothers and sisters when they were pups. Their mother was killed by a stag. What were you just doing?" He was wondering why someone from the Reach spent time in a godwood. No one worshiped the Old Gods south of the Neck, as far as he knew.

She seemed puzzled by his question. "Well, I was only praying, Jon." She called him by his name. Again, he had the impression her face was familiar. Her face had a solemn air and she had green eyes under thin eyebrows.

"Do we know each other?" he asked as he kept trying to find where and when he saw her before.

She smiled sweetly. "You don't remember me? We met three years ago. I stopped at Winterfell on my way to Highgarden. My father was with me. We spoke at the time."

Jon searched for some time, and then he found. "Mira Forrester?"

Her smile widened. "So you remember me now. You were younger at the time, but you already looked very much like your father. You look even more like him now."

"Thank you. I wish I could say the same about you and your father, but… I can't."

He was afraid for a short time he had offended her, but she only let a very small chuckle escape her throat. Jon remembered now. Lord Gregor Forrester had come to Winterfell with his daughter a few years ago. He didn't remember why, though she seemed to say she was going south. That may explain her attire. They had spoken very briefly, though Jon couldn't remember what they told each other exactly. She had grown up since. No wonder he didn't recognize her.
"You already said more now in a few minutes than three years ago in a whole evening," she pointed out. "And I can't remember you being able to make a joke at the time. You barely said a few words."

"I suppose that's what we must expect from bastards."

"Not me." Her face had turned serious.

"I'm sorry. I… I didn't mean to spy." Jon said. "I just thought you were from the Reach and I found it strange that someone from the south was praying to the Old Gods."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Jon, but I'm afraid I'm the only one who prays to the Old Gods at Casterly Rock."

Jon frowned at this. "Casterly Rock?"

"Yes," she simply replied.

"What are you doing at Casterly Rock? You live there?"

"Of course. I'm a handmaiden of Lady Margaery Lannister."

Jon hadn't expected that at all. Though now a strange memory came back from his journey to Winterfell. He heard a knight speak about Ser Lucion Lannister, a cousin of Lord Tyrion, and about a handmaiden at Casterly Rock he turned around and her northern friend. Was he talking about her?

"I thought you had gone to Highgarden, not in the Westerlands." She said so a few moments ago.

"I went to Highgarden, and I became a handmaiden for Lady Margaery then, before she was married. When she was wed to Lord Tyrion, I followed her to Casterly Rock."

That explained everything. "A lot of things changed in three years." Though he couldn’t tell exactly. It wasn't as if he had known Mira Forrester very well when she stopped at Winterfell. She only stayed for a night.

"Yes, indeed. A lot. I heard you're coming to Casterly Rock."

"Aye, I am."

"It's good. I will no longer be the only Northerner there."

"Mira!" a voice called from behind. "Mira!"

"Sorry, I must go back," she told him. As she was about to walk past him, another young girl with a dress similar to the one Lady Mira had, but purple, came into view. She had brown hair, but this brown was pale. She stopped where she was.

"Yes, Sera?" Lady Mira asked.

"Huh?" She seemed to be lost. Jon realized she was staring at his direwolf. "Oh, we need your help. With Lady Margaery's things."

"Of course." She looked at Ghost. "Don't worry, Sera. He's not dangerous." She did something Jon never thought someone would dare. Mira Forrester ran the palm of her hand on Ghost's head, and the direwolf made no movement. It was a chance that Jon ordered Ghost to remain quiet before. The other girl, the one called Sera, seemed to relax. Now she was looking at Jon.
"This is Jon," Lady Mira told her. "He's Lord Stark's son. This is my friend, Sera Durwell. She is a handmaiden for Lady Lannister too," she told him.

"My lady." He bowed awkwardly to her, just like Sansa once told him he should do whenever he met a lady for the first time.

Sera Durwell's cheeks strangely took a red color. "My lord," she said awkwardly.

"I'm not a lord, my lady. My name is Jon Snow. I'm the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark." Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor and it can never be used to hurt you.

"It doesn't matter," Mira Forrester said to his left. "Now, excuse me, I must go. Good day, Jon."

She walked away and her friend followed her outside the godswood. Jon looked at them as they left the place. Then he turned to the weirwood and made a short silent prayer. They weren't far from leaving now.

Gods of the North, gods of my ancestors, watch over me in the south, even if this isn't your realm. Keep me true to your ways and prevent me from acting with dishonor. Watch over my brothers, Robb, Bran and Rickon, over my sisters, Sansa and Arya, over my lord father, and over my brothers and sisters' mother too. I will come back. I swear.

Thirty minutes later, Jon was all saddled up and exchanging one last look with his brothers. Even Bran was here in Hodor's arms. He wouldn't see them before a very long time, probably years. He would make them proud of him. He would serve with honor in the south, for House Stark. When the company moved forward, Jon was among them. He turned his head and looked at his brothers until he got through the gates and the walls of Winterfell hid them from him. They followed the trail from Winterfell until they reached the landmark indicating the Kingsroad, then they turned south. One of the knights he befriended after they left the Wall, a man of thirty whose father was a fisherman, patted him on the shoulder as they rode next to each other.

"Welcome in the Lannister household, Jon Snow. Say goodbye to the North."

Jon looked behind. Winterfell was still visible, and it was beautiful and impressive even from this distance. He thought about all the good time he spent there, all the memories he had. He was leaving his home, and not for the Wall. He wondered when he would see it again. A new chapter of his life had just begun. Soon, he couldn't see his home anymore. Winterfell was behind and Casterly Rock lied ahead.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it. As you can see, Jon is well on his way to the Westerlands and on a very different path from the one he has in the show.

Please review.

Next chapter : Catelyn
This chapter was only supposed to be uploaded next week, but since my master is really coming to an end, giving me more time, and that many people told me they wished this story was uploaded more often, I decided that I will keep updating one chapter every week at least until the end of Season 7.

The incident at the Inn at the crossroads, though very different. For those who would like to understand a part of Catelyn's behaviour in this chapter, I invite you to read again a promise she made in her first chapter while watching over Bran.

Catelyn II

Chapter Notes

The inn was crowded. She and Ser Rodrik were lucky to get the last empty rooms. The innkeep, Masha Heddle, hadn't been unkind with them, but she hadn't given them as much attention as when Catelyn travelled with her lord father through the Riverlands. The woman didn't recognize the daughter of the Lord of Riverrun, which was exactly what Catelyn wanted. Now she was heading to see him one last time. She would send the orders Ned gave her from Riverrun. Vyman, her father's maester, would keep the secret.

She and Ser Rodrik were officially a father and his daughter from Fairmarket, travelling to see relatives in a village near the Tumblestone. That wasn't easy, with Ser Rodrik always calling her my lady. She had to repeat to him again and again that she was his daughter until they reached Riverrun, but he kept calling her the same way, no matter how often she told him. When they entered the common hall where everyone ate, they took places well apart from everyone else. She recognized sigils from some men there and there, men in service to Lady Shella Whent, Lord Jonos Bracken and Lord Walder Frey. The late Lord Walder Frey, as her father called him.

They sat at a table. She was exhausted, which was why she decided to stop at the inn, despite the risks. Someone could recognize her, but they both needed a good night of sleep after so much time on the Kingsroad with only a few hours to sleep every night. Sometimes, they rode under heavy rain. After the inn, they would ride west to Riverrun. She had to arrive before her father died. Vyman didn't give him much time to live, to believe her father's own words. She should warn Lysa once she arrived, so she might have the chance to come in time to say goodbye. At least, Edmure and their uncle Brynden would be there. She hadn't seen them in years. She would have been overjoyed at the prospect to seeing them again if it wasn't soured by the news of her father's declining health.

Catelyn wished she asked more questions to Lady Margaery back at Winterfell. She was the one her father gave the letter to. She could have asked her for more details. The Lady of House Lannister had been very kind during all the time she stayed at Winterfell. When Petyr told her that the dagger used against her son belonged to Tyrion Lannister, she had considered for a very short time that his wife could be involved as well, but remembering the young lady, she couldn't bring herself to believe that she could seriously take part to such a horrible thing. Her husband was behind this and she certainly knew nothing of the plot. Catelyn wondered once again how Margaery Tyrell could be married to the Imp and yet be happy.
A singer was boasting not far away, trying to convince the Frey men to pay him for his music. Catelyn smiled, hearing him tell everyone that the Lord of Riverrun himself once said he never heard something more harmonious than his voice accompanied by his woodharp. Catelyn highly doubted her lord father ever said that. He had nothing against music, but he didn't enjoy it very much either. Sansa loved music, on the other hand. Arya, not as much. Her sons preferred to spar with swords and shoot arrows.

She remembered her father teaching swordfight to Edmure himself from time to time. Now that he was taken to bed, he couldn't do it anymore. Hoster Tully had been vigorous in his youth, full of life, riding all across the Riverlands to meet his bannermen continuously, hunting with every lord and landed knight who fell under his authority. She had vague memories of him taking her on his shoulders when she was a little girl, but she was so young at the time that she could barely remember, and yet she knew he had done so. Was all that gone now? Was he really going to die? Bran was alive, at least there was that, but he wouldn't be able to walk again. Running, climbing, riding, all that was gone for him as well. The gods took what they wanted.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Ser Rodrik asked her. Her face must have shown the emotions troubling her heart.

"Yes, I am. Father."

He chuckled. "Old habits die hard."

The musician chose this moment to come and sit right next to them, without being invited. "Seven blessings to you, goodfolk!" he declared.

"And to you," she replied.

"Boy!" Ser Rodrik shouted. "Bread, meat and beer. Quickly."

"Ah, good idea, grandfather. I'm starving. A song while we wait or...?"

"I'd rather throw myself down a well." Ser Rodrik didn't like music. He saw it as something for girls, but not for healthy young men when they could hold a sword. The contrast between the two men made the situation quite funny. The proud and courageous old knight and the proud and young musician who thought his music could make every girl fall in love with him. That was what she needed to lighten up her mood.

"Now now, grandfather, this may be your last chance if you're heading north. The only music the Northerners know is the howling of wolves!" The words weren't as funny as he thought they were, but his behavior really made him quite hilarious.

"How would you know that? Have you ever been in the North?"

"Why would I? There are only blizzards and bearksins up there, and nothing to sing about. I hear all women have beards there."

He certainly never went in the North. "Where have you travelled?"

"Everywhere. I've been to Highgarden, Storm's End, Riverrun, King's Landing. The king himself welcomed me at court to play during the prince's name day."

She didn't think it was likely. The door slammed open at this moment and a thunderous voice rang in the room. "Your best table, ma'am."
"You can eat, but I must warn you, we're full up," Masha said.

"Don't worry, we have our places to sleep. Just give us a good meal."

"As you wish, sers."

"Oh, new customers." On these words, the singer abandoned them and went to the new people who arrived.

Catelyn had her back turned to the front door. She turned to look over her shoulder. She stopped breathing. The men who just arrived were about a dozen or more, and they all wore the sigils of House Lannister and House Tyrell.

"My lady, don't look. Someone could recognize you," Ser Rodrik warned her. She turned her head back to look at him and repositioned her veil to better hide her face. The knight kept looking at the newcomers. "I know some of them. They were at Winterfell with the Lannisters. There's one of Lady Lannister's guards among them."

"Does it mean Lady Lannister is here?" she asked, hope burning in her tummy. Ser Rodrik had the dagger on him. If she could see Lady Margaery and show her the weapon…

"By all the gods!" the knight muttered.

"What? She’s here?"

"No. It's Jon Snow."

Catelyn turned her head so quickly that she felt a quick pain come and leave her neck. Ser Rodrik was right. It was him. Dark hair, brown eyes, a beard beginning to appear on his chin that looked very much like her husband’s, northern clothes made of leather. You couldn't mistake him for anyone else. He looked even more like Ned than the last time she saw him. They even had the same expression on their face. She turned away again before he could see her.

"What is he doing here?" Catelyn asked.

"I don't know. Didn't he go to the Wall?"

Yes, he did. She saw him leave Winterfell. He was heading to the Wall with Benjen Stark and the Imp. He was supposed to take the black. What was he doing here? Did he desert? When a man said his vows to the Night's Watch, there was no way to leave it. A quick thought came to her mind, about telling everyone in the inn that a deserter of the Night's Watch was standing in their midst, but she threw the thought aside immediately. She couldn't blow up her cover, and Ned would never forgive her if she did something that could lead to the boy's death. She couldn't have him killed for the simple crime to be from a different mother. She only wanted him out of sight.

"Wait. He's with someone. There's someone with him," Ser Rodrik said. He tried to keep his head down, so that Jon Snow wouldn't notice him, but he kept looking all the same.

"I don't care if he is with someone. What is he doing here?"

"I don't know, my lady." They whispered all the time, to not attract any attention. "It's alright. He just sat at a table with the girl. His back is turned on us."

Catelyn sighed in relief. He didn't see them. What was the bastard doing here? How did he find himself thousands of miles from the Wall, in an inn where she happened to stop, along with
Lannister men? Ned couldn't have called him to the capital. He told her he couldn't bring a bastard in
King's Landing.

She risked a look at him. He was indeed sitting with his back turned on them. She noticed the large
table with men in crimson and green armors at the other side of the hall. This had to be the retinue
that Lord and Lady Lannister brought with them at Winterfell, on their way back to Casterly Rock.
Was there a chance that the Imp wasn't there and she could speak to his wife in private? She couldn't
talk about the dagger to Lady Margaery when her husband was around. Jon Snow was there. If he
was here, then Tyrion Lannister certainly came back from the Wall as well. The man who sent an
assassin after her son wasn’t far away, maybe right outside the inn, and she couldn't reach him. He
was surrounded by guards and she only had Ser Rodrik. She was powerless here.

After a moment, Catelyn realized Jon Snow wasn't alone. He sat apart from the men in crimson
armor, but he wasn't alone. A young woman sat with him. Since they were sitting face to face,
Catelyn could have a perfect look at her. She had to be fifteen or sixteen, about the same age than the
bastard. She had green eyes, a pale face with thin eyebrows and normal lips, a long neck and hair as
dark as the cloudy nights in the North. She wore a light blue dress that left her arms and neck bare.
She was speaking in a low voice to Jon Snow. Catelyn couldn't understand what they told each
other.

She turned away. People might begin to wonder what she was looking at, and some of the men at the
other end of the inn might recognize her for the lady who welcomed them at Winterfell not long ago.
However, her thoughts were mostly about that young girl who sat with the bastard son of her
husband.

"Who is that girl?" she asked in a whisper to Ser Rodrik.

"I don't know, my lady. I never saw her before," he replied.

Against all logic of safety, she took another look at the table where they sat and tried to take a closer
look while still keeping it short. The girl was slender. Very slender. You could discern forms on her
chest, but timid, as if they were afraid to appear. Her breasts were quite humble, barely allowing their
existence to be known, and her hips were thin. When one of the servants brought their food, she saw
her take a fork, only to see that no muscle could be seen on her arms. She didn't have the best frame
to have children one day. *Wide hips to bear them, big breasts to nurse them, strong arms to carry
them. That's the ideal for a woman.*

Once she was done examining, she turned her head away again. It would be better to let the
Lannisters disappear before they left. There were probably a hundred or more of them outside to
escort the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock. If only she could speak to the lady, or better hang the
lord.

"My young lady, my young ser," the singer said. He was back, but it wasn't to Catelyn and Ser
Rodrik that he spoke. He spoke to Jon Snow and whoever that girl with him was.

"I'm not a knight, minstrel," the bastard said. That was the first time Catelyn heard him speak since
he entered. Without any doubt, that was him.

"Oh, too bad. Will you still give a singer a silver coin for a song at the intention of your lovely lady?"

"Marillion, if I were you, I would leave this place immediately." It had to be the girl. She had spoken
quite loud. Catelyn looked at the scene. All the attention would be to the singer. No one would
notice her.
"So, my lady heard about the great Marillion. Finally, someone who knows the fantastic singer," he claimed high. "I will give you a song for free for that, my sweet lady."

"No song. The last time we met was in Highgarden two years ago. You spent an entire evening pursuing me, and in quite an inappropriate way. The guards of the castle threw you out and forbade you from ever coming back again."

Catelyn saw the singer's face drop down. The young lady was looking at him seriously, straight in the eyes, with an expression somewhere between indifference and threat on her face, but also a very thin smile on her lips.

"Again, I suggest you leave this place immediately, because when Lady Lannister hears from me that you played the Rains of Castamere, you'll regret ever coming here. You don't want to know what she does to those who play that song."

Everybody in the hall was looking at the scene now. The singer's face had gone white as a sheet. Then, all of a sudden, he ran to the door as if hounds were released on him, smashed it open and disappeared outside. A burst of laughter came from the table filled with Lannisters and Tyrells, and soon everyone was laughing in the inn. The girl didn't join the general laughter, nor did Catelyn, though Ser Rodrik chuckled a little. As for the young woman sitting face to face with Jon Snow, she had a timid smile on her lips, barely visible, but it was there without any doubt.

"You know him?" the bastard asked her.

"Yes, sadly." They were speaking with a normal voice again, but if she listened attentively, Catelyn could hear their discussion very well. The girl's voice was rich, sweet, clear, yet there was a hardness to it as well.

"What happened?"

"He came to Highgarden once. It wasn't long before Lady Margaery left for Casterly Rock. He spent the entire evening singing about love to every girl he saw, but at one moment he seemed only interested by me. He stuck around me so much that in the end I went to some guards, and when they saw how he behaved and what he was saying, they threw him out. I think he drank too much."

"Was he…? I mean… Did he… try something?"

"I think he would have been capable to try something. He made no attempt, but I didn't wish to wait until he made one."

Their own supper arrived at this moment and Catelyn and Ser Rodrik devoted their attention to it. She kept listening to the conversation that took place at her back, not far away. The young lady spoke to the bastard about constructions across the Narrow Sea, like the Long Bridge of Volantis, while he gave her details about the Wall. Catelyn seldom saw someone so curious about the Wall and the Night's Watch, let alone a woman.

"My father sends ironwood to the Wall on a regular basis. I always asked his men details about it when I was a child, but most were not interested at all by the Wall and couldn't tell me much. They found it too cold, or didn't like most of the men in the Watch."

"There are criminals among them, it's true, but some are only thieves who stole a piece of bread or a ham to eat. I had a friend there, Pyp, who ended at the Wall because he stole a wheel of cheese for his little sister. She hadn't eaten in three days. Another one was an orphan. His father was a farmer and he abandoned him when he was three."
"That's sad. When I arrived at Highgarden, I accompanied Lady Margaery for her charity works. I had never seen people so poor and miserable in my life. My parents never showed me that," the girl commented.

"My father made me follow him sometimes when he travelled in the North, but I never really saw people being abandoned like that. I thought the Night's Watch was an order that was meant to protect the Realm and had a noble cause to fight for, but at the Wall all I saw were people who were there because they had nowhere else to go."

"The world is seldom what we believe it is. Sometimes it's worse than we believe, sometimes it's better." She resumed on a merrier tone. "Too bad Ethan and Talia aren't here. They would have made a far better music than this singer."

"My sister Sansa sings as well, though I didn't hear her sing very often. She doesn't seem to want to sing when I'm present."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I'm a bastard. She's always been more distant with me."

It was a good thing. Sansa had understood early that Jon was only her half-brother. It was better if she didn't attach herself too much to him. Arya, on the opposite, seemed to like him more than her other siblings, but Catelyn couldn't tell Arya to not speak to the bastard. After all, even if Jon Snow wasn't her son, he was her children's half-brother. He and Robb had played together since their birth and grown together. She reminded Robb early that he was the future Lord of Winterfell and not Jon, but he never seemed to see Jon as a threat for him. They were only children back then.

"Well, let's hope you'll never be the only brother she has." On that declaration of the girl, Catelyn almost choked on the bread she just swallowed.

"What do you mean?" Jon Snow asked.

A moment of silence went. "My mother was born to a family of seven children. She had six brothers. Two of them died not long after their birth, and three died during Robert's Baratheon's war. Two at the Battle of Ashford, and one at the siege of Storm's End. She only has one brother left. Imagine how it would be, if she had never wanted to speak to the only one who survived."

Jon Snow chuckled nervously. "Well, I don't believe my brothers will die anytime soon."

Catelyn was eager for them all to leave. Luckily, a captain came to call the Lannister and Tyrell men outside for guard duties. Only Jon Snow and that girl with him stayed behind. At one moment, Catelyn looked at them again, and she caught the eyes of the young woman. She brought her head back in a normal position, too quickly. She could feel her gaze on her nape.

"I think someone is spying on us," she heard the girl say.

"What?" Jon Snow asked.

"These two have been looking at us since we arrived."

They were made. Catelyn shouldn't have looked so often in their direction. Maybe Ser Rodrik hadn't helped either. He looked at the pair constantly ever since they arrived, but he faced them at least.

"Ser Rodrik! He recognized him. Catelyn didn't turn her head. She kept it down, hoping that the bastard would only notice Ser Rodrik and not her. In vain. She heard a chair being pulled on the
floor and the bastard walk to them. "What are you doing here?" Then a pause followed. "Lady Stark!"

She closed her eyes, sighing internally. What did he just do? She slowly turned to look at him. He looked at her in return, an expression of utter surprise plain on his face. He said her name so loud that everyone heard in the inn.

"Lady Stark." Masha made a clumsy curtsy, just like she used to years ago.

Catelyn removed her veil and stood up. She stared at the bastard. He shouldn't be there. He shouldn't even exist. She thought of the woman who was his mother, the woman who bore this boy to Ned, a son who looked so much like him, unlike her own children. That wasn't fair. She had been a good and dutiful wife to Ned, bearing his children, doing everything that was expected from her and more, but this… This was too much. Now he put them all into danger. The Lannisters outside could learn they were here because of him.

The bastard looked on the floor after a moment. At least he had the decency to do that, to realize that wasn't his place, but that didn't make Catelyn's feelings towards him soften in any way. He put them all in danger.

"Ser Rodrik, we're leaving. Now."

She walked away, the knight following her. If the bastard understood the meaning of her gaze well enough, he would understand that he wasn't to speak of her presence to anybody.

By chance, they left their horses in the stables of the inn, and they had been full as much as the rooms when they arrived. The Lannister retinue couldn’t place their horses there, so there were crimson or green cloak in sight. As Ser Rodrik detached the horses, she heard someone walk behind her. She looked behind to come face to face with the same girl who supped with the bastard. She had a cloak on her shoulders now. She curtsied.

"Lady Stark, please forgive me, I didn't present you my respects back in the inn. I should have recognized you," she said.

"Well, thank you," Catelyn replied. "Who are you?"

"My name is Mira Forrester, my lady. My father is Gregor Forrester. He's one of Lord Stark's bannermen."

"You are from the North?"

"Yes, my lady." Catelyn would never have thought so, looking at the way she dressed. No one in the North, not even the Manderlys, exposed their arms or even their neck.

"What are you doing here, so far from your home?"

"I am Lady Margaery Lannister's personal handmaiden."

Catelyn now remembered that Lady Margaery's handmaidens were all dressed the same way than Mira Forrester, though she noted, not without approval, that this girl's clothes were more decent than those the others wore. "Lady Lannister told me she had a handmaiden from the North. So it's you?"

"Yes, my lady."

She considered the girl. She was from the North, her family sworn to Ned, and since she was a
handmaiden, she was personally at the service of Margaery Lannister, without any other link to House Lannister than the one she had through her mistress. Ser Rodrik still had the dagger. Could she give a message to that girl for Lady Margaery and be sure she would only talk about it to her, and not to the Imp?

"My lady, it's time to go," Ser Rodrik said. The two horses were ready and he had come out of the stables. Catelyn was discussing with the young girl at the exit.

"Lady Stark, did Jon do something wrong back in the inn?" Lady Mira asked.

Catelyn turned her attention back to the girl after she gave it to Ser Rodrik a moment ago. "Jon?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady. You didn't seem happy to see him. Did he do something he shouldn't have?"

What was the bastard doing here? "Why is he here? He left for the Wall, to take the black."

"Yes, but Lord Tyrion offered him a place in his household while he visited the Wall and Jon accepted."

No, that wasn't possible. Ned had refused the Lannister's offer to take his son as a ward at Casterly Rock. Jon Snow was supposed to take the black, to make his vows to the Night's Watch. This way he would never father any children who may pose a threat to her own. Now he was heading to Casterly Rock with the Imp. He said he was taking the black. It wasn't supposed to be like that.

"Did Jon do something wrong back in the inn?" the handmaiden repeated her question. She was being very polite, but Catelyn's mind was full of anger at the situation right now. Ned's bastard had just blown up her cover, and here stood a young woman who asked her if Jon did something wrong?

"Let's leave, Ser Rodrik," she said. She mounted her own horse, helped in that by the knight. Ser Rodrik bowed to Lady Mira before he climbed his own horse.

"My lady, bastards don't choose who their parents are," Mira Forrester told her.

"No," Catelyn replied dryly.

"Safe travel, Lady Stark."

"Thank you, Lady Mira."

She and Ser Rodrik rode away, leaving the inn behind. They circled the large camp the Lannisters had set, then rode as quickly as they could to get as far from them as possible. They didn't head west. That was where the Lannisters were going. They rode north. She rode back to her family.

Chapter End Notes

Instead of meeting Tyrion Lannister, Catelyn stumbled on her husband's son. At least, no one was arrested.

Please review.

Next chapter : Sansa
Sansa IV

Chapter Notes

A short chapter from Sansa's perspective in King's Landing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

SANSA IV

She tried to pray to the Old Gods, but she couldn't. She looked at the face of the weirwood several times to remind herself why she was here, but no matter what she did and how hard she focused, she couldn't set her mind on the prayer. Her conversation from yesterday with Joffrey came back to her repeatedly. She could hear his words as if he was saying them right in front of her.

Her prince had come to see her in the end of the afternoon, bringing her a necklace and asking her forgiveness for being rude to her lately. Things had indeed been tense between them ever since they arrived in King's Landing. Ever since the day Lady died. She still missed her friend, she missed giving bacon to her while she hid under the table during breakfast, and she missed walking her. Lady would have liked the capital. Sansa knew Joffrey wasn't responsible for what happened, but the accident made him distant with her. Arya hadn't helped either, blaming the prince for Lady's death, but he seemed to hold her responsible for what happened. She couldn't blame Joffrey for that either. She had gotten out of it without a single scratch while Nymeria almost tore his hand off his arm. The queen was right. Joffrey would bear scars on his arm for the rest of his life.

Her first weeks in the capital had almost been an ordeal, with Joffrey ignoring her. Without the tournament, there would have been no solace for her in the city. The final tilt opposing Ser Gregor Clegane the Mountain against Ser Loras Tyrell had been a true fairy tale, the Hound coming to the rescue of the Knight of Flowers after the Mountain tried to kill him for defeating him in the final. Although the Hound still scared her, Sansa had come to pity him after Lord Baelish told her the story about how his face was burned and after he saved Ser Loras.

Sansa hadn't been sure of what to expect from Ser Loras Tyrell when she heard he would come to the tournament. She knew she had been wrong to trust Lady Margaery Lannister in Winterfell, but could the same apply to her brother as well? It didn't. Ser Loras was a knight like those out of the fairy tales. When she first saw him ride against Ser Meryn Trant, she was struck by the resemblance between him and the Lady of Casterly Rock. They were kin for sure. He defeated three kingsguards in the first tilts, then he faced Robar Royce. Before every tilt, he gave a white rose to a fortunate fair maid in the assistance. When the time came to face Lord Royce's son, she had been the one to who he gave the white rose before riding, and he won. Sansa felt this rose was special. He chose her for the tilt before the final, from all the young women in the assistance. For the final tilt, he gave a red rose to Princess Myrcella. Sansa envied the princess, but she didn't resent her. Sansa had Joffrey, Myrcella had Ser Loras. They didn't need to fight over the same knight. Sansa had her own prince.

She felt butterflies in her stomach. Joffrey had called her my lady when he visited her. Not a common lady. She was his lady. One day we'll be married in the Throne Room. Lords and ladies from all over the Seven Kingdoms will come, from the Last Hearth in the North to the Salt Shore in the south, and you will be queen over all of them. I'll never disrespect you again. I'll never be cruel to you again. You're my lady now, from this day until my last day.
She could still feel the kiss he planted on her lips. He loved her. He wasn't spoiled like Lady Margaery tried to have her believe. Everything she thought of Joffrey when they met was true, and that was the only truth that mattered. All her thoughts, her whole mind, everything in her was directed toward her betrothed, the future king to who she was destined.

Sansa opened her eyes and looked at the tree. "I'm sorry," she muttered. She couldn't pray today, not with all that was going on in her head. She stood up and walked through the godswood. The one they had in King's Landing was very beautiful, more beautiful than the one in Winterfell she would say. She came there often these last days, to pray for her lord father. Lord Eddard Stark had been gravely injured by some criminals who ambushed him in the streets of King's Landing. She didn't know what her father had been doing in the city with only three men, but they all died and her father had been severely injured. He spent many days asleep and had only awoken yesterday. They didn't allow her to see him before he woke up. She had prayed to all the gods, Old and New, to save him. However, all her prayers wouldn't bring back those who died. Jory, Ser Rodrik's son, was among the victims. She and Arya had both gone to the godswood to pray after they learned that their father could be in danger. The Grand Maester assured them that he was safe now, but still, Sansa was afraid. Joffrey's visit yesterday had lifted her mind, but she was still worried for her father. First Bran, now him. People said one of his legs hurt very much. She didn't want her lord father to lose the use of his legs like Bran did.

Everyone had been very kind with her since her father was injured. The queen came to offer her sympathies in person, and so did Princess Myrcella and Prince Tommen. Even King Robert muttered a few condolences when they crossed paths in the Red Keep. She heard he and her father had a great disagreement not long before, a few hours before he was assaulted by criminals, but now he seemed to regret it.

Sansa and Arya had put aside their differences as well. They prayed together, both in the godswood and in the sept. Arya also behaved better at dinner and for breakfast. There were no more quarrels between them. *Arya is your only sister. You won't get another one.* Sansa didn't want to lose Arya when they could both lose their father, so she ignored the small misdemeanors she displayed from time to time. They even spent a night together in the godswood, as some sort of watch for Father, just like they did when they received the news that Bran would never walk again. Father had been with them back then. That night, she had dreamed of Bran. This night, however, none of them slept. Their lord father wasn't with them.

She knew Arya would be following her dancing lessons right now, so she headed that way to find her. Arya never liked dancing in Winterfell, but strangely she hurried to her lessons here. This was a clear day, without a cloud in the sky. Everything would have been perfect if it wasn't for her father's state. Why did he have to be wounded right now? Things weren't like they should be. Her father would heal, she knew it. The gods wouldn't make things worse all of a sudden just when they began to improve. Everything would be fine.

As she approached the room where her sister usually followed her lessons, Sansa heard strange noises. It was as if someone was hitting something with a stick, or several sticks. She stopped for a moment to listen to it, then slowly resumed to move to the room. The sounds only kept growing stronger as she got closer and closer. When she stood before the closed door, she realized it came from the other side. She carefully and slightly opened the door and looked inside. First, she only saw the floor and heard the sounds. Then she saw her sister, wearing pants and jacket, a wooden sword in her hand. She saw another sword emerge, in wood as well. It attacked Arya and she was parrying it.

Sansa flung the door open. "What are you doing?"
Her sister looked at her and the next moment the other wooden sword hit her on the arm. "Ow!"

"You were disturbed, boy. Tsss."

The man who just hit her sister wasn't a butcher's boy like on the Kingsroad. He was dead. The Hound had killed him. This time, it was a man with brown frizzy hair and a moustache.

"What are you doing?" Sansa repeated.

"I'm practicing," her sister retorted.

"Young lady." The man bowed to Sansa. There was a strange thing with his accent. He didn't seem to come from Westeros, just like Jalabhar Xho.

"I thought you were practicing your dance," Sansa said to her sister.

"She is, but not the dance you are used to, in Westeros. This is the water dance of Braavos."

Sansa looked at the man. Was he Arya dancing teacher? Syrio Forel? She looked back at her sister who seemed amused by the situation.

"Father organized me dancing lessons," Arya offered as an explanation.

Sansa had never understood why her father allowed Arya to behave like she did, but she never thought he would actually give her someone to teach her how to use a sword. That was worse than everything she imagined. However, she didn't wish to start an argument with her sister. She didn't come for this, and the time wasn't to quarrels.

"I'm going to visit Father. Would you like to come?" Sansa asked her.

Arya seemed to hesitate a moment. "I'll finish my lesson. I'll go and visit him later."

"Very well." Sansa turned on her heels and left, quietly closing the door behind her. She would see Father and wait for Arya with him, and they would all spend time together.

As she walked way to the Tower of the Hand where they resided, Sansa mused on her sister's dancing lessons. It wasn't fitting for a lady to carry a sword, or to learn how to use it. Knights did this, but not ladies. How could she try to get along with Arya when she didn't even try to act as a lady should? She did no effort at all. Why didn't she have another sister?

She climbed the stairs of the Tower, her father's men greeting her when she entered. On her way, she crossed the path of Grand Maester Pycelle who was slowly coming down. with an empty flask with traces of a white liquid inside. His chains were clicking. It reminded her of the same sound Luwin was making at Winterfell whenever he moved.

"Excuse me, my lady," the Grand Master said in a ragged voice as he walked past her. He looked exhausted.

"How is Lord Stark?" Sansa asked, remembering how to ask a question properly about the Hand of the King.

"He is well. Quite well. He needs rest, but he will recover. Don't worry, my lady."

He resumed his path, and Sansa resumed hers. When she arrived at her father's room, the door opened when she was only a few paces away. Ser Kevan Lannister came from her lord father's room with something that looked like concern on his forehead. He smiled however when he looked at her.
Sansa didn't get to see the Master of Laws very often, but he was always kind with her whenever their came upon each other.

"Lady Sansa," he said as he closed the door.

"Ser. I only came to see my father," she said for him as much as for the guard at the door.

"I must warn you that your father is sleeping, my lady. He's drunk milk of the poppy. Pycelle said he would need some."

Deception filled her heart. She wanted to talk with her father. She didn't get to talk to him ever since the accident in the streets. She may have been able to talk with him if she hadn't gone to see Arya first.

"Your father needs rest, my lady," the knight resumed. "If you permit, I will escort you back to your chamber."

"Of course, ser." She wouldn't turn him down. So they walked together.

"Do you enjoy your stay in the capital so far, my lady?" he asked her.

"Yes, I do."

A thin smile appeared on his face. "I'm glad to hear it. I'm afraid you lord father doesn't share your liking of the capital, but who could blame him after this accident with the criminals?"

"Is he all right?"

"Yes, his life is not in danger. He should be able to go back to his duties very soon."

She felt relieved to hear it not only from the Grand Maester, but also from Ser Kevan. "I prayed for him every day."

He nodded. "You pray a lot, my lady, don't you?"

"Yes, to the Seven and the Old Gods."

"My wife, Dorna, prays a lot as well. Seven prayers each day, but only to the Seven."

"I never met her."

"No, she's not here. I left her at Casterly Rock when I was appointed on the small council, along with my two youngest sons and our daughter. I miss them," he added at the end.

"But your son Lancel is here?"

"Yes, and I'm glad to have him close. Still, I miss Dorna and our children. I suppose you must miss your brothers and your mother as well."

"Yes," she recognized. She missed them, but not horribly. "But I like the capital. And Prince Joffrey is very kind with me."

He looked back at her. "I'm glad to hear it. You get along well?"

"Yes, ser. He gave me this yesterday." She showed him the necklace she was wearing.
"You see me delighted. I was a little afraid about how Joffrey would behave with you, after what happened on the Kingsroad." His expression turned soured. "I'm sorry for your wolf."

"Thank you, but I'm well. Joffrey was wounded, and I don't blame him for being distant with me for a time."

"Was it your fault if your sister's direwolf bit him?"

"No, ser."

"Then he had nothing to blame you for. It's normal to be upset, still. Joffrey seems to be kind with you."

"Yes, he is." She thought about the kiss he gave her, and she couldn't stop herself from smiling.

"I'm glad he is. Of all the children my niece and the king had, Joffrey was always the most difficult. But he seems to behave well with you. That's encouraging. He's not like this with everybody."

"What do you mean?"

He leaned his head on one side for a moment. "Oh, everyone has his flaws, the prince like everyone else. Sometimes it seems a wife's duty is to refrain her husband's flaws. You'll have a lot of work when you marry my grandnephew."

Sansa was confused. "I don't understand."

"You know who my brother was, Lady Sansa?"

"Yes, Tywin Lannister, Lord Tyrion's father."

"Yes. He was Hand of the King long before Lord Stark, and for twenty years. I suppose you never met him."

"No."

"I'm not surprised. You're still quite young and he died three years ago. My brother was a hard man. Hard but just. Some say he was cruel, but he only was because he had to. He did what he had to do, just like your lord father. He wasn't an evil man deep inside, but he had his flaws all the same. People didn't like him. He never smiled, or almost never. But the day of his wedding, he was smiling, and the day his two first children were born, he smiled as well. My sister-in-law made sure that his faults didn't get the better of him. She prevented him from making terrible mistakes quite a few times. When she died, my brother was destroyed. He was never the same afterwards."

"How did she die?" Sansa asked.

"She died bringing my nephew, Lord Tyrion, into the world. A very sad event. My brother never recovered from this, and sometimes he put the blame on his last son for that." He sighed. "Sometimes I look at my nephew with his wife and I have the impression to see Tywin and Joanna back to life again. Tyrion completely changed after he was married to Lady Margaery. She made him a better person. And she loves him."

They arrived before the door of Sansa's chamber and stopped. "Make sure Joffrey remains someone good, my lady. As his wife and his queen, that will be your main duty, and maybe the most difficult," he declared. "I wish you a good day."
He bowed and left. Sansa didn't see how it would be difficult to make sure Joffrey would remain a good man. He was her charming prince, and she didn't see how he could turn into an evil man. The words threatened to burst into her mind, but she chased them immediately. She wished Ser Kevan hadn't mentioned Lady Margaery. Whenever the Lady of Casterly Rock came back to her mind, the cruel words she said about Joffrey came back. The prince deserved her love, and she would give it to him, just like he gave it to her. Sansa went back into her chambers and began to write a poem for her prince.

Chapter End Notes

We go back to longer chapters, don't worry. The last two ones were quite short, but the next will be longer. There is even one that will be longer than any other in this fic up to now.

Please review

Next chapter : Jon (at Casterly Rock)
Jon III

Chapter Notes

Jon's first chapter at Casterly Rock. We get to see his life there and the relationships he established with a few people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON III

When Jon opened his eyes, light had begun to filtrate through the panels of his window. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, trying to clear his mind from the strange dream he made last night. He had been walking around his room, but objects and furniture seemed much higher than usual. He looked at Ghost who lied next to his bed, still asleep. Jon groaned and rose up. He went to the window and opened the panels to look outside, to receive the sunlight straight into his eyes. He blinked, trying to reduce the amount of light he received, and looked down on the countryside.

The Westerlands were quite different from the North. The lands around Winterfell were plains or forests, here it was mostly hills and mountains, with valleys between. The Goldroad made its way through the horizon between ranges of hills. Jon was almost surprised the sun could find its way through the many mountains that lied between it and the castle.

Jon was impressed by the Wall, but it was nothing when compared to his awe when his eyes set on Casterly Rock for the first time. People said the seat of House Lannister was thrice higher than the structure he was supposed to defend a few months ago. When they arrived in view of the castle last week, they were at the beginning of the afternoon, and they could see it from such a great distance that they needed several hours to reach it. By the time they finally arrived at the Lion's Mouth, the great gate that gave on one of the many yards, it was almost night. Jon had realized that days grew longer as they rode further south, but Casterly Rock had given the impression that light was going down much quicker when they closed on it. It was because the sun set in the west, which made the great castle hide it and throw a long shadow that covered them long before they reached its doorstep and long before the sun was really gone. Winterfell was a great castle, but compared to Casterly Rock, it looked like a small holdfast. The castle wasn't only high. It was large as well. It wasn't as large as the Wall, of course, but Jon wasn't sure how many hours he would need to travel from one extremity of the castle to the other.

If the outside left him speechless, the inside didn't have to envy anything to it. He spent the last week exploring the castle, from the Great Hall to the courtyards. He also explored the countryside. The place was lavish, and that word didn't describe it with justice. Jon had never seen so much gold and luxury in his life. There were vaults in Winterfell filled with gold and silver, the result of the ancient Lords of Winterfell who amassed small amounts of riches through time, but no gold or silver was to be seen around the castle otherwise, except for a pin there or there, like the ones Theon Greyjoy liked to wear. Here, riches were exposed to the sight of everyone, and the girls wore dresses made of tissues Jon had never heard about or jewels made of precious stones he didn't know to exist. Margaery Lannister was the one to wear the most costly clothes. Sometimes Jon wondered if her wardrobe was as rich as the vaults of Winterfell.

Casterly Rock was a succession of gardens, yards, larders, vaults, halls, barracks, rooms and
everything you could think of. Underneath, a vast complex of mines extracted the gold that made House Lannister rich over the centuries. Jon didn't think he would have enough of a lifetime to see all of it. He might lose himself exploring the castle one day if he wasn't careful. He still struggled to find the godswood.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "My lord, Lord Tyrion is waiting for you."

Jon shook his head. He almost forgot. "Tell him I'm coming."

He proceeded to put on some clothes for the day. His chamber was giving on the eastern side of the castle. The first time they showed him his personal rooms, he thought there was a mistake. The room was twice the size of the one he had at Winterfell. The bed was twice the size of his own back home as well. Jon found it queer to give a bed large enough for two people to sleep in to a single person. The mattress was thick, much more than anything he ever saw. The only thing that could have surprised him more would have been if a servant had been assigned to him personally. It hadn't been the case, and Jon was grateful for it. He lit his own fires, dressed, went to bed and left it without help, and he ate in the Great Hall with most of the household of Casterly Rock.

Today, however, he wouldn't break his fast with everyone else. He would break it with Tyrion Lannister. His squire, Tywin Frey, had come to tell him about that yesterday in the evening. Jon put on his clothes for the day and went to see Lord Tyrion after telling Ghost to remain in his room. Jon kept dressing like he did in the North, and this made it very easy for everyone to know who he was. He was the man who dressed the most plainly here. All the people he came across knew immediately that he was the bastard of Winterfell. It wasn't that easy to find his way to the personal rooms of the Lord of Casterly Rock, but he did. It was easier than to find the godswood. Still, he had to ask his way twice, which earned him a few surprised looks each time. If someone ever tried to seize Casterly Rock by force, Jon feared his men might lose themselves in the tunnels of the castle.

There were two guards that Jon recognized as men who travelled with him from the Wall who guarded the lord's apartments. One of them announced him and Jon was invited to step forward into the rooms. If he found his own room luxurious, then he was wrong. His father would have wondered through how many winters the riches in the lord’s rooms may have allowed the entire North to be fed. At a table in the centre of the room, the Lord of Casterly Rock sat, his wife at his side. However, she stood up as soon as he entered.

"I suppose it's time for me to leave. I'll see you later," she said to her husband.

She kissed her husband and walked away, granting a smile to Jon on her passage. Jon bowed and said a my lady, like Sansa once reminded him to do when he was addressed by a lady. Jon hadn't spent much time around the Lady of Casterly Rock. She behaved civilly with him, but she didn't seem to be much interested in talking with him, or with knowing him better. It wasn't that different from Lady Stark, only she didn't show any sign of antipathy towards him. She behaved with him the same way she behaved with most of her household knights, something Jon wasn't far from being.

"Please, Snow. Come and help yourself," the small lord told him. Jon came and sat in front of the Warden of the West. He never thought he would break his fast with one of the most powerful men in the Seven Kingdoms one day.

"Lady Lannister is not eating with you?" he asked.

"Usually, yes, but she's been very busy lately. The time we spent in the North made us late with many things, and she must leave for Highgarden soon." Jon took some bread and started to put some butter on it. "So, how's been your first week at the Rock?" Lord Tyrion asked him as he chewed on a piece of bacon.
"Quite well, my lord."

"No need to call me my lord, Jon Snow. We are between friends here. There's no one to hear us."

"Very well, Tyrion."

At the same moment, the door opened to let a handmaiden come in. "Excuse me, my lords," she said, "but Lady Margaery wanted me to take a shawl. The air outside is colder than she thought."

"Of course, Lady Sera, take whatever Margaery needs," Tyrion told her. The handmaiden went to a room whose purpose Jon couldn't make out. There were at least six different rooms here, all that for only two people. Even his lord father and Lady Stark didn't have that much space. They only had their own room each, and they were barely larger than the other ones inside Winterfell.

"You said no one would hear us," Jon said. They both chuckled. The handmaiden with brown hair came back from the room where she was with a red piece of tissue that glistened into the light. Jon looked at her a moment as he laughed. She turned her face away and kept walking to the door to leave the apartments.

"I think this one has an eye on you, Jon Snow," the Lord of Casterly Rock said with a huge smirk.

"She doesn't," Jon said a little too quickly.

"I bet she does," he insisted.

"I don't wish to disappoint her, but a bastard of the North has little to offer her. What's her name? Sera Darwell?"

"Durwell. One of my wife's favourite's handmaidens."

"I know." Even though he seldom spoke with her, he already knew a lot about Lady Sera Durwell.

"So, not disappointed of the Rock so far?" his friend asked him, coming back on the topic.

"Not at all. There's a lot to do. Sometimes I don't know where to begin."

Jon spent his days training in the yards with the other knights, squires and guards, assisting to the audiences Lord Tyrion and his wife gave, and trying to visit the castle. The evenings were spent playing dice and drinking ale if not wine with his friends. Surprisingly, Jon had become acquainted with many members of the Lannister household pretty quickly. The fact he was a bastard didn't seem to matter here. The others welcomed him like they welcomed everyone else new here. His second night here, the other knights got him so drunk that he could barely stand the next day. They even went to Lannisport all together once, to visit a brothel. Jon had been the only one to not get a girl. One man he got along very well with was Ser Daven Lannister. Although he was almost ten years older than him, Jon had earned his respect after they faced each other on the sparring grounds. Since that first duel, they sparred together every day. The Lannister knight defeated him every time, but he was very friendly and never humiliated Jon. Quite the opposite, he advised him about how to fight better, and it worked. Jon could hold his ground a little better at every duel.

There were also many other knights and squires he spent time with, some of them even being bastards. He had developed a certain friendship with a few of them on the road from the Wall, but he met others here. He was really just a man like anyone else here, and he liked it. He didn't have the title bastard written on him for everyone to see, or if people knew who he was, they didn't seem to care.
"I've been thinking about the position I could give to you. Perhaps it would be better to try a few ones first, and then you could tell me what you would rather do. My cousin Daven is leaving tomorrow with a group of twenty knights to scour the region and arrest the robbers and criminals they might come upon. Would you like to go with him?"

"Of course." To see some of the country would do him some good after the first stunning week here.

"You won't be his squire. You'll be a man under his command like everyone else," Tyrion explained to him.

"That works for me."

"Good. I'll also have you try the position as guard here, or in the city Watch of Lannisport, not to mention our ships patrolling the Sunset Sea. You'll see that there's a lot of possibilities."

"Thank you." He meant it.

"Don't thank me. Thank yourself. If you weren't good at anything, I wouldn't have asked you to come. I proposed you to come here because I thought you could be useful in the Westerlands. Here, a man gets what he deserves through his deeds, not through his lineage."

Jon had no problem with that. That was exactly why he went to the Wall, to prove himself somewhere birth meant nothing. "I thank you all the same."

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must go. I have the docks to inspect, and I've got a lot to catch on, just like Margaery. Take whatever you need," he said, indicating the large amount of food on his table. And the Lord of Casterly Rock left him to finish his breakfast alone.

Later, Jon went to the training grounds. He went there every morning to practice. Many people were already practicing their swordplay or their shooting when he arrived. It was the main practice ground of the castle, and Jon knew there were others as well. Even then, this practice ground was already larger than the one they had at Winterfell. Ser Benedict Broom, the master-at-arms of Casterly Rock, was looking at two boys of Sansa's age sparring. They were the two young brothers, Martyn and Willem Lannister, the children of Ser Kevan Lannister who was away at King's Landing, serving on the small council with Jon's father. Some people who weren't sparring greeted him as he walked to the armory.

Inside, there was only one other person, and he smiled when he saw Jon walk in. "Hi, Jon. Lord Tyrion wanted to talk with me this morning."

"About what?"

"To know if I was well settled, and to tell me I'm going on patrol tomorrow."

"With Daven?"

"Aye," Jon answered, not without surprise.

"We're going to be on the same patrol then. I'm going too."

Jon was glad of it. Teron Hill was a bastard, just like him, from a minor house of the Westerlands. Jon liked him, since both were quite similar. Teron had thought about joining the Night's Watch just like him. His father was a brother to the lord of House Payne, but during a tour of the Westerlands
Lord Tyrion made about a year ago, he stayed at the seat of the Paynes for one night. Teron hadn't been present when the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock arrived at his uncle's keep. He was hunting down criminals in a nearby village on his house's territory with five other men. Only one of them was a knight. The criminals had proven to be more organized than they thought and ambushed them on the road, killing everyone but Teron. He barely managed to come back alive, heavily wounded. It so happened that the day he came back was the last day the Lannisters spent at the keep of House Payne. Before he left, Lord Tyrion had ordered Lord Payne to send Teron back after the criminals once he recovered, with twice the number of men they had originally, and that this time Teron would lead these men. If he was to neutralize the bandits, then he was to come and see him at Casterly Rock.

Teron needed time, but within a week he was back in the fields with a dozen men under his command. Two weeks later, he came back with the heads of the leaders of this criminal group, and within half a year he rode to Casterly Rock where he was knighted by Ser Daven Lannister and given a position as a household knight. He was of Jon's age at the time, and all this had happened only a year ago.

Jon was very impressed by the household the Lannisters were maintaining. It wasn't really its size, which was overwhelming just like the castle itself. His father would certainly have said it was too big for nothing. It was the composition that fascinated Jon. At Winterfell, most of the people who lived in had kin who lived in the castle before, or they all came from noble families. That wasn't the case here. Many of the people Jon had come across were the first in their families to reach the Rock, like they called it. Some knights or guards here were bastards, but even more, some came from the smallfolk as well, without any tie to a powerful family. They gained their position thanks to their doings and realizations, and it seemed it had been like that for a very long time at Casterly Rock. Most of the people Jon knew were already there when Lord Tyrion became Warden of the West. They had been recruited under Tywin Lannister's rule. The father and the son chose the people serving them for their merit rather than their origins.

"Well, I'll have at least one sympathetic face for a week," Jon quipped.

The other bastard laughed. "Let's see if you'll say the same after I make you roll in the mud today."

"I wouldn't bet on that if I were you."

"Why not? I'm betting everything you want you'll be yielding to me before the end of the day."

"Sorry, I don't place bets." Their father strongly taught to Jon and his brothers to never gamble.

"Come on. It's innocent. Not a serious debt. No money. It will be fun, you'll see."

"All right. What kind of bet? What will you lose if I defeat you?"

"Let's say… my pride. I will act like your squire for the first day of patrol tomorrow."

Jon laughed. "That means you will help me don my armor, fetch my water and tend to my horse?"

"Yes, my friend. You got it all right." He smirked. He didn't think he could lose.

"Very well." Only for the pleasure to see a knight act as a squire for a single day, he supposed that was worth it. "And what will I lose if you are the one to defeat me?"

"You'll have to lose your shyness before girls." Teron had a malicious gaze in his eyes. "You'll go and talk to that handmaiden."
"That's out of the question!" He would never do that.

"Of yes, you will. A bet is a bet. You agreed."

"I never…"

"You did. You said very well when I told you my punishment if you defeat me, and you said it. Too late to turn around."

Jon sighed. "As you wish." He had to defeat Ser Teron Hill at all cost.

Tyrion already teased him this morning because of the red that came to Lady Sera Durwell's cheeks when she looked at him. Jon hadn't noticed that until recently, but it seemed the Lord of Casterly Rock wasn't the only one to notice it. Even Daven commented on that two days ago. He was talking with Jon and surprised the handmaiden looking at them from behind Jon's back. He wasn't sure what to make of it. In Winterfell, no girl ever showed an interest in him. Why would they? He was only the bastard, while his brother was the future Lord of Winterfell. Jon hoped the girl would forget him soon. He didn't want to cause her sadness. She would have nothing from a marriage with him. Her family would never accept. And he wouldn't sleep with her. He wouldn't take the risk of fathering another bastard like him, or to dishonor her. Anyway, they barely addressed a few words to each other since they met in the godswood of Winterfell.

Teron was ready before Jon, so his friend left the armory before Jon was done preparing. When Jon came to the training yard, there were about ten duels taking place at the same time. Teron was dueling with Ser Cleos Frey. Jon thought it would be a good idea to find someone else to spar with. He may be lucky enough to avoid a duel with Teron, and this way he had no risk to lose it.

"You cannot lose a battle that is not fought. Tyrion told him that once. Before he could start his search, a loud voice called after him.

"Jon Snow! Come here."

He turned to the origin of the voice and saw a burly knight with yellow hair, sidewhiskers and a beard as yellow as his hair waving his hand, signaling him to approach, which Jon did.

"Ser Daven," Jon greeted the knight he would ride with tomorrow.

"Himself. Bother for a little practice?"

"Not at all."

They took position face to face. "Be careful, Jon. You have the master-at-arms of Casterly Rock watching you."

Jon looked to his right to see that Ser Broom was effectively watching them. He immediately felt a horrible pain on his left flank. He stepped back, his hand on his side, Daven Lannister laughing at him. "You let yourself be distracted too much, Jon Snow."

"We hadn't begun," Jon protested. Daven's practice sword was the cause of his pain in the flank.

"Why? Because we didn't agree to start together? Do you think most of the fights with swords begin when two opponents stand face to face and decide on a common basis to draw their swords? That's not how it happens in real life. You're being attacked at the moment you expect it the least. You'd best remember that tomorrow when we go on patrol." It seemed Tyrion Lannister informed his cousin that Jon would go with him. "If we meet any problem during the following days, it will be bandits ambushng us on the roads, or we'll be the ones ambushng them. The element of surprise
and distraction is often decisive in these skirmishes. If you're not focused at all time, then the first man hidden at the right place will cut you in half. Look at what I just did. You would be dead if I had a real sword."

Jon listened to the words. "You could have told me without doing this," he complained.

"We learn better with some pain." He made a massive roar and flung his sword horizontally. Jon positioned his own sword just in time to block it, or at least partially. The force of the hit was too great to totally stop. Still, he managed to divert the blow enough. The blade only scratched his armor. The Lannister knight laughed out loud. "See. No better way." Jon soon joined him in his laughter.

"Good. In position now," the knight said.

Ser Daven held his sword before him and Jon did the same. The knight was very well trained, and stronger than Jon. He seldom lost a fight. He thought he noticed that Daven was the one to make the first move more often than usual, so maybe he could have an element of surprise if he launched the first attack. Jon quickly decided that was what he had to do. He sent a quick blow in the legs that Ser Daven blocked easily, but it wasn't meant to get through his opponent's defense anyway. He swung his sword on Daven's left side, and he parried again. He launched an attack against Jon, and Jon stopped it, but he was forced to step back. Daven positioned himself in a defensive stance again. Jon brought a blow to his head this time, but without success. Jon made several attacks, all blocked by the knight, who only moved when necessary and forced Jon to retire, but never stroke back. Jon grew frustrated and attacked more quickly and more strongly than before. It lasted for a very long time. Finally, when Jon stepped back once more, the Lannister knight counter-attacked. His blows were powerful, and Jon could barely divert them. The fifth or sixth attack brought his sword on the side and Daven brought his own blade to Jon's neck. It only stayed on the neck. It barely touched his skin.

"You're dead, Jon Snow." He removed the sword. Daven removed his helmet and Jon did the same. Jon was panting in his full armor, while his opponent almost breathed as easily as if they were drinking ale. The knight chuckled lightly. "You got impatient, and careless. Wrong thing to do. In battle, we must stay focused, no matter the circumstances. Some battles are very difficult and very long." Jon sighed. "Don't get me wrong, boy. You fight well, but fighting against a single opponent in a training ground is very different from fighting real men on the battlefield, or outlaws on a road, or in a forest. You may have your first taste of real fight tomorrow."

He patted Jon vigorously on the shoulder and went to see someone else. Jon sat for a moment to catch his breath. Daven Lannister was a good man from what he could tell. His mocking manners reminded him of the Imp sometimes. Were all the Lannisters like this? The Kingslayer mocked him when he was at Winterfell about going to the Wall. However, Jon knew now that there was more than he thought behind the mockeries when it came to a Lannister. Daven's lessons might be useful tomorrow when they would leave the castle.

"Ser Daven can say what he wants, you fight quite well," a voice near him said. Ser Benedict Broom had taken a seat beside him. "Much better than many people here. Did you have a master-at-arms at Winterfell?"

"Aye. Ser Rodrik Cassel."

A frown appeared on the mid-aged man's brow. "Never heard of him, but he seems to have done a good job. You should favor less your right, however." He knew it. Ser Rodrik often reminded him of that back in the North. "A good knight must be able to attack as well from every side."

"I'm not a knight," Jon replied.
"Not yet. You wouldn't be the first bastard to get a knighthood."

He stood up and left Jon alone. Jon wouldn't mind gaining a knighthood. It might be his best chance to advance. Still, he didn't have it yet. After a few moments, he went to seek another opponent. Jon won most of the other duels he participated to. Some were close victories, but he defeated his sparring companions all the same. Morning was reaching its end and Jon just defeated Ser Lucion Lannister. People were beginning to gather their things and remove their armors for dinner, when someone he would rather not hear yelled at him.

"Hey, Jon. You forgot about our duel." Teron Hill faced him before Jon could escape somewhere.

"It's no longer time for practice," Jon tried.

"Nonsense. Only one last duel. I want to see you speak to that girl."

Jon realized many people were looking at them. It seemed he had no way to evade the situation. "All right. One duel," he conceded.

He and Teron took position, with half the men of the courtyard watching them, including Daven. "Okay, everyone," the bastard from the Westerlands declared with a powerful voice. "You are all witness that if Jon Snow loses this duel, he will have to go and speak with a certain handmaiden."

There was unanimous laughter. Jon felt red coming to his cheeks. It was a good thing he already had his helmet on his head. "And if Teron Hill loses, he must act as my squire for all day tomorrow."

New bursts of laughter.

"Don't count on it," the knight replied. He placed his helmet on his head and took a stance for battle.

They eyed each other for a moment. Jon decided to let him take the initiative. And he did. His blows were not as powerful as Daven's, but they were not to be dismissed either. Jon had won half his duels against Teron Hill, and he lost the other half. Swords collided, clanged, ducked, flung, swung. It was a dance where one mistake could decide whether Jon would be forced to speak to Sera Durwell or if Teron would act as a squire tomorrow, cleaning his boots and making fire for him. Attacks and counter attacks followed each other closely, none managing to break through the other's defence. Jon was growing impatient. Was there no weakness in Teron's stance? He thought about trying a series of quick blows in the hope that it would unbalance his opponent. The last time he did this, Daven took the advantage. He kept his forces while Jon spent his uselessly. He and Teron were about equal in fighting skills.

He let Teron attack him for a moment, studying the points where he was weaker. He favored attacking the chest and head instead of the legs. Jon never risked to lose his balance, but he saw his opponent about to lose his own at least once. He waited for a powerful attack. Jon feigned to almost stumble, and when Teron unleashed a powerful strike toward his head, Jon ducked and hit the knight hard on the pads of his left leg. Using the distraction it provided, Jon kicked him in the leg, and his opponent fell on his knees. Jon made a quick and decisive blow that Teron stopped. Jon pushed hard, his muscles tensing under the effort. The effort his opponent made was superior in the end.

Jon got pushed back and lost his balance, Teron ran to him, swinging the word at the level of his head. Jon lowered his head and made a similar movement with his own sword that crushed heavily against Teron's flank. The knight tumbled on the ground, face first. Jon gained back his stance quickly enough to bring his sword on Teron's back.

"Surrender?" he asked.
A moment passed. Then Teron released a heavy sigh. "Surrender."

Many people cheered around, and laughed too. Two of them helped Teron on his feet. He would have to be a squire tomorrow, and to the bastard of Winterfell, but that wasn't what relieved Jon the most. They all went back laughing to the Great Hall where they dined together, Teron being the target of most of the mockery. Jon then went with Daven and the other knights to prepare their patrol.

Later, he went back to the training yards and practiced shooting arrows. He wasn't very good at it, but he had to remain good enough. As he took a pause and watched other men firing arrows on the targets while he drank some water, a small voice called his name next to him.

"Hi, Jon."

He turned, a smile on his lips. A girl who was about Arya's age stood next to him. The resemblance between his little sister and Joy Hill didn't go farther however. The girl with green eyes and golden hair was shy and held her hands protectively close to her tummy. Her behavior was all the opposite of the girl whose hair Jon loved to ruffle. She tried to act as a lady, though she didn't manage it very well. She was also very quiet when Arya was bursting with energy. You would never see Joy Hill shoot arrows like Arya did to laugh at Bran. Still, she remembered Jon of Arya. As a bastard, she was almost an outcast as much as he and Arya were at Winterfell.

"Hi, Joy. How are you today?"

"I'm fine," she said very sweetly. She almost looked afraid to talk. Jon tapped the place next to him on the bench to indicate she could sit. She executed herself very slowly and looked at the people shooting. She glanced towards a squire people nicknamed Tyg. "He's very good."

"Aye, he is." Despite being very young, Tygett Sarsfield almost never missed the target, and his arrows were close to always at the center of the target. Jon didn't think he could achieve such precision one day.

"His name makes me think to Egg, you know. Ser Duncan the Tall's squire. That's a funny name."

Jon repressed a laugh. The Egg in question was King Aegon the Unlikely, who made Ser Duncan the Tall Lord Commander of the Kingsguard when he became king. Instinctively, Jon ruffled her hair. She giggled. "So, done anything interesting today?"

"I had lessons with Maester Creylen. I like him. He's always very kind with me, but I wish Uncle Tyrion could help me. He did it before."

She seemed sad. From what a friend told him, Joy was a very lone child. Jon could almost recognize himself in her. They were both bastards, and in some way set aside from the others because of that. Jon had almost ended at the Wall because he wasn't a legitimate child. He wondered where Joy would end. With the Silent Sisters? He hoped not.

He knew the Lord of Casterly Rock, although not necessarily very close to her, was very protective of his bastard cousin. Joy called him an uncle, but in fact she was a cousin of the Imp, the daughter of his favorite uncle, Ser Gerion Lannister. One day, Ser Benedict's son, Alexander, told him that a knight was removed from service because he dared to mock publicly Joy Hill about her bastard status. Jon found it somewhat drastic. If every person who mocked him for the same reason had to be removed from Winterfell, his father would have to make many changes to his household. At least, the little girl had a family who cared about her. They were both luckier than most. On the other side, Joy had no brother and no sister, and her father was dead. Jon may never have known his mother,
but at least he had a father, brothers and sisters who loved him. Joy had none of this.

"But I managed to make my sums all alone," she said proudly.

"I'm glad of it," Jon answered to her, all smiling. She smiled as well. She was a very sweet child.

"I heard you beat Teron this morning."

"Aye, I did."

"Everyone is talking about it." Rumours spread fast inside Casterly Rock. "Martyn and Willem say they want to fight like you when they'll be older." The two sons of Kevan Lannister, wanting to fight like a bastard. It seemed everything was possible in the Westerlands. "Is it true that your sister is betrothed to the king?"

"Aye, she is."

"So… she will be queen one day."

"Aye, she will."

"I didn't like Joffrey when he came here. He looked… I didn't like him. He spoke as if he knew everything. And he laughed at me. I hope your sister won't marry him. And he looks like a girl."

Maybe she had more in common with Arya that he thought. They both despised Joffrey. Jon found that Prince Joffrey looked like a girl too. He had sent a raven to King's Landing after he arrived to tell his lord father that he was well and happy here.

"I'll tell you a secret, Joy. I hope Sansa doesn't marry Joffrey me too." They both chuckled a little. Two bastards laughing together on a bench while people were shooting arrows not far away.

Jon went back to shooting. During another pause he made, Joy asked him if he could show her how to use a bow. Maybe she had much more in common with Arya than he thought. He couldn't tell her that he would. She wasn't his sister. She was brought back to her chamber by her septa about an hour later.

After the supper, Jon decided to visit the godswood of Casterly Rock. Ghost followed him. He wouldn't come back before a few days, so better pay his respects to the Old Gods before he left. The corridors of Casterly Rock were well illuminated with torches at all times, and those on the sides of the hill had windows carved into the stone. He wondered if there was a heating system similar to the one in Winterfell, with hot water from the hot springs in the ground running inside the walls. Jon doubted it. There were mines under their feet, the source of the Lannister's wealth, not hot springs.

Jon watched his shadow grow and reduce as he walked along the tunnels. At this hour in the North, it would be complete darkness, but here in the Westerlands, the sun had not entirely disappeared and there were still a few shades of light, though not much. It would be night very soon. Jon tried to be careful, but it seemed that wasn't enough. He lost his way. The godswood was in an almost deserted section of Casterly Rock, with very few occupied rooms nearby. One of the Tyrell knights who served Lady Lannister once told him there was a maze at the entrance of Highgarden, to lose anyone who would try to take the castle. Jon highly doubted it was as much a labyrinth as the tunnels he was lost in right now. He didn't recognize at all the place where he was. Everything was so alike here.

He turned a corner to almost bump into someone. "Sorry," he said.

"Jon, I'm glad to see you. Hello, you." She knelt to stroke Ghost's fur. The direwolf let her do.
Jon was glad to see her as well when he realized he almost bumped into the only other Northerner in this castle. He had spent a lot of time with her on the road from Winterfell. It so happened that Mira Forrester liked to take a walk every evening before she went to bed. She told him she had this habit from her time at Ironrath, when she used to walk in the grove of ironwood behind her home every day before she went to sleep. She continued when she was at Highgarden, the castle offering many gardens and places to wander around. On the road, Jon accompanied her in her walking, since she couldn't get too far from the Lannister retinue without an escort. The road was full of outlaws who wouldn't hesitate to attack a young girl all alone. She had found Jon close to a campfire one evening and asked him to escort her the first time. Jon didn't know why, but he remained near a campfire every evening afterwards, knowing she would need someone to follow her.

That was during these walkings that he got to know her better. Mira Forrester was the eldest daughter of Lord Gregor Forrester of Ironrath and Lady Elissa Branfield. Born in the North, she was sent to Highgarden by her mother who wanted her to learn the ways of the south and became a handmaiden to Margaery Tyrell before she was married to the Lord of Casterly Rock. She followed her mistress when she moved to the Westerlands and remained at her service since then. She had four brothers and one sister, worshipped both the Old Gods and the New, prayed every day, loved to read, spoke two languages from across the Narrow Sea, knew the whole history of the North by heart and loved apple pie. Jon knew her better than anyone else in Casterly Rock thanks to their discussions in the evenings. Since they arrived, they didn't meet as often as before, with her duties towards Lady Lannister, but she still introduced him to Joy Hill a few days ago.

"Me too," he told her. "I was going to the godswood."

"Well, you're heading the wrong way. Come with me, I was going there me too. And don't worry. I lost my way countless times in my first days here."

He made a very short chuckle and followed her. "Thank you."

"I heard you had quite a fight this morning in the training yards."

Rumors really spread quickly here. "Aye. It's Teron. Teron Hill. He made our duel quite… public."

"He also made public that you would have to speak to a handmaiden if you lost the duel." She was looking at him with an amused look. "I suppose the handmaiden in question was Sera."

He laughed nervously. "He forced me to make a bet about it."

She smiled discreetly. "That's not the first time it happens, and certainly not the first time a woman is involved. But you won, I heard."

"Aye. Now he'll have to be my squire tomorrow."

She chuckled so lightly that Jon barely heard it, but her timid smile expressed her feelings clearly enough. "Perhaps he'll think twice before making a bet next time."

Jon nodded, but then asked seriously. "Your friend Sera… I hope she doesn't… I mean, really, she doesn't… Concerning me."

Mira looked away. "Maybe."

"I… I don't want to disappoint her. I'm only a bastard, and… To be honest, I don't know her." What he knew of Sera Durwell all came from her friend. "I'm not interested. I don't want her to get ideas."

"Don't worry," she said, smiling reassuringly. "Sera blushes whenever she sees you, but in truth she
wants to marry someone who could give her a position. She won't make any move on you."

Jon sighed in relief. "Good. I'm glad to have won this duel."

"I can imagine."

They continued to walk for a moment without talking, but Jon broke the silence after a moment. "So, how are things since you came back?"

"Very busy. Lady Margaery has a lot of work to do, and she wants it done as quickly as possible."

"Why? Is there some reason to worry?"

"She spent a lot of time in the North. She and Lord Tyrion weren't supposed to stay there for so long. Lord Tyrion decided to visit the Wall and it made their stay much longer. Now she must catch up with a lot of things, and she wants to go to Highgarden soon."

"Why is that?" Lord Tyrion told him about it, but he didn't explain why his wife wanted to go to Highgarden at all cost.

"She wants to see her family again. And there's the wedding, too."

"The wedding?"

"One of her cousins is getting married. Willas Tyrell. She wants to be there for the ceremony."

"For a cousin?" Jon found it queer. He could understand if it was her brother who was getting married, but a cousin? Not that Jon could have any idea what it was to have cousins. He had none. His uncle Brandon and aunt Lyanna both died without children during King Robert's war, and his uncle Benjen joined the Night's Watch, so he fathered no children either. Maybe he had cousins somewhere, sons and daughters of his mother's sisters and brothers, but he had no idea of who they were, or if they even existed.

"He's almost like a brother for her. A big brother, really. I met him in Highgarden. He's very kind, and a good man. Lady Margaery loves him very much. I believe she loves him more than her actual brother."

"That much?" She nodded. It surprised Jon that someone would love a cousin more than her brothers and sisters. "Will you go to Highgarden as well for the wedding?"

"Yes, I must."

"It seems I'll take your place as the only Northerner in Casterly Rock for a time." They smiled at each other. "I hope you'll come back quickly."

He felt better knowing there was someone else from the North around. He could speak with Mira about things he couldn't really talk about to people of the south. "I won't come back."

That startled him. "What do you mean?"

She stopped and looked at him. "It's a wedding, Jon. A very particular wedding. That's why I'm going there with Lady Margaery."

"I know, you told me, but I don't understand..." She raised an eyebrow and looked at him strangely, as if she was saying to him that he was missing something. "Wait... Is that your wedding?" Her lips turned up. "You're the one marrying Lady Lannister's cousin?" That was unbelievable.
"I know, this is surprising, but that's the truth."

Jon winked a few times. "Aye, I'm surprised. Why didn't you tell me before?"

She shrugged. "A lady must be allowed some secrets, as Lady Margaery would say."

Jon was confused. He thought he knew Mira enough, and all this time she was betrothed and he didn't know. "Well, congratulations."

"Wait for the wedding. Let's continue." They resumed their walk to the godswood. Ghost whined a little and Mira scratched him between the ears.

"How is he?" He was curious as to who his friend would marry.

"Very kind and gentle. Handsome too. He raises hounds, horses, hawks. He is very bookish and intelligent. He thought about becoming a maester once. In fact, we came to know each other well because we both spent hours reading in the library of Highgarden."

"I see." He chuckled. Ghost bared his teeth. "I'm just surprised that you're marrying a Tyrell."

"I know, it's strange. He proposed to me about a year and a half ago at Old Oak. My mother is very enthusiastic. She hoped I would marry a minor lord of the Reach one day, or his heir, but she never thought I would marry a nephew of the Lord of Highgarden. She told me she couldn't believe it when she received the raven that announced the news."

Jon tried to picture that. He imagined his own family being a minor house like the Forresters. House Forrester was quite rich thanks to the trade of ironwood, but they were still a minor family who could only raise a few hundred men at most. They weren't even directly sworn to House Stark. They were bannermen of the Glovers, who in turn were sworn to the Starks. Three steps separated them from a direct oath to the Iron Throne. For a Tyrell to marry a girl from a minor house, one from the North furthermore, it was very unlikely. And yet it was about to happen to Mira.

"Did Lady Lannister arrange all that?" He knew that Margaery Lannister was very close to Mira. Could she be fond enough of her handmaiden to arrange her a marriage within her own family?

"No, that was Willas's idea. Lady Margaery only made sure her own parents would accept."

Willas Tyrell had to love Mira very much if he wanted to marry her despite her status. Not that Jon could blame him for wanting to marry her. "Well, it seems I'll be taking your place as the only Northerner at Casterly Rock forever. I'll miss you."

"I'm not gone yet, Jon. Lady Margaery still has at least a few weeks to spend here before we go. Here we are."

They had arrived before the godswood, if you could call it that way. The godswood of Casterly Rock was in fact a cave almost entirely filled with the branches and the roots of a gigantic twisted weirwood. People called it the Stone Garden. It was very different from the one at Winterfell and Jon wasn't entirely sure if it could be considered a godswood. Still, it was the closest thing to a godswood they had here, and his father wouldn't want him to ignore the Old Gods.

Mira already knelt on the ground. Jon sat next to her and began to pray. Some time later, he opened his eyes. His father told him he didn't necessarily need to pray in any specific way when he was in the godswood. Only keeping your mind on them was enough. You could let it wander, as long as you kept a place for the gods. He sat on one of the many roots, the carved face in view. However, it wasn't what attracted his attention the most.
Mira was still sitting in a praying position, the same one he found her at Winterfell. Ghost lay still not far from her. He had become very familiar with Mira as they walked every evening while on the road. He seemed to have taken a liking on her, and from his reaction after she told Jon that she was going to leave, he didn't enjoy the prospect of seeing her go.

Jon didn't enjoy it either. Mira was a welcomed presence at Casterly Rock. She was the only other person from the North here, and she was very kind to him from the very moment they met. Jon still hardly remembered their first encounter years ago, but it seemed to him he must have been blind to not notice her at this moment, even if she stayed only for a night. She didn't seem to care at all that he was a bastard. She even went to speak with Lady Stark after they met her in the inn at the crossroads. She was a very good friend, and she helped him to be prepared for the time he would be at Casterly Rock. He would somewhat feel alone without her.

He looked at her. She was so quiet, looked so much at peace, her eyes closed, her head bent forward, her hands joined on her knees. He had never seen someone so calm and serene in his life, discreet yet of pleasant company, simple yet clever, displaying no emotion yet very sensitive. He knew almost everything about her and her family, from her father called Gregor the Good, her mother who lost most of her family in Robert's war, her uncle who was the last survivor of her mother's family, her eldest brother Rodrik who suggested her books to read in the ravens from her home, her other older brother Asher who was exiled in Essos, her sister Talia who sang beautifully and her twin Ethan who played the luth, and Ryon who was only a baby when she left for Highgarden. He just got to know her, and she would leave. In some way, he was angry at Willas Tyrell for taking her away. Couldn't she marry a Lannister instead of a Tyrell? Daven, for example. He briefly spoke with the knight about Mira once, and he had a lot of respect for her and her family. He would certainly be as good a husband for her than Lady Lannister's cousin at the other side of the world.

She was positioned exactly the same way he found her months ago at Winterfell. A few months that went by like a bolt shot from a crossbow. He looked at her, watching every detail. He knew that behind her closed eyes were clear green eyes, always kind and sweet, yet piercing. Her pale face was free of any of her brown near black hair, them being brought together by a bun behind her neck to let them fall in a tail behind her back. The pale skin on her face was the same on her hands and arms joined together as she prayed, in a delicate grip. She wore a brown jerkin with leaves' symbols that shone under the light of the sun or the fire over a light blue dress that let her arms bare. She wore heavier and longer dresses back in the North, but when they rode past the Neck, she began to dress more lightly, though not too much. Jon had seen the other women at Casterly Rock, especially those who accompanied Lady Lannister, and in comparison, Mira was dressed very decently. Only her arms were displayed. Jon's eyes lingered on them for a very long time, and on her face, and on her hair. He understood why someone would want to marry her, even a Tyrell. He would miss her.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you like how I portrayed Joy Hill, and how I tried to depict Tyrion's household from Jon's perspective. Despite the fact that Tywin is a from the nobility and obviously considers the common people as inferior people, I think he would have prioritized competence and deeds over birth when it came to choose his household, who still remained servants for the most part. There would have been no reason for Tyrion to stop this policy.

The character of Tygett Sarsfield is a cameo from "The Changing of Seasons", a three part fiction of Game of Thrones by SerGoldenhand.
Please review

Next chapter: Ned
Eddard III

Chapter Notes

Ned is dealing with the politics in King's Landing. As we can expect, he hates it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

EDDARD III

"You bring me news that Viserys Targaryen is dead, and now you're telling me that the savage who married his whore of a sister is planning to invade us?"

For the second time since Ned arrived in King's Landing six months ago, Robert decided to assist a small council meeting, and just like the last time he mostly yelled and roared against the Targaryens.

The last time had been three months ago, when word came from Ser Jorah Mormont that Daenerys Targaryen was pregnant, bearing the child of a Dothraki horselord on the other continent. Robert had ordered the girl, her child and her brother to be killed, offering a lordship to whoever would kill them. Ned had spoken against this, but Robert was deaf to his words. The whole small council, at the exception of a Lannister, ironically, approved Robert's decision, and Ned had resigned from his position as Hand of the King. He was planning to leave King's Landing immediately and go back to the North, but Littlefinger brought him to see the last person who Jon Arryn saw before he died. On their way back to the Red Keep, they were attacked by a group of bandits. Jory and two of his men died, and Ned was severely injured before the City Watch intervened. Robert forced him back into the office of Hand, threatening to pin the badge on Jaime Lannister if Ned removed it again. Ned hadn't been in a position to refuse, his mind clouded by the milk of the poppy, serious injuries at the right arm and the left leg. He needed time to recover. Now he was fully healed, only to hear that the attempt against Daenerys Targaryen's life had failed. He was glad it failed, but the king wasn't.

"It seems our horse friend didn't take very well the attempt we made against his wife and his son," Littlefinger commented.

"Now he's seeking revenge against us. He wants to conquer the Seven Kingdoms and place his son on the Iron Throne. If he ever manages to cross the Narrow Sea… This is a catastrophe," Ser Kevan said.

"I… I doubt the Dothrakis could ever be a real threat to the Seven Kingdoms. They never sailed on ships, and I don't see how they could learn to do it now," the Grand Maester observed. Pycelle was among those who advised for the assassination of the Targaryen girl two months ago, saying many more innocents would die if the Dothrakis invaded. Now he said he didn't think the Dothrakis could ever cross the Narrow Sea.

"A real threat!" Robert roared, pacing through the room. "They are a real threat. There are thousands of ships in the Free Cities. Khal Drogo only has to plunder some villages and cities, then to use the gold and the slaves he'll find there to buy the ships he'll need with the sailors."

"We must prepare for the eventuality of an invasion," Ned intervened, looking at his friend. "Send word to White Harbor, Gulltown, Planky Town, Saltspan, Duskendale, Storm's End. Tell them to prepare for an invasion, to fortify their defenses."
"And you believe they will obey? Why would they? Some will be very happy to see Khal Drogo arrive with the grandson of the Mad King. They still see me as an usurper. They will open the gates of their castles for this whore and her son. If this Khal Drogo has any mind, he will sail for Dorne. The Martells will side with him with joy. Doran Martell blames me for his sister, nephew and niece's deaths."

Ned couldn't blame the Prince of Dorne for that. What Ser Gregor Clegane did was a horrible crime. Tywin Lannister may have been the one to command that atrocity, but Robert shut his eyes to it. He did nothing to bring the murderers to justice.

"I believe Lord Stark is right, your Grace," Ser Kevan began. "Where we stand now, the best thing to do is to fortify the eastern coast and reinforce the fleet. If need be, we can ask Balon Greyjoy and Paxter Redwyne to send us some ships to reinforce our presence in the Narrow Sea. The Iron Islands will have to obey. We hold Balon Greyjoy's last son, and Paxter Redwyne is loyal to the Throne."

"Loyal to your nephew and his wife, you mean," the king retorted. He stopped pacing, slowly walked to the table, then slammed it with both fists. A cup of wine toppled and its content fell all over Pycelle. "I WANT THEM DEAD! The girl, and her son! And that Khal Drogo too!"

"Your Grace, I'm afraid it is very unlikely that another man will try to murder Daenerys Targaryen after the failure of the first one," Lord Varys said carefully. "Khal Drogo will make sure to punish the culprit very painfully. No fool will try anything against his khaleesi, even for the Iron Throne itself."

"The best way forward now is to prepare for an invasion," Kevan Lannister resumed. "And with some luck, maybe Khal Drogo will find himself dead before he assembles all the necessary resources. The Dothrakis are known for fighting among themselves. They already got us rid of Viserys. This Drogo may be defeated by another khal before he reaches the Narrow Sea."

"Do nothing? That's your wise advice? Do nothing till the enemies ride on our lands and besiege our castles? That is your plan, Lannister?" Robert asked in a booming voice as always.

"This is his plan, and mine," Ned declared.

"I won't wait for them to invade my kingdoms to do something. Double the bounty on the whore's head."

"This would be useless, your Grace," the Lannister knight replied. "To kill Daenerys Targaryen will only infuriate her husband furthermore and press him even more. The best strategy right now is to prepare for the invasion and wait for the enemy to push him back into the sea the moment he appears on our shores. Of course, it wouldn't be necessary without the foolish decisions you took."

"I beg your pardon." Robert spoke with outrage, his voice lower than before.

"The decision to send assassins after the Targaryens was as stupid as it was cruel. This is the sort of decision the Mad King would have taken," Kevan Lannister declared.

"Be careful, Lannister."

"I am a member of this small council, your Grace, and as such it is my duty to advise you, and to tell you the truth, even if you don't like it. By sending an assassin after the girl, you angered a powerful warlord who vowed vengeance against you and who will stop at nothing to ravage the Seven Kingdoms. I advised you, just like Lord Stark, against this decision, but just like when Jon Arryn was Hand of the King, you didn't listen, and now we are in danger of the first foreign invasion since
the War of the Ninepenny Kings, and this is your doing."

"This is borderline treason, what you're saying, Ser Kevan."

"This is no treason. Only criticism. My nephew knows how to take it. I was hoping you would know it too."

Ned tried to realign the conversation. "We must focus on the preparation of our defenses."

"Defenses? Do you think wars are won with defenses? No, they're won with steel and armies in the field. I'm not going to wait for the Dothrakis to come." He turned to Varys. "Tell to all the Free Cities that I'll offer them everything they want if they kill Khal Drogo and his hordes for me, and even more if they bring me the girl's head."

"You would really murder a child after what happened the last time?" Ned asked, unbelieving.

"Murder? You call it murder? The Targaryens burned your father alive, and strangled your brother as he watched him die. They kidnapped your sister, raped her and killed her, and you say that killing one of them is murder? I call it justice!"

"There is no justice in the killing of children. Daenerys Targaryen did nothing against our families. She has no blood on her hands."

"And when she's old enough? Don't you think she'll want revenge for her family?"

"I'll consider her a threat the day she tries to take her father's throne, not before."

"So, that's all you have to offer as advice, really? Nothing? Do nothing? Let the rebellions ignite until our lands are on fire? Someone talk sense to that honorable fool!"

The small council was silent. "Are you really going to try to kill the girl again?" Ned asked after a moment.

"Are you deaf as much as you're a fool, Ned? I told you this would come. Well, the time has come. She dies, one way or another."

He had hoped there was still something left from the man he used to know, but it seemed he was dead. He might have been dead before the war even ended. With a resolved sigh, Ned stood up, removed the badge of Hand from his doublet and dropped it on the table. "You can pin it on Jaime Lannister as far as I'm concerned. If you want a butcher, then he's the man you need. Not me."

He walked around the table and made to leave, but Robert stopped him with a hand on his chest before he could go far enough. "Ned."

His tone, just like his face, looked like a mix of plea and anger. Maybe there was some of the old Robert left, but not enough. "You're no longer the man I knew."

With that, Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, walked out of the small council chamber. He closed the door on the politics of the Realm and on a friendship more than twenty-years-old. His steps echoed on the marble of the floor as he walked back to the Tower of the Hand. He would leave tomorrow on the morning, and he wouldn't come back here. He was a Northerner, and his place was in the North, with his wife and their children, among his people. There was nothing for him here in King's Landing. He hated this place. He had come here to serve the king, and to find out what happened to Jon Arryn. The king ordered him to carry out murders while he drank and whored, and he found nothing to identify Jon Arryn's assassin. He had failed.
When he neared his room, he noticed someone very skinny, dressed in trousers and light tunic, standing on one feet, trying to keep her equilibrium. Ned thought she was better than the last time. He smiled softly at the sight of his youngest daughter. There was so much of Lyanna in her.

"Still following Syrio's lessons, I see."

"Aye." She answered quickly, trying to maintain her position.

"You're getting better." She smiled back at him. Would Robert have been a different man if Lyanna had lived? "Come, I must talk with you."

She fell back on her two feet and followed him into his solar. Once inside and with the door closed, he turned to look at her. "We're leaving tomorrow. We're going back to Winterfell."

"Why? Is it your leg and your arm? I thought you were right. You're not dying, aren't you?"

"What? No. I'm well."

"Then why?"

"I resigned as Hand. We have nothing more to do here."

"But my lessons with Syrio? I'm finally getting good."

"I'm sorry, Arya. We're going back home. You'll get to see Robb, Bran and Rickon again, and your mother. She misses you."

"Can we take Syrio back with us?"

Ned thought about that. "I'll talk to him. If he wants to come, he's welcome, but I won't force him."

"What about Jon? Is he coming back too?" Jon. He almost forgot about the boy. That was unforgiveable. He received news some time ago that he had gone to Casterly Rock and was now serving in Lord Tyrion's household. Ned had been surprised and terrified by this. According to Robb, it was Jon who took the decision himself after the Imp made him the offer. Ned thought the boy would be safe at the Wall, and now he was in the Lion's Den. But there was nothing Ned could do about it.

"Sit. I need to tell you something." Arya did as she was told, and Ned sat right in front of her. "Jon is a man, now. He is free to take his own decisions and he must find his own path in the world. His place is no longer at Winterfell."

"Why isn't his place at Winterfell? He always lived there with us."

"Yes, he did. But he's not your mother's son. Jon had to leave one day or another. The time has come for him. Robb will be Lord of Winterfell one day and rule the North when I'm gone. You and your sister will marry lords when the times comes, and your brothers Bran and Rickon will rule holdfasts as Robb's bannermen."

"Why can't Jon become Robb's bannerman too? He's our brother, just like Bran and Rickon."

How could he explain that to her? He sighed. Maybe it was time. "Look, I'm not going to lie to you. This is not pleasant to hear or to say, but it's the truth. Jon is not a legitimate child like you. He's a bastard. There's nothing for him at Winterfell. He had to go."

An awkward silence followed. He saw a wave of anger flashing in his daughter's eyes, the same he
sometimes saw in Lyanna's eyes. "It's mother? She wanted Jon to go?" He couldn't answer to that. "You said winter was coming, and that we had to look after each other. How can we look after Jon if he's far away?"

"Jon made his choice, Arya. He's free now. It's not to me to tell him where he must go and where he must not."

"Can I go to see him?" Anger subsidized for sadness. "He says Casterly Rock is a very good place. Can't we visit him before we go back in the North?"

A detour through Casterly Rock would make their journey back to Winterfell several months longer, especially if they wanted to spend a long time with Jon. Still Ned couldn't say no. Not right now. "I'll think about that. I'll give you my answer tomorrow. Now I would like you to start packing your things. Tell Sansa that we're leaving and get your septa to help you."

Resolved, Arya left. Ned shook his head when she was gone. Should he make Jon come back to Winterfell. Cat wouldn't like that, but wouldn't it be better? Jon wouldn't be safe in the Westerlands. He had done everything he could to keep Jon away from the south. What if the Lannisters discovered the truth? Ned highly doubted they would, but could he be entirely sure? He should at least inform the boy that they were leaving King's Landing. Jon looked happy at Casterly Rock from the ravens he sent, and he was far from Catelyn, but it didn't reassure him to know that he was among Lannisters.

One of his men opened the door. "Ser Kevan Lannister to see you, my lord." He stepped aside and let the knight enter. Ned had come to respect Tywin Lannister's brother deeply, especially after he resigned for the first time as Hand. He had been the only one on the small council to oppose the decision of killing Daenerys Targaryen and her unborn child. When Ned was stuck to his bed, he informed him about the situation of the Realm. He had found that Ser Kevan had more honor than most people in this city. He even told him his suspicions concerning the death of Jon Arryn, though he never mentioned his widow's letter. Ser Kevan investigated the case, though he didn't seem to believe Jon Arryn was murdered, and he found nothing so far. Ned found some similarities between them. Ser Kevan was a second son, just like him, and had spent his life advising his brother, then his nephew. Ned would have played the same role had Brandon lived.

"Lord Stark."

"Ser Kevan. Please, take a seat. How was the king after I left?"

"Quite silent," the knight answered at he sat down, Ned's desk separating them. "All the opposite of last time. He's left for hunting."

"Hunting?" Again?

"That's what the king always does when he's troubled, when he faces problems he would rather not face. I don't blame you for leaving. The truth is, I almost envy you." Lord Tywin's brother looked miserable right now.

"Do you have family at Casterly Rock?" Ned asked.

"I have. My wife, Dorna, had just given birth to our first daughter when I left. I may not be able to recognize her when I come back. My two other sons, Martyn and Willem, are there too, squiring for knights. And all the while I am forced to sit on the small council while my son Lancel squires for the king, which means mostly to pour his wine while he insults his mother."
Ned remembered a time during the tourney, while Robert thought about riding into it. Ser Kevan's son failed to put his armor properly on him because Robert was too fat, and Robert said something no boy would like to hear about his mother. If it had been Brandon and Robert had spoken about their lady mother this way, Robert would have lost his head, or Brandon would have.

"He's unfair with your son," Ned conceded. "Why did you come to King's Landing in the first place?"

"Because my nephew wanted me to sit on the small council, and Tyrion is my lord. I follow my lord's orders." Just like Ned did.

"I want to thank you, for standing with me in the matter of the Targaryen girl. You were the only one to do so. Everyone else approved of that murder. I never thought the only man with enough honor to disapprove this would be a Lannister. I misjudged you."

"I didn't oppose this decision because it was the murder of children. Sometimes killing innocent people is a necessary evil to prevent greater evils, but sending assassins after both Targaryens, while they are bound to a Dothraki horselord, was a mistake. We had few chances to succeed, and even if we did, we would have to face the wrath of a man with forty thousand men in his army. And that's what happened. Not only Daenerys Targaryen is still alive, with a child soon to be born, but now we infuriated a man who will have no mercy towards us if he ever crosses the Narrow Sea." Calculating, just like his brother. Still, he had opposed Robert's decision. "The king's decision was foolish. I know Tyrion wouldn't approve that. He's not stupid enough to send an assassin against someone powerful when we're at peace. It's the best way to start a war, and right now that's the last thing we need."

Ned frowned at this. "What can you tell me about Lord Tyrion, ser? I met him at Winterfell, but I didn't get the chance to know him very much."

"Well, Tyrion is a good man. Devoted to his family and House Lannister, filling his duties as best as he can, doing his best for his people. He loves his wife and his family, and he's a good lord, and clever. I never told you I was there when my brother died."

"No, you didn't."

"When that mast fell on him, for a time, I thought this was the end of my house. Tywin had brought us back on our feet after our lord father almost destroyed everything our ancestors worked for. I was afraid. Jaime was a kingsguard, he couldn't inherit. Tyrion was our only option. I hate to say that, but I was sure our family was doomed. At the time, Tyrion spent his time drinking, eating, whoring, in taverns and brothels, laughing with men and women of dubious reputation."

"That sounds almost like Robert."

"Yes. When I arrived in King's Landing, I wondered if I could do with the king what I did with my nephew."

"That is?"

"When Tyrion became Lord of Casterly Rock, he began to bring whores into his bed. I put a stop to it after my brother's funeral and I started to make arrangements to get him married. I have to admit he surprised me. He fulfilled his duties very well, ruled as good as Tywin would have, and maybe even better. And his marriage... I never expected that, but he loved his wife, and she fell in love with him too with time. I never thought it would turn that way. I believed I would have to spend the rest of my life trying to contain Tyrion's debauchery, and instead, sometimes, I have the impression that I'm
back at the time my brother and his wife lived and I advised him. I thought maybe I could speak the same sort of sense into the king, but I'm afraid I failed."

Ned listened to Ser Kevan's story attentively. Indeed, Tyrion Lannister was reputed to be a whoremonger and a drunkard, though there was no word of him fathering any bastard, to the opposite of Robert. Maybe he couldn't have children. He had been married for some time now, and Margaery Lannister still bore him no children. It was sad, for a man who changed his life so drastically. Maybe Ned should have tried to change Robert like the Lannister knight did for his nephew. Certainly, Jon Arryn tried, but Robert was much older than Tyrion Lannister, and he didn't have a wife he loved. All Robert always wanted was to crack skulls and fuck girls, as he said it. If Lyanna had lived, again, Ned wondered if Robert would have been any different. Or would his sister have ended like Cersei Lannister, bearing Robert his children while he went to bed any woman he chanced to meet? Robert had always whored, even before at the Eyrie, when he was Jon Arryn's ward and already betrothed to Lyanna.

"Maybe it's too late for the king," Ned said, resigned.

"Maybe." Ser Kevan seemed to regret it as well. He straightened up. "I wish you well in the North, my lord."

"You're going to stay?"

"As long as the king wants, or that my nephew orders me to stay." He extended a hand, and Ned shook it. "It's been a pleasure to work with you, Lord Stark."

"The honor was mine." Before the knight walked out, Ned had one last question. "You really found nothing about Jon Arryn?"

Ser Kevan sighed. "I'm afraid not. I must admit the death was quick and sudden, but these things happen. I tried to find clues, but nothing. We must accept that Jon Arryn died naturally, Lord Stark. He wasn't poisoned."

Ned pursed his lips. Ser Kevan didn't seem to be lying, and as far as Ned could tell, he was an honest man doing his duty. Could Lysa Arryn have been wrong? Could Varys have lied? He thought about asking Ser Kevan about the attempt against Bran's life and the possible involvement of Lord Tyrion, but the knight just told him that sending an assassin was the best way to start a war. Unless the Imp wanted to start a war… I like peace. I don’t want a war, and the best way to avoid a war is to keep you as far away from King's Landing as it is possible. Why did he think that going into the capital could start a war? He knew Lord Tyrion suspected Jon Arryn may have been killed. He asked it bluntly to Ser Kevan, who revealed he received instructions from his nephew to lead an investigation about this, but they found no irrefutable proof that someone actually killed Jon Arryn, or the identity of the possible killer.

"Thank you, ser."

"My lord." The knight bowed his head and left the room. The man Ned appreciated the most in the capital was the brother of Tywin Lannister. How ironic it was.

The moment Ser Kevan opened the door, Sansa burst into the room. "You can't do this, Father! You can't send me back home! I can't leave!"

"Child, be careful." Septa Mordane entered the room. "Ser, excuse us," she addressed to Kevan Lannister.
"Don't worry, I'm leaving." Ser Kevan gave to Ned a look that seemed to wish him good luck. He probably was aware of what was ahead of him.

"Father, you can't do this!" Sansa repeated as her septa closed the door. "I don't want to leave the capital. I like it. I'm betrothed to Joffrey."

"Sansa," he said gently, "I resigned as Hand. We have nothing more to do here anymore. It's time for us to leave, to go back home."

"But it's my home. I'm supposed to marry Prince Joffrey. I love him and I'm meant to be his queen and have his babies. I can't go."

Ned tried to imagine what Arya would say if she was here. "Listen to me, sweet one. This match with Joffrey was a terrible mistake. The boy is no good man, or honorable, you must believe me." He saw more than enough of Robert's eldest son since the Kingsroad to know that he wouldn't make a good husband for Sansa. On that, the Imp hadn't lied to him back at Winterfell. Maybe he should have listened to him. After all, the most respectful member of the small council was named on his insistence.

"He is! I love him. He is like Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, or Ser Florian. I want to be his queen. I want to marry him."

"He's no prince Aemon or knight, Sansa. When you're old enough, I'll make you a match with someone who's worthy of you, someone who's brave and gentle and strong…"

"I don't want someone brave and gentle and strong. I want him! He'll be the greatest king that ever was, a golden lion, and I'll give him sons with beautiful blond hair."

"He's not a lion, my dear." The septa chose this moment to intervene. "The Lannisters are lions. He is a Baratheon, a stag, King Robert's eldest son."

"He is not. He's nothing like that old drunk king."

Ned blinked. A golden lion. Sons with beautiful blond hair. Nothing like Robert. Nothing like Robert. He remembered the boy, Gendry, who he visited in the Street of Steel. He looked so much like Robert. Ned only needed a moment to realize he stood before one of Robert's bastards. And the baby girl, Barra, she had black hair like Robert and his eyes too, bright blue. If he had met Joffrey without knowing he was Robert's son…

"Septa Mordane, bring Sansa back to her rooms. Start to pack her things."

"Wait! It's not fair!" Sansa screamed, tears in her eyes.

"Come on, child. Remember your manners," Mordane told her. She almost had to grab Sansa out.

Ned thought about Jon Arryn. He had taken a book to Pycelle, a book with the physical description of the members of the great houses of Westeros, and he visited Robert's bastards in the days before his death. Ned took the Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms and opened at the page of House Baratheon. He had looked at House Lannister so far, finding nothing that pointed as to what Jon Arryn was looking for.

House Baratheon began with the man who was made Lord of Storm's End three hundred years ago when Aegon invaded Westeros. "Lord Orys Baratheon, black of hair." The names followed. Davos, Robar, Boremund, Axel Lyonel, Borros, Gowen, Ormund, Steffon, Robert. A succession of names, all of them with black hair. One name was missing. "Joffrey Baratheon… golden-haired."
That couldn't be. Ned verified all the Baratheons, and they were all black of hair, except for three: Cersei Lannister's children. Robert's children? No, he had to be certain. He looked at the unions between Lannisters and Baratheon. The most recent one was between Tya Lannister and Gowen Baratheon ninety years ago. They only had one son who died in infancy, but Maester Malleon said he had a full head of black hair. He looked into the pages of House Lannister and found a marriage between a Lannister man and a Baratheon bride more than a hundred years ago. Their four children were black of hair. He kept looking. The gold always yielded before the coal.

That was what Jon Arryn discovered. The seed is strong. The Baratheon seed was strong, that's what he meant. He remembered something else that a small man told him, back in the North. Joffrey may look more like my brother than his father. His mind didn't work for a moment. He knew who was Joffrey's real father. All that thanks to his daughter and a Lannister.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jaime
Jaime IV

Chapter Notes

The aftermath of Ned Stark's discovery. Jaime heeds Margaery's opinion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JAIME IV

"He knows about us. He knows the truth."

It had been several hours since Cersei told him what was said between her and Eddard Stark when they met in the godswood. The honorable Eddard Stark had found out about Jaime and his sister and their children, as Jon Arryn did before him. Jaime doubted this time they could rely on a timely death to get rid of the Lord of Winterfell. He had wanted to go right away and kill him when Cersei told him Stark was about to tell the king. It didn't matter if someone saw him. All that mattered now was to protect Cersei and their children. If he killed Ned Stark, the secret he discovered would die with him, and Jaime would face the consequences of his actions. Robert could try to execute him. Jaime would ask for a trial by combat.

The problem was, killing Ned Stark wouldn't keep the truth buried. According to that honorable ass, he had already sent two letters to warn people of his discovery. One had left with a ship bound to Dragonstone in the morning. It was intended for Stannis Baratheon, Robert's brother. However, that wasn't what bothered Jaime the most. It was the second letter he worried about. Ned Stark sent his best rider in the night through the Lion Gate, to follow the Goldroad. The second person to know about this would be Margaery Tyrell.

Jaime cursed Eddard Stark and all the wolves. Couldn't he write to Tyrion instead? No, he decided to write to his wife. It was their doom. Margaery Tyrell already despised him and Cersei. What would she think of them when she learns that he and Cersei had been sharing the same bed in secret for years? And Tyrion? How would that affect his marriage? Their alliance with House Tyrell in danger, the wrath of Robert Baratheon, the threat of a war with the North and possibly the Riverlands and the Vale, the ruin of his brother's marriage. What could be worse?

They couldn't stay put and do nothing. His sister-in-law reproached him more than enough to have done this in the past. Jaime wouldn't remain idle while his family was being destroyed. Cersei understood that very well too. They needed to act swiftly if they wanted to survive. His first thought after reflection had been to warn Tyrion, but Cersei discarded the idea. She didn't believe Tyrion would help them, or she didn't want him to help them. To Jaime, that was a folly. They needed Tyrion and his men more than ever, and they had to warn him about the message Ned Stark sent to his wife. Cersei would have none of it. They could only rely on their men here in the city.

It pained Jaime, but he had to give up the idea of asking for Tyrion's help. He could try to convince Cersei later. In the immediate time, they needed to neutralize both Stark and Robert. The king was hunting, but he would come back. Cersei told him to let her take care of her husband. The main threat for now was Eddard Stark. He told Cersei to ride for Casterly Rock with him and their children as quickly as possible and with as many men as they could. He said he wouldn't have their blood on his hands. The man was honorable, Jaime could give him that, but he was a fool. As if he and Cersei would run away. They were Lannisters, and Lannisters didn't run. They fought.
Ned Stark only had fifty men with him in the Red Keep. The red cloaks who were here to protect Cersei were two hundred. Jaime smiled at the prospect of a battle. It would be short, and wolf's blood would flow much more than lion's blood. Jaime led a body of thirty red cloaks through the corridors of the castle with the most important mission of all. Servants looked at them worriedly, giving way for them. Red cloaks seldom walked in such strong formation. They attracted attention for sure.

As they approached the Tower of the Hand, Jaime prepared. It was the wolf's lair. Jaime had spent about twenty years in the Red Keep, and he knew it better than Casterly Rock. If they acted quickly, all this would be over before anyone could realize what was going on. They walked along the corridors that rounded a small garden with a fountain. They were by the end of the afternoon now and light was beginning to fade. Days too long, life too short. The sound of the boots clicking on the marble was very distinct. As they turned a corner, a pretty young girl with red hair ran into them. She stopped at their sight and Jaime made his men halt.

"Lady Sansa."

Jaime didn't have much interaction with the Stark children in King's Landing. He didn't want another accident like the one in that tower at Winterfell to happen, so he kept his distance with them. Anyway, they reminded him of their father and he didn't like to think about Eddard Stark. Sansa Stark, on the other hand, the eldest daughter who was betrothed to Joffrey, barely reminded him of her father. She was more trout than wolf and mostly took after her mother. The youngest one had far more wolf blood in her veins from what he could tell. Jaime even thought he saw some of Lyanna Stark in her.

They were supposed to arrest the Stark girl in her room, but Jaime didn't expect she would be wandering around the Red Keep at this hour. She surprised them before they could reach the Tower. They had to deal with her. She was obviously distressed at the sight of so many Lannister men. However, the first words that came out of her pretty mouth weren't those Jaime expected.

"Ser Jaime! Please, hear me good knight, I need your help."

Before Jaime could recover from his surprise, a septa appeared behind the young lady. "Child, come back." Her eyes turned rounder when she realized how many men Jaime had behind him. "Sansa, come back."

"Wait a minute." Jaime raised his hand. "The young lady said she needed help. What do you need, sweet child? How can I be of help?"

"I must speak to the queen, ser. I know this is not appropriate, but I need to talk to her immediately. That's very important." The child was almost pleading.

"Sansa, don't do this," the septa warned her, but the Stark girl only had eyes for Jaime. He didn't know why she seemed so desperate, but why not use the situation to their advantage when an opportunity presented itself. He smiled warmly to the girl.

"You want to see the queen? Very well. Dake, Godwyn, escort the young lady to the queen's chambers. I'm sure my sister will be very interested in what she has to say."

"Thank you, ser. Thank you." Sansa Stark's face showed utter relief. A child's relief.

"Sansa, don't!" the religious woman shouted. She ran to catch the child's arm, but Jaime placed himself in the way and gently stopped the woman. He would say she was in the mid-forties.

Jaime repeated the order to his men. "Bring the lady Sansa to my sister. Don't worry. She'll be safe,"
he added in a whisper for the septa.

She had no fear to have concerning her little pup. Jaime grabbed the arm of the woman, holding it tight enough for her to not move, but not too strong enough either, to not hurt her. He didn't want to cause more pain than necessary. He waited for the Stark girl to be out of sight. He caught a glimpse of her face before she disappeared. She looked frightened, or uncertain, but she followed his two men dutifully all the same. Jaime let some time pass after she disappeared in another corridor, then he turned to the septa, whose arm he still held. He loosened the grip a little.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The next moment his dagger was in her heart. An expression of complete surprise came to her eyes. Jaime held her by the back and laid her carefully on the floor as blood filled her mouth. Then he stood up and watched her as her body slowly stopped moving and life left her. Her last gaze was for him, and it was one of hatred. Jaime regretted he had to kill her, but there was no other way around. He needed all his men to take the Tower of the Hand and make Ned Stark prisoner, but having one or two keep her prisoner would weaken his forces, and they couldn't allow her to warn someone of their plan. It was sad, but there was no other solution than killing her. At least he tried to kill her the gentler way possible, not like he murdered Aerys.

"Ser!" Jaime looked up at one of his men's shout to see three Stark guards staring at him from a distance. Damn! One of them ran away in the direction they came from. He was running to the Tower's stairs. Jaime knew immediately what they had to do. He drew his sword.

"Charge!"

The red cloaks followed him. Within a few seconds, the two guards were dead, one by his own hand, but it was only the beginning. Jaime ran after the third and his men followed him. They couldn't let him warn the others. They had to keep the effect of surprise. Two other men were guarding the entrance of the stairs. They were disposed easily as well. Jaime led his men through the stairs and corridors of the Tower of the Hand, leaving death behind them everywhere they went. Most of the Stark men were in their dormitories, unaware of what was going on and unprepared for battle. They died very quickly. When it became obvious for Jaime that most of the Stark guards were dead, he sent his men in smaller groups to search all the rooms of the Tower, then headed for the Hand's personal quarters.

They met Ned Stark before they reached his chambers. He came face to face with them along with ten of his men. And Kevan. He walked next to Ned Stark. What was he doing here? Jaime had to remind himself they told him nothing of their plan. Kevan wasn't involved. They should have told him. They both froze before each other.

"Ser Jaime," Stark said, cold as ice.

"Lord Stark," Jaime replied, displaying a mocking smile on his lips on purpose.

"Jaime, what's the meaning of this?" his uncle asked.

"The meaning of this…" Jaime began, "is… that Lord Eddard Stark, here… threatened the lives of the queen, Prince Joffrey, Prince Tommen and Princess Myrcella."

"This is a lie," the Northerner said.

"A lie? Really? Didn't you say to my sister in the godswood, this very morning, that she should leave the capital with her children as soon as possible if she wanted them to live? Are you going to deny it,
"Stark?"

A moment of silence passed. "I gave her a chance to save her children," he finally said.

"So you recognize you betrayed the Crown? You recognize that you threatened not only the queen, but also Robert's children, including his heir?"

"Joffrey has no right on the Iron Throne."

"You just condemned yourself with your own mouth, Lord Stark."

"Wait!" Kevan said. He stood between the two groups of fighters. Jaime had about the same number than Stark. It didn't matter. He had the best red cloaks with him, and himself. His uncle stared at the Lord of Winterfell. "Lord Stark, can you explain yourself?"

"You're a good man, Ser Kevan," Stark said, "but you don't know who your nephew and your niece truly are."

"I think he knows us well enough. He was there when we were born," Jaime retorted.

"Yes, you were born at the same time. You shared a womb, like your sister says. And she confirmed that you shared more than a womb."

"It's true," Jaime recognized. "We have a lot in common, Cersei and I. We care about our family. So when someone threatens our family, and threatens the queen and the king's children, not only I defend them out from the oath I took, but also because they are family."

"Oaths mean nothing to you. You swore to protect your king and you murdered him."

"Just like you would have murdered him if I didn't. You swore an oath to this king as well, and yet you rebelled against him."

"He killed my father, and my brother, and kidnapped my sister."

Jaime shrugged. "Technically, it's the prince who kidnapped your sister. And... considering one of the last orders the king gave me was to bring him my father's head... I think we have more in common than you might want to admit, Stark. Now, lay down your weapons and we will let you live."

"I do not obey you, Kingslayer."

"As you wish. I gave you a chance." He paused, then addressed his men. "Kill his men. Take him alive."

The Stark guards drew their swords instantly with their lord and the dance of swords began. Kevan drew his sword as well and met Stark's sword. The Lord of Winterfell looked surprised by this. Jaime's men attacked the Northerners. The corridor was narrow, which left small place to move. Jaime cut through one, two, then three of them. A fourth tried to take his head off. Jaime ducked easily and cut his head instead. He searched for Ned Stark, who he saw plunging his sword through one of the red cloaks' throat. Jaime threw himself forward. He waited for this moment long enough, the time when they would settle their accounts once and for all.

Ned Stark blocked his first attack and tried to hit him on the right flank, but Jaime stopped the sword easily. He waited for this a very long time and took joy in fighting Eddard Stark. To his great pleasure, the Lord of Winterfell held his ground quite well. He was a good sword. It would have
been too easy if he had been a mean swordsman. Swords kept meeting and clashing against one another, none of them managing to take the advantage. It was only the two of them, with nothing to stand in the way.

After a time, Jaime stopped to smirk. Ned Stark wasn't only parrying his hits. He was also launching counter attacks, and almost managed to get through his defense. Jaime's mind focused on the duel and the duel alone, trying to find the weakness in his opponent's tactic, but he found none. Now he understood better how he could best three kingsguards. They broke their duel for a moment, facing each other, only a few feet separating them as they prepared for the next move.

Then Eddard Stark cried in agony as a spear pierced through his knee. Jaime realized that his uncle had plunged it through the former Hand's leg. Ned Stark was on his knees, without armor. All Jaime had to do was to finish him. It wouldn't be difficult. He was in no state to fight. But he couldn't. That wasn't the way it was supposed to take place. He wanted to defeat Ned Stark, not to kill him. With a raged cry, he hit the floor with his sword.

"Bring him to a tower cell." His uncle's voice brought him back to reality. His doublet and face were covered with strays of blood. "Fetch Pycelle to take care of his injuries. If he lets him die, tell him he will be hung for treason." The red cloaks didn't move anymore than Jaime for a time. "I gave you an order!"

The men carried them out immediately. One removed the spear from Stark's leg while two others dragged him, each one by an arm. Jaime looked around him. Only four of his men survived the battle.

"You, follow me!" His uncle's voice left no place to question. Jaime followed him like he would have followed his father.

On their way, Kevan inquired on the other red cloaks. All the northern guards were dead. He ordered some cloaks to clean the mess while he sent others to the portcullis, with the order to close it and let no one enter or leave. If the king was to come, they had to delay him and warn Kevan immediately so he could talk to Robert before anyone else could. The path they took afterwards led them to the royal apartments. Jaime had a good idea of who they were going to visit. On their way, Kevan assembled about twenty red cloaks to come with them. When they arrived before Cersei's rooms, he ordered their men to let no one enter. Kevan pushed the door and went in uninvited.

Jaime followed him inside to find Cersei discussing with Littlefinger. Both looked in his direction, alarmed, when he entered. "Please leave, Lord Baelish. I have important matters to discuss with the queen."

"As you wish, ser." The Master of Coin left with his usual smirk. Gods, Jaime hated that man.

As soon as the doors closed, Kevan looked at both of them with an expression that strangely reminded Jaime of their lord father. "Can you tell me what the hell is going on here?"

"We didn't expect you so soon, Uncle Kevan," Cersei said, all gentleness.

"I'm sure. I supposed you're the one who told Janos Slynt to invite me to meet him outside the city. It appears he had nothing of importance to tell me."

Cersei had tried to keep Kevan far away from the Red Keep while they would be dealing with the Starks. "Well, I'm glad you're here." She was good at faking. "In these terrible hours, family is all we can rely upon..."
"I doubt it. You didn't tell me you were about to slaughter Ned Stark's entire retinue, nor that you would have him arrested. What about his daughters?"

"They are well. No harm has come to them. We are watching them closely."

"Then in this case tell me why. You just assaulted the king's best friend and had dozens of people killed inside the Red Keep in times of peace. How can you explain that?"

Cersei's face was proud and unimpressed. "That is none of your concern as Master of Laws."

Kevan was obviously furious. Jaime supposed he didn't like to be left in the dark. He had been Father's closest advisor for many years. He was certainly always aware of his latest plans. "As a member of the small council, everything that concerns the king concerns me. And as the representative of the Lord of Casterly Rock here, everything you do is of my concern."

"I don't think so. I am the queen."

"The queen consort," Kevan rectified. "You really think you have any real power here? Everything you have, the gold, the men, they were given to you by your father, and then by Tyrion after him. He can call them back whenever he wants."

"Then I will wait for him to call them back." Cersei was smiling, cold as ice. She had a plan in mind.

"As you wish, your Grace. Jaime, come." Like a good dog, Jaime followed his uncle as he walked to the doors and opened them. He addressed the red cloaks in a voice loud enough for Cersei to understand all of it very clearly. "Guard this door. Don't let the queen leave these rooms under any reason."

Jaime looked back to see the stunned look on Cersei's face. Kevan kept walking away and Jaime kept his pace. The doors closed behind them and he heard shouting.

"Open the door! I'm your queen! I order you to open this door! How dare you? I am the queen!" The guards didn't allow her to leave. They kept the door closed despite Cersei's attempts to open it. They didn't obey her.

They walked to what Jaime knew were Kevan's private apartments. Kevan made a sign to make him understand to step in. He closed the door behind and sat behind his desk. He looked tired. "Cersei always overestimates her power. She doesn't realize that everything she has, she owes it to someone else. More than half the red cloaks were chosen by Tyrion, and some by me. He made it very clear to them that in the end, they were to follow my orders before Cersei's." Why didn't it surprise Jaime? Tyrion and Cersei hated each other. It wasn't unexpected that Tyrion would tell the red cloaks to follow an uncle who always respected him, and who advised him since he became lord, instead of the sister who always hated him. "Now, you're going to tell me everything, Jaime."

Jaime couldn't tell him. He couldn't tell him everything. "You heard my discussion with Eddard Stark. He threatened Cersei and her children."

"I heard that part. But I wonder why he threatened them. Why would he tell your sister to leave King's Landing when he just resigned as Hand? When I spoke to him yesterday, he seemed about to leave this very morning."

"I don't know. He threatened Cersei and her children. I couldn't stand by and let this happen. Cersei is my sister and her children are my nephews and niece. Father would have approved what I did."

"I doubt it. Tywin wouldn't have attacked the king's best friend in sight of everybody. This is the best
way to have the Crown on our back. Robert will have our heads if anything happens to Eddard Stark."

"Robert won't be a problem for long."

"What does that mean?" Kevan asked with a frown.

Jaime shrugged. "I don't know. Cersei said she would deal with him."

Realization came to his uncle. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "What led you to this madness?"

"Eddard Stark was going to say something to Robert that would have Cersei's head on a spike, and her children's heads next to hers. We had no choice. It was that or be killed."

"Is that so? What was Eddard Stark going to say to the king that could bring him to execute his wife and his children?" Jaime didn't reply. He tried to think about something, but nothing came to his mind. "Or should I say Cersei's children?" Jaime froze immediately. Kevan looked at him intently. "I suppose he discovered the truth about you two."

Jaime thought about denying it, but he didn't think it would work. It was obvious from the way he looked at him that Kevan knew the truth. "How do you know?"

"I was at Casterly Rock when your lady mother surprised you together at the age of nine and moved Cersei's room at the other side of the Rock to keep you apart. I kept the secret, like she did. When she died, I didn't want to make things worse than they already were for your father. He just lost his beloved wife. I didn't want to add to his troubles when he had just been given a dwarf as a son. I hoped it would vanish with time, but it seems I was wrong. You're not very good at hiding. I saw early that nothing had changed when I arrived in the capital."

Jaime could see how Kevan's eyes judged him for that. They were cold, just like his father's eyes. He remembered how Tyrion looked with disapproval after he pushed the Stark boy from that tower. "We had no choice," Jaime repeated.

"Eddard Stark said he gave Cersei a chance to save her children. What did he mean by that?"

With a sigh, Jaime told him everything he knew about the conversation between Cersei and Eddard Stark. When he was done, his uncle stretched his hand on his desk. "You should have accepted his offer."

"Accept? Robert would have us killed within the week."

"Unlikely. The king is hunting. He wouldn't have come back before days, maybe weeks. You would have more than enough time to place enough distance between you and the capital and reach the Westerlands. Tyrion and his bannermen would have sheltered you and we would have been able to make a deal allowing you and the children to live."

"You would have us let Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark tell the entire world that our children are born of incest?"

"Every house in the Seven Kingdoms will know it by the next two months. Eddard Stark wrote to Stannis Baratheon. He will make sure everyone is aware of the truth. He'll send ravens through all Westeros to spread the news. Even if Lady Margaery remains silent on that, everyone will know it soon enough. If you had accepted Eddard Stark's offer, we would have been able to arrange you a comfortable exile and the insurance that you would live. Now, because of your actions today, there
"We can win this war."

"Unlikely. We can only rely on Tyrion. The Westerlands are not strong enough to face the might of all the other kingdoms."

"We have the Reach at our side."

Kevan leaned forward. "When Margaery Tyrell reads Lord Stark's letter and learns the truth about Cersei's children, how long do you think the Reach will support Joffrey's claim?" Jaime had nothing to reply to this. "We could have prevented a war if you had ridden to Casterly Rock, and ensure your children's survival."

"You would have abandoned us?" Jaime asked, unbelieving.

"No. We would have made sure you stayed alive. Tyrion wouldn't have given up on you. He may hate Cersei, but he loves her children, Tommen and Myrcella, at least, and you were always his big brother. But now the only way forward is war. Robert will declare war upon us the moment he learns about what you did. His brothers will follow him, and so will the North, the Riverlands ad the Vale. Dorne is likely to stand by their side, and we can't be sure the Reach will help us."

"So, what are we going to do?" Jaime asked. Strategy wasn't where he was the strongest. He was a knight, not a war commander.

Kevan sighed. "There's no way to stop a war from happening now. All we can do is place all the chances on our side."

"How?"

"Did you warn Tyrion about the situation?" Kevan didn't need his answer to know it. "That's the first thing to do. Tyrion probably already knows about you and Cersei. He's clever, it would surprise me that he doesn't already know." Kevan was right about it. Tyrion was aware of the special bond between him and Cersei. "With some chance, he could even intercept the message Eddard Stark sent for his wife and convince her that Stannis is lying when the news begin to spread. We will need the Reach at our side when the war starts."

"What about Robert?"

"I hope your sister's plan works." Jaime almost sighed in relief. At least, Kevan approved that Robert had to die.

"And Robert's brothers?"

"There's nothing we can do about Stannis. He's out of our reach. Renly neither. He is at Storm's End. They will turn against us. As for the North... We'll have to convince Ned Stark to bend the knee."

"That won't be difficult, since he cannot stand on his feet," Jaime quipped.

Kevan didn't seem to find it funny. "I'll call all the lords and ladies of Westeros to King's Landing to proclaim Joffrey as their king. This includes Tyrion and his wife. We will need them here." Cersei would like it. "Now go. I have ravens to send and a lot of work to do. Seven Kingdoms are to be looked after, and many may be in open rebellion before long." Jaime walked away. "One more thing. You will not see Cersei again. You won't be allowed in her presence alone anymore. If you want to be a kingsguard, Jaime, I think it's time you behave like one."
As Jaime walked along the corridors, he wondered what it would be to live without Cersei. Well, things hadn't gone as horribly as he thought. Kevan would help them. Cersei wouldn't be happy about it, because she wouldn't get to rule as she always dreamed of, but her son would be king like she always wanted. In the end, it wouldn't be that different from what they hoped for.

On the way to his chambers, he crossed Meryn Trant's path who told him that Arya Stark escaped. Her dancing master held them while she ran away. Kevan wouldn't like it, and Cersei neither. At least they had the father and the eldest daughter. This should be enough to prevent Stark's son from doing anything foolish. Jaime realized quickly that it wouldn't be enough. The Starks being who they were, Robb Stark would march on King's Landing the moment he heard that his father and sister were imprisoned.

Jaime made sure the kingsguard remained loyal to Cersei and her children by assembling them and explaining they had to neutralize the Starks after they threatened the king, the queen and their children. That wasn't his watch, so he went to sleep that night.

He had difficulty to sleep. They would be at war soon. The last time he took part to a war was ten years ago, during the Greyjoy's Rebellion. He remembered talking about the siege of Pyke with one of Ned Stark's men. He said they fought together there. Was he among those he killed today? Now they would be at war again, and not again some petty lord who dreamed of plunder, but against the Starks, the Baratheons, the Tullys, and possibly the Arryns and the Martells. Kevan was right. They needed Tyrion, more than ever. He hoped his brother could convince his wife that whatever Ned Stark wrote was a lie. Jaime didn't know if he looked forward or dreaded the battles to come. He wasn't young as he once was. He had given up all his dreams of glory and honor when he witnessed the Mad King's folly. He had nothing to do of these things now. The only thing that mattered now was his family. Tyrion. Cersei. Their children. Genna. Kevan. Did he forget someone? He thought about it for a moment, and remembered someone very dear to his little brother. As such, she was the second most important person to protect. He couldn't let something happen to her. Tyrion. Margaery. Cersei. Their children. Genna. Kevan.

Jaime managed to sleep a few hours. The next morning, as he went to guard his sister, the queen, he slowly realized there were many gold cloaks patrolling the corridors. I've got a bad feeling about this.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
Jon IV

Chapter Notes

So far, the longest chapter I have ever written in "A Rose and a Lion". It beats Tyrion/Margaery's wedding by two hundred words. I put a lot of work in this, so I ask you to review it after you finished reading this chapter. Tell me what you liked and what you hated. And if you want to insult me, feel free to do so. :)

Three songs are appearing in this chapter with their lyrics. I suggest you listen to them when they appear. Here's where they can be found on Youtube:
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neBE5aI3nHA&list=RDneBE5aI3nHA&index=1 (Siren from Karliene Reynolds)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVNDXHfAuuU (The Essence of Life by BrunuhVille, voice by Sharm)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGrHBFB02x4 (The Wolven Storm by Sharm)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON IV

Jon stood straight in the Great Hall of Casterly Rock, hand on the pommel of the sword attached to his belt, down the dais along with a dozen other men who bore colors of House Tyrell or House Lannister. Jon was the only wearing those of House Stark, without great surprise. Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery were holding court early this morning because of the festivities planned for the evening. For now, they weren't here. The two golden thrones were empty. It was strange for Jon to guard two chairs like this, but this week he had a duty to serve as a guard for the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock when they held court. Every knight had to do it in the household. It was a good thing Jon brought an armor to the sigil of his family when he left Winterfell. Although he liked the Lannisters, he wouldn't have felt right to wear an armor of theirs.

From a door on the side, a man entered. He was at the end of his thirties, with blond hair like every Lannister. Jon found it funny how the Lannisters all had shining blond hair, though the shades could vary from one individual to another. Lord Tyron's hair were more silver than gold, for example. Ser Damion Lannister walked past them with his sandy hair, without giving them a single glance. He only cast a short look at Ghost who stood next to Jon, and took place in a chair on the dais, below the golden thrones. Jon didn't have much to do with him since he arrived. The man participated to the administration of the castle, and Jon saw more often his son Lucion. The father opened a ledger and started to look at numbers and figures. Some time went on, then a fat woman wearing an entirely crimson gown walked in. Genna Lannister was feared all over Casterly Rock. If Jon hadn't known better, he would think she was the real Lady of the Westerlands. No one dared to show her any disrespect, not even Daven. He saw her next to her husband a few times, and Ser Emmon Frey always looked like a doll at her side.

Her eyes spotted Jon as she approached the dais and she stopped a few steps from him and Ghost. "So, you're both here today." She addressed both Jon and his wolf. That wasn't a question, and Jon doubted she expected an answer. "Don't shame your house like my husband shames his. And unleash that beast on whoever my nephew asks." With that, she walked to her seat. It could have been worse.
Jon looked around him. The Great Hall of Casterly Rock displayed so much riches that it made it decadent. Gold and silver were so abundant in this castle that you could get sick of it, and he feared it had a very bad effect on the Lannisters. All of them displayed more arrogance than Jon ever saw in anyone. Although their arrogance could be funny, as it was the case with Tyrion and Daven, it made them very proud and boastful. Jon had seen how his pride almost got himself killed at the Wall. Strange to think that a Lannister was the one to bring him back on earth. Tyrion Lannister was arrogant, but humble at the same time. Jon still had difficulty to understand the little lord. Since he got back to Casterly Rock, he and Tyrion Lannister seldom spoke to each other. Jon had to concede that the Lord of Casterly Rock had many duties to attend. They spoke a few times together, but their conversations had been short. Nothing to see with the long discussions they had on the Kingsroad and at the Wall.

Jon heard a door open behind him. His friend came in with his wife and Jon turned his head to look at them. Lady Lannister wore a light dress made of green silk. Jon had to admit she was very beautiful. His friend sent him a nod with a smirk, and Jon returned it in kind before he turned his head, taking back his position. The court would begin soon.

The guards at the huge doors opened them and let the petitioners enter. As they walked towards the dais, the herald announced loudly. "You all stand before Tyrion of House Lannister, son of Tywin, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. And before Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands."

Jon still wondered why the Lord of Casterly Rock had so many titles. His father was only Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, the latter title being given to him by the king. The people stopped at a respective distance from the dais. Some were eyeing Ghost, he had no doubt about it. Then two men came forward. From their garbs, Jon could tell they were not from Westeros, or at least not from any part he knew. They were dressed plainly, in grey and brown. One was big with an ostentatious moustache and yellow hair, the second was slim with a small beard running all around his mouth and short brown hair.

"Magister Arfo Renyon from the Free City of Braavos, and Tycho Nestoris, representative of the Iron Bank of Braavos."

Both bowed, the fat man much more deeply than the thin one. "My lord, my lady, I thank you for receiving us," the fat one said.

Lord Tyrion told them something in a language Jon didn't understand. The slender man smiled at the words. "I'm afraid your Braavosi is a little rusty, my lord."

"Please forgive me, Lord Nestoris, but I only learned a few words when I was a lad," the little lord apologized.

"No offence taken. We appreciate the effort. However, I'm not a lord," the representative of the Iron Bank replied.

"You may state your business."

The fat man who had to be the magister of Braavos stepped forward and spoke with force of compliments. "My dear lord, my dear lady, the Free City of Braavos wishes to improve its conditions of trade with the Seven Kingdoms."

"In this case, you should have gone to King's Landing, and ask for his Grace, Robert Baratheon."

"I think we all know Robert Baratheon doesn't care much about trade and financial matters,"
Nestoris pointed out.

"My lord, my lady," the magister resumed, "it is our wish to increase the trade between our countries. Trade is the wealth of Braavos, and the Sealord of Braavos is eager to trade with every nation for mutual benefit."

"I'm sure of that." Tyrion Lannister didn't seem convinced from the way he spoke. "We already have trading activities with Braavos, Magister Renyon. I am sure your merchants were very happy about the Trade Agreement of Old Oak. Especially those who sail for the Westerlands and the Reach."

"They were, indeed, but you see, Braavos is expanding its trading activities, and we have a special proposition for you." The magister took a pause. "We want to build a harbor in the Westerlands."

"I believe we already have all the harbors we need, Magister. Lannisport is already the third harbor in the Seven Kingdoms in importance, the second according to some."

"Of course, but Braavos wishes to extend considerably its trade with the Westerlands in the near future. However, the actual installations in the ports are not enough to sustain such an increase in trade. The Sealord of Braavos is offering you the opportunity to increase the wealth of your country. We propose to build ourselves, with our own money, a new harbor in the Westerlands, that could welcome the new ships, and add to the prosperity of your kingdom. We will administer the harbor for you, freely, and pay taxes on all activities. We have a similar proposition for my lady's lord father and the Reach."

"Where would this, or these, new harbors be?"

"We already have a few different locations in mind. I could show it to you on a map."

A moment of silence followed. "We will think about it. In the meantime, I will allow you to remain at Casterly Rock, as our guest."

"Thank you very much, my lord. It is a great honor for me to be an honored guest of the Lord of Casterly Rock and his beautiful lady wife."

Jon almost laughed. He was so pompous. "And you, Nestoris?" Tyrion asked all of a sudden. "I don't believe you're here to represent Braavos, even if you're Braavosi."

"No, I haven't come for the same reasons than Magister Renyon. Although I would like very much for this project of harbor to see the day, this is not the reason of my presence. I have come to discuss financial matters," the man of the Iron Bank replied.

"Financial matters?"

"Yes. Not very pleasant financial matters, neither for me, neither for many other people. It is about debts."

"Casterly Rock has no debt towards the Iron Bank," Ser Damion declared.

"No, you don't, and we don't wish to create any. You have no need of debts. It is the debt of others that I am here about. However, the matter is quite complex. I suppose we could discuss it in private, Lord Lannister."

Jon moved his head slightly to look at Tyrion, who whispered with his wife. Jon couldn't hear what they were saying, and everyone else could certainly not as well. When they broke their whispers, the Lord of Casterly Rock directed his attention back to the representative of the Iron Bank.
"We will discuss about it tomorrow, in private, Nestoris. In the meantime, you are free to enjoy the castle."

The slender man bowed slightly to show his appreciation, all the while smirking. They were brought out of the Hall by two men, then the herald called for the next petitioner.

"Lord Reginald Lannister, Lord of Lannisport."

The Lannister in question had curly and short blond hair, though the blond was darkened when compared to the other Lannisters Jon knew. He wondered where all these Lannisters came from. The members of House Lannister of Casterly Rock were already a great family, but with those of Lannisport, he thought the Lannisters could make the Frey envious. Tyrion once told him he had so many cousins with the name Lannister or a similar name that he didn't know how many they were exactly. He talked about lesser branches of his house with names like Lanny, Lannis, Lannett, Lantell, Lannist… Jon couldn't remember all of them. With so many Lannisters and close relatives, if Walder Frey could field an army out of his breeches, then the Lannisters could certainly field three or four armies by themselves… though not from their lord's breeches.

"My lord, my lady, I have come to ask for your help. The extension of the port of Lannisport is proving to be more costly than we expected. If we hope to complete the works as we should, we need more financial help from Casterly Rock."

"Are you saying the costs of the construction are greater than what you told us in the past?" Lord Tyrion asked.

"We need more money to finish it."

"We already allowed a generous financial help, Lord Reginald, not to mention the reduction of taxes that increased trade activities," Lady Lannister told him.

"I know, but we don't have enough gold to complete it."

Again, the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock conferred in whispers. Jon saw Lady Stark side by side with his father on several occasions when he received petitioners, but he was surprised by the difference in the way Lady Lannister behaved before petitioners. Lady Stark mostly welcomed them and said the appropriate courtesies to show them respect, and sometimes she would try to soothe one who was too angry or displeased, all the while supporting his father's decisions, but it was always Lord Stark who made the decision in the end. Here, at Casterly Rock, things were different. Before taking a decision, Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery always discussed together, unless the matter was of little importance, and they took alternate turns to render the verdict. Mira told him that they were talking about matters of state when they ate together, or while walking, and that when they received important guests, Lady Margaery played a vital part in the discussions and negotiations. That was very interesting for Jon to see. Margaery Lannister wasn't at all like Lady Stark. She played an active role in the politics of the Westerlands, and seemed to wield as much power and authority as her husband. Her role wasn't limited to running a household and bear children, far from it.

When the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock were done discussing, it was the wife who spoke to Lord Reginald. "Lord Reginald Lannister, we will inspect and review in detail the works that are being done on your shipyards and see what are your needs. If necessary, we will grant you more funds. In the meantime, we will give you access to an important loan with the lowest interest rate we have."

"Thank you, my lady. My lord," the Lord of Lannisport said.
"Lady Alysanne Lefford of the Golden Tooth," the herald announced.

Jon watched a beautiful young woman around twenty-years-old step before the dais, wearing clothes as rich as Lady Margaery, but in a different fashion. Lady Margaery’s gown today was in the style of the Reach, while Lady Lefford's was obviously in the style of the Westerlands, warmer and heavier. They had stopped at the Golden Tooth on their way from Winterfell and she had been an excellent host.

"My lord, my lady, I'm sorry to bring you bad tidings in such a day, but I'm afraid I have no choice," she said.

"Speak, Lady Lefford," the Lady of Casterly Rock said immediately.

"As you know, the taxes the Golden Tooth owe to Casterly Rock are late."

"Indeed. I was quite intrigued by this. Can you explain us the situation?" Tyrion Lannister asked.

"I'm afraid our last convoy with the money was attacked on the road, and that the money was stolen. We found several dead bodies on the River Road between Casterly Rock and the Golden Tooth. They were the men who had the mission to escort it. The money was missing."

"How many men were escorting that gold?"

"A dozen. Led by two knights."

There were whispers among the crowd. "Whoever did this… they were many," Lady Margaery observed, sounding worried.

"Do you have an idea of who could be behind this, Lady Lefford?" the little lord asked.

"I do."

She said nothing more, but the Lord of Casterly Rock seemed to understand whatever it meant, for he called Ser Daven. His cousin stepped forward, ready to receive orders and to carry them out. "Ser Daven, I give you full authority to raise three hundred men of your choice and to bring them to the lands of the Golden Tooth to face the threat. I want you to discover who are behind these attacks and to bring them here to answer for their crimes."

"Yes, my lord."

Daven left on that word, probably to assemble the small army Lord Tyrion told him to raise. The next petitioners were minor lords and knights with requests of small importance when compared to the previous people. There were also merchants, some complaining about tax collectors who took more than they owed to Casterly Rock, a few complaining about the works in Lannisport's harbor that slowed down their activities, and even one who complained about a poorhouse Lady Margaery built next to his shop. There were also peasants and people living in the city and the villages around, who asked for help about wells, irrigation and work of lands, maintenance of mines, lumbering, or hunting. Jon Snow was surprised to discover not long after he arrived that some people were allowed to hunt in the woods around Casterly Rock. In the North, hunting was reserved to lords on their lands. Looking at the size of Tyrion Lannister, Jon supposed he probably never hunted and let others do it in his stead.

The court cleared around midday. It was time for the preparations of tonight's feast. That meant Jon had to prepare as well. He had taken part to a few feasts since he arrived, but this one was special. Today marked the end of the third year since Tyrion Lannister and Margaery Tyrell's wedding. Jon
had been there when a part of Lady Lannister's family had arrived yesterday. Mostly, two of her cousins had come. Her parents and brother were too busy. Jon had debated for days about the clothes he should wear for the occasion. It would be odd to wear northern garbs among people exclusively from the Reach and the Westerlands, but it would be odd as well to dress like a southerner. Finally, he had asked Mira for advice. She told him to do as he thought he should. No one would judge him for that. So Jon decided to not shave his beard or cut his hair, like Lady Stark insisted when the royal family visited Winterfell, and he decided to keep his northern clothes. Ghost, however, would have to remain in his rooms. The people in the castle had become more or less used to the presence of the direwolf wherever Jon went, but he still startled many people, and a feast wasn't the best place for Ghost.

When the time for the festivities came, Jon went to the lady he would escort. He knocked on her door and her handmaid opened. She seemed to stare at him, disapproving either his appearance or his presence, he couldn't tell. There were some people here at Casterly Rock who disapproved the fact he lived here. Most didn't, but there were some who did. It had to be the consequence of being a bastard. Teron told him he had the same problem when he arrived.

"I'm here to take Joy to the feast," he told the handmaid.

She nodded and let him in. Joy's room was spacious enough, about the same size than his own. She was standing before a glass, wearing a yellow cream gown. She turned to look at him, a bright smile upon her face.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"You're very pretty," Jon replied, smiling at his turn.

"They had it made for me especially for today."

Jon turned to the handmaid. "I suppose it would be better if I didn't tousle her hair." The old woman opened her mouth in outrage, and Joy had difficulty to contain a laugh. It was obvious the woman spent quite some time arranging Joy’s hair for this evening. Jon shared an accomplice smile with the little girl. "I guess it's a no. Now, would you come, Joy?"

She came immediately, all excited, and took the arm he offered her. Another thing Sansa reminded him once, to offer his arm to a lady when he was to accompany her somewhere. Was Joy a lady? Maybe not as much as Sansa, but more than Arya.

"I wonder what there will be for dessert. I hope they will serve lemon cakes," she said as they walked to the Great Hall. Maybe she had more in common with Sansa.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it will be delicious.

"Are you going to dance?"

Jon scoffed. "I don't know. Will you?"

"I'm not sure. There aren't many people who want to dance with me. They always prefer Myrielle and Cerenna, or Megga or Alla." Jon wasn't surprised. Why dance with the bastard when you could dance with someone else? That was the same thing for Jon back at Winterfell. Girls always preferred Robb, the heir to Winterfell.

"Will your sisters visit us?" she asked out of nowhere.

"Not right now. Maybe one day."
"I'd like to meet them. Margaery says they're kind, and Uncle Tyrion said Arya was very funny."

Jon had no difficulty to imagine that. The Imp's sharp tongue with Arya's. He wondered which one of his sisters Joy would go along the better. She and Arya were about the same age, but Joy was very quiet when Arya was jumping and running everywhere. Joy liked dresses, reading and praying above everything else. She had more in common with Sansa. However, if Sansa behaved any way with Joy like she behaved with Jon, he highly doubted Joy would become a great friend of his older sister. And despite being quiet, Joy wasn't that different from Arya. She told him a few times about jokes she made to her cousins, and although they couldn't compete with those Arya did to Sansa, she wasn't apathetic. Joy was lonely, that was all, just like he and Arya were. It was a good thing that Jon was at Casterly Rock. This way Joy had someone to keep her company and to escort her to feasts. She had to go to them all alone before. No one wanted to escort the bastard. Since Jon was already a bastard himself, it didn't do any wrong that he was the one to accompany her.

They met more people on their way as they progressed to the Great Hall. Before the large doors, there were enough people trying to enter at the same time to create a waiting line. When they got through it, Jon had to let Joy go. She would sit at the high table with the Lannisters and Tyrell siblings, while Jon would sit with the household knights. It didn't bother Jon. At Winterfell, he sat with the stableboys and squires while his brothers and sisters sat at the high table with his father and their mother. He was used to it, and here at Casterly Rock he wasn't seated apart from his family like at Winterfell. He was given an equal rank to the other knights. His position was almost higher than at home. He had some small amount of jealousy for Joy. She was welcomed at the high table here, with her family, when he wasn't back at Winterfell.

Jon shook his head. He wouldn't let thoughts like these darken his mood for tonight and the good time he would have with his friends. They welcomed him the usual way they welcomed him.

"So, found yourself a girl to accompany you. Isn't she a little too young?" Ralph teased him.

"She had no one to escort her, and I had no one to escort," Jon explained as he sat.

"Poor girl," Geraldus said. "All that because her mother is not highborn." Ser Geralus Hill was the bastard son of a knight in service to the Lannisters of Lannisport, and just like Joy his mother wasn't a lady.

"Well, we'll have to find a girl for Jon tonight. There are more than enough for that," Teron declared loudly.

"Don't ever think about that," Jon warned him.

"Come on. It's time for this. With all the wine everyone will drink, half the girls won't be able to make the difference between a high lord and a bastard."

"And if you're as drunk as you were the last time, Teron, you won't be able to distinguish a horse from a girl," Daven added.

Everyone burst into laughter, including Teron. They kept trading jokes for a time. At one moment, the great doors of the Hall were closed. The time for guests to arrive was over. A few minutes went on before the herald loudly hit the floor with his stick. Everything went silent immediately. The doors slowly opened. Then everyone watched in stupor who came in.

Jon could barely see Tyrion, the other people hiding him from his sight, but his wife couldn't be missed even from ten miles away. Margaery Lannister was a beautiful woman, but right now she looked like a goddess. She wore a gown like none Jon ever saw. It was mostly two colors, red and
green, with strings of gold and silver all over. Some portions of the gown seemed to be made of a very thick fabric, while others looked so light that it was almost transparent. Despite these contrasts, the result was very pleasing to the eye and Jon strangely didn't find it provocative at all. The Lady of Casterly Rock had her hair arranged in a very complex headdress, a ring of braids right over her forehead, curls falling all over her back, with an hairnet composed of gold and precious stones Jon couldn't name. She had a necklace in the shape of a red flower and he noticed several rings around her fingers and her arms.

Jon remembered seeing the queen, Cersei Lannister, in Winterfell. She wore rich clothes as well and many jewels, just like her brother's wife, but there was something very different in the way they displayed it. There was something… unnatural with the way Cersei Lannister behaved. Was it arrogance? She gave the impression she was above all the others. Margaery Lannister didn't give this impression. Jon seldom spoke to her, and only to exchange a few words, but her manners looked natural, sincere, true. As she sat on the dais with her husband, Jon saw her smile fondly at her friend, and the looks she sent all over the Hall were ones that loosened the atmosphere and warmed the room, while the queen's gaze sent chills along his spine the one time their gazes met at Winterfell.

The Lord and Lady of Casterly Rock were followed to the dais by a long procession that included Lord Tyrion's many cousins at Casterly Rock, and some people Jon didn't recognize, maybe other cousins. There were also Lady Margaery's cousins who had come for the celebration. Jon had the occasion to talk with one of them, Ser Garlan Tyrell. He and Daven were good friends, and the Lannister knight had introduced Jon to the man and his wife, Lady Leonette Fossoway. The Tyrell knight had seemed happy to meet him, just like his wife. Jon later saw him practice in the sparring grounds, fighting against three men at the same time. Daven told him later that Ser Garlan preferred to fight against multiple opponents because it was more similar to real battle. The fact Ser Garlan had a beard made Jon more comfortable about not shaving his own.

Something queer caught his attention as people sat at the high table. He realized what it was when she turned and he could see her face. Mira was among those sitting on the dais. For a moment, Jon didn't understand. Handmaidens weren't invited to sit at the high table with the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock. Then he remembered when he saw the man with a stick who sat next to her. Of course, Mira was betrothed to Willas Tyrell. As such, she had a place at the high table. Jon heard she would leave in two days with Lady Margaery for Highgarden, where her wedding would be celebrated.

Servants began to arrive with the first of the six courses for the feast. The people at the high table were served first, but there were enough servants to bring everyone his food within very reasonable delay. Jon still had to get used to the refineries of the south. He didn't know exactly what was in the soup they were served, but he thought it was spiced with something he never tasted before. He should ask what was in it, then send the menu of the feast to Sansa, only for the pleasure of imagining her jealous expression and how Arya would laugh at it.

Bards and singers began to come in and play. The Bear and the Maiden Fair and The Seasons of My Love had a place of choice. Wine began to be poured all around. Jon wasn't accustomed to so much of it. They drank ale in Winterfell most of the time. He tried to only drink what was required, but with his friends pushing him to drink more, it was difficult. All in all, it was a pleasant time, with a lot of jokes.

The second course was a salad, again with a few things Jon never saw before. The food was so strange here in the south. Were his father and sisters eating the same sort of things in King's Landing? What did they think about it? Sansa loved it, surely, but he doubted his father liked it as much. He would have stayed in the North if he could.
At the third course, a young woman with red hair came to sing the Song of the Seven, a man accompanying her with his woodharp. It wasn't the same he and Mira fell upon in the Riverlands, when they crossed Lady Stark's way. If Mira really intended to execute her threat, the bard would be better to stay away from Casterly Rock. Jon asked Daven once about it, and Daven confirmed him that every man or woman who dared to sing or play the Rains of Castamere when the Lady of Casterly Rock was present had her wrath upon them for the rest of their life. The singer here played another song, one Jon never heard before.

Oh, my lover, oh, sweet love

I hear music when we touch

Every whisper, voice like thunder

Drumming heartbeats take me under

Oh, sweet lover, oh, sweet love

Oooh, oooh, oooh

Our lips colide and gasp

Like the ocean on the sand

I will flounder in your waters

Let the sirens take me under

Oh, my lover, oh, sweet love

Oooh, oooh, oooh

Wish your heart been singing for me

Like a siren of the sea

Wish your heart been singing for me

Like a siren of the sea

Of the sea

Oooh, oooh, oooh
Oh, my lover, oh, sweet love
Take me to your underworld
I'm not drowning, I'm just falling
Oh, my siren take me under
Oh, my lover, oh, sweet love

Oooh, oooh, oooh

Wish your heart been singing for me
Like a siren of the sea
Wish your heart been singing for me
Like a siren of the sea
Of the sea

Oooh, oooh, oooh

Wish your heart been singing for me
Like a siren of the sea
Wish your heart been singing for me
Like a siren of the sea
Of the sea

Jon thought he remembered a bard who came to Winterfell many years ago. That was the kind of songs he played. When he left, Sansa cried and begged their father to let him stay, but the man left all the same. Sansa surely didn't lack bards in King's Landing. That wouldn't be the sort of things Arya would love in the capital. Jon looked at Joy who joined the applause that followed the end of the song. Arya would find it boring. She would urge Jon to escape with her outside so he could show her to fight with her sword. What would Sansa think if she discovered Jon gave a sword to their little sister?

Someone hit on his cup with a spoon. "Everyone. The Lady of Casterly Rock wishes to say a few words," Lord Tyrion declared loudly.

Margaery Lannister stood up. The way her hair was arranged in a ring, along with the hairnet with gold and precious stone that held it in place, gave her the appearance of a queen. "My lords, my
"ladies, sers, my friends," she began. "Three years ago, I arrived here, barely a woman, a stranger to you all, unknown to everyone. You knew nothing of me, and I knew nothing of you. I wasn't sure what I would find here, and I must admit that I was afraid. Considering, the special nature of my marriage, I'm sure you understand I was hesitant." The whole Hall shared a short laugh with her. Tyrion Lannister didn't seem displeased by the jape. "Today, I'm happy to say that I was wrong to fear. I found a new life here, a new purpose, new friends, a new family, and the most wonderful husband I could dream of." She looked at her husband at this moment. Jon had never seen the Lord of Casterly Rock with an expression like this one. "I haven't forgotten my origins. I was born Margaery Tyrell of Highgarden, and I will remain Margaery Tyrell until the end of my days. But I am also a Lannister. You welcomed me as one of your own, and you trusted me. I will never forget that."

"House Lannister and House Tyrell have not always been on the best of terms. When my ancestors served as the stewards of Highgarden for the Kings of the Reach, we fought wars against the Kings of the Rock. We fought on opposite sides during the war that led to the crowning of our actual king, Robert Baratheon. We were rivals. Today, I'm glad to say that all this is in the past. Our two houses are linked through the strongest bonds there are, and we will face the future together, as one. We will have the same friends and the same enemies, and we will fight any danger and any foe we have together. The Reach and the Westerlands, together forever."

"Together forever," the people in the Hall repeated.

"Now, let's enjoy the evening."

And the feast resumed. Lord Hoster Tully had come to Winterfell a few years ago, when Jon was twelve or eleven. He had given a toast to his father, but made no such speech about House Stark and House Tully. The fourth course was mostly made of lobsters. Jon knew they were very expansive. He looked around and got his confirmation that everyone had the same plate. How much did they spend only for this course, let alone for the entire supper?

The next courses came and left, and Jon began to feel a little light headed. He drank too much. By chance, they were at the last course and he could excuse himself after that and leave the table where the others always encouraged him to drink one more cup of wine. The last course was lemon cakes for everyone. Joy's wish had been granted. He would send the whole menu to Sansa for sure.

Jon left the table as soon as he was done with his own plate. Other guests had begun to stand up as well. The musicians had begun to play music more fitting for dancing. Lady Margaery opened the dance with her cousin Garlan, and after a minute she made a sign to invite everyone to join the dance, and many did. Jon watched from afar. He seldom danced back at Winterfell during feasts, and what few attempts he made were clumsy at best. He would often sneak off with Arya at these occasions. He saw Daven dance with a girl with freckles. She had to be Desmera Redwyne, his betrothed. She looked to be about ten years younger than the knight. Ser Garlan Tyrell danced with his wife after he left his cousin, and Jon even saw Joy dance with a boy around her age. Jon didn't recognize him. At least one bastard would dance tonight.

"So, all alone?" Jon was startled. He hadn't seen him coming.

"Aye. The others wanted to get me drunk."

The Lord of Casterly Rock made a sign with his head that suggested it wasn't such a bad idea. "Everything is better with some wine in the belly."

He told that to Jon while on their way to the Wall, many months ago. "I'm not so sure of that." Jon didn't feel exactly drunk for now, but he felt a little awkward when he walked.
"Believe me, it is." To emphasize his words, he took a long swallow of the cup he had in his hand.

"You won't dance with your wife?"

"Do you see me dancing?"

They both burst into laughs. Jon looked at Lady Margaery, who was at the center of all the attention. Everybody was looking forward to dance with her. The way she danced reminded Jon of his sister Sansa. She loved dancing and singing and feasts and music. Everything Arya didn't like. How was it between them, all alone in King's Landing? They surely gave headaches to their lord father.

Jon looked at his friend, who stared at the dancing floor. Following his eyes, Jon deducted he was looking at his lady wife. He couldn't blame his friend. He wasn't sure if he won a tourney right now if he could name another woman queen of love and beauty. A name strangely came to his mind immediately as he had these thoughts.

"You have a very beautiful wife, my lord," Jon told his friend.

"Yes. More than beautiful." The little lord's answer sounded as if it came from far away. "The other knights speak well of you. They like you, Snow," his friend told him after a time.

"They're good men," Jon replied.

"I must congratulate you. You managed to find your place here, bastard."

"Thanks to you, Imp."

They chuckled lightly. "Oh, my lady wife is retreating from the dancing floor. Better to join her before someone snatches her away from me."

With that, Tyrion Lannister left him and Jon was alone again, but not for long. The music switched to a more rhythmic pace and the movements of the dancers followed. That was when he heard another familiar voice to his right, a voice he never hated to hear.

"Jon." He turned towards the person who just spoke.

"Mira." She was with her betrothed.

"Jon, I present you Willas Tyrell. Willas, this is Jon Snow, the son of Lord Eddard Stark."

Willas Tyrell was a handsome young man, pale, in his twenties with brown waving hair. Jon thought Sansa may have been swooning after him if it wasn't for the stick he was leaning on. Jon had seen him when he arrived, but they never spoke to each other before.

"Nice to meet you, Jon Snow."

He offered a hand and Jon shook it. "Glad to meet you, Lord Willas," he replied.

"Thank you." He was cordial and smiled, but Jon thought he looked tired. He seemed to lean a little too much on his stick. "So, enjoy Casterly Rock?"

"So far, aye. It's bigger than Winterfell."

"Yes, it is. And taller than the Wall, too."

"How do you know that? You've visited the Wall before?"
"No sadly, though I wish I could. I'll have to ask Lord Tyrion about it before we leave. He visited it."

"I spent some time there as well," Jon precised.

"How is it?" Willas Tyrell really looked interested.

"Impressive, especially when you see it for the first time. Though life is hard this far north. My uncle is a member of the Night's Watch and he says half the members of the Watch don't survive winters."

"Indeed, life must be hard there." The song ended, and the one that followed was much slower. Willas Tyrell looked at the dancing floor. "I think I could follow this one. Mira, would you want?"

Mira smiled uncertainly. "Willas, you remember what happened the last time we danced together?"

Her betrothed laughed nervously. "It won't happen again. And if it does happen again, well, I'll give people a good laugh. The last time it distracted them from the bedding ceremony."

Mira's smile widened very discreetly for a second as she closed her eyes. "Very well, but I warned you." She turned to him. "Are you going to dance, Jon? You've been spending the whole time here since the supper was over."

"I don't think so. I'm not very good, and anyway there's no one who wants to dance with the bastard of Winterfell," he replied.

Jon had said it with a smile, but Mira didn't seem to find it funny. "Wait for me a moment. I need to see someone."

And so she left Jon and Willas alone like that. There were too many people and Jon couldn't distinguish where she was after a moment. He turned to Willas.

"Any idea where she went?" he asked him.

"No." He shook his head. "So, you're not good at dancing?"

"Not at all. At Winterfell, the girls wanted to dance with my brother Robb. And here... I'm still a bastard. So, no, I'm not good at all."

"Well, we are two. I used to dance well enough before, but..." He looked at his leg with eyes. "Now it's more difficult. I can't put too much weight."

"I'm sorry."

"You can fight with a sword and shoot arrows, I suppose?"

"Aye, I can. My father had six children, and except my sister Sansa we all know how to wield a sword and shoot arrows. Though my brother Bran knows, but he can't fight with a sword anymore. He lost the use of his legs not long ago."

"How?"

"He liked to climb to the walls at Winterfell, and he made a fall. Several floors."

"And... he lost both his legs?"

"Aye. He can't even walk."
Willas Tyrell’s took a pained expression. "Damn. And I thought I wasn't lucky," he commented on an sympathizing tone.

"Now he can ride, at least. Lord Tyrion gave him the plans of a special saddle before he left Winterfell. I received news from Winterfell not long ago that he could use it now. He's happier than ever."

"Good thing." He seemed genuinely relieved. "I have a special saddle as well, for my leg, but I don't dare to run my horse faster than necessary. I don't want to lose my other leg."

Mira came back at this moment. Jon wanted to curse for a moment. Her friend Sera was with her. It was difficult enough to deal with Teron and the others, now Mira was plotting against him as well.

"Well, Jon, I found someone to dance with you. You have no excuse now." She smiled back at Sera who smiled shyly in return. She was reddening too. Mira turned to her betrothed. "Now, Willas, it's time."

Willas Tyrell left his stick against a column and walked with Mira to the dancing floor. He almost leaned on her on the way. She shot a glance to Jon and gave what looked like a smirk.

Jon turned his attention to Sera Durwell. She didn't say anything. After a moment, Jon broke the silence very awkwardly. "So… I suppose we should go."

"Yes, we should," she replied.

"I'm warning you. I'm not good at it," he tried to lighten the mood.

"Well, we'll see."

He offered his arm, just like Sansa taught him, and soon they were on the dancing floor. Jon found the dance awkward, but overall it went well enough. He didn't stumble over his partner, and Mira's friend, although she was shy, was kind. They did three dances together, but after that Jon took his leave. He didn't want to take the risk to trip over her. He went back outside the dancing floor and spent time with some of his friends, all knights and squires. Most didn't stay away from the floor too long, and they all danced with more than one girl. Jon was the only one who did not. He also kept company to Joy for some time, until it was time for her to go to bed.

More and more people seemed drunk, but there were still many who danced and the bards kept playing, though they slowed down the rhythm of the songs. Another woman with a very powerful voice had taken the place of the previous one. The atmosphere was quite merry. Jon felt more accepted here than at Winterfell, but he still felt like he was apart from the others all the same.

He noticed Mira leaning against a pillar at some time, all alone. He was surprised than she wasn't with Willas. He went to her.

"Hi."

"Hi," she replied. She seemed happy to see him. He always felt comfortable with her, at ease. They could talk about anything together.

"Where is Willas?"

"I'm afraid he was tired. He left the feast. I think he's a little sick."

"Sick?"
"He's paler than usual. I think the journey from Highgarden exhausted him. It was very hard for him to dance."

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "It's probably nothing. A little fever, or a little cold. If anything was serious, Willas would know it. He studied medicine."

"Really?"

"When you can't train to become a knight, studies are among the few things left you can do." Jon nodded. That was the same thing for Lord Tyrion. "This time, we didn't make a laughing stock of us," she added with a small chuckle.

"What happened the last time you danced together?"

"It was during Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery's wedding. Willas invited me to dance and I agreed, but he ended lying on the floor when he made a wrong movement with his bad leg. People laughed a lot."

Jon chuckled with her. "It had to be the great moment of the wedding."

"Not really. But it distracted the people and made them think about something else than the aborted bedding ceremony."

"Aborted bedding ceremony? What do you mean?"

She smiled at him. "When the time came for the bedding ceremony, Lord Tyrion forbade it."

"What? Really?"

She nodded. "Yes. I don't know why exactly, but he did it. He and Lady Margaery left the feast without anybody else, all alone."

Jon found it strange. The bedding ceremony was part of an official wedding, the moment when the bride and the groom were brought to their chamber to consummate the marriage. The bedding existed to ensure there would be consummation. Was the marriage consummated that night? He looked at Tyron, who sat at the high table. Right now, his wife was with him and they were talking together. They looked very happy, and he saw them exchange a long kiss.

He turned back his attention to Mira, who looked absentely at the people dancing not far from them. Her hair was arranged exactly in the same way she wore it all the time, assembled in a bun behind her neck that let them fall in a ponytail behind her back. There were curls in the tail.

"I like your dress," he said, all of a sudden. She wore one that was different from those she had usually. This one was mostly white, with a few black ironwood trees sewed on it, as light as the blue, green and purple ones she wore on normal days.

"Thank you," she replied with a smile. "I had it made for today. It bears the colors of my family."

"A white ironwood tree on a black field, with a black sword at the center of the trunk."

"Yes," she confirmed. "You know your sigils quite well."

"Those in the North, yes." She was still smiling. He loved her smile.
"Would you like to come to Highgarden, Jon? For the wedding?"

He was surprised by her offer. "Well, I don't know. Technically, I'm part of the household of Casterly Rock."

"I can talk to Lady Margaery. She will ask Lord Tyrion to let you accompany her. He never refuses her anything… almost," she added after a short time. "And Lady Margaery always travels with a few men of House Lannister in her escort along with her own guard. You could be part of them." Jon didn't really know what to say. He didn't expect this at all. "You could see Highgarden and some of the Reach. Sera is coming for the wedding as well. I'd like to have as many of my friends present."

"Well… All right. Yes." She smiled at him softly again. "Is your family going to be there?"

"Yes. They're on their way to Highgarden right now. We should arrive before them, but we won't have long to wait. As soon as they arrive, the wedding will take place."

"Well, I'll be happy to be there."

"Thank you, Jon."

She looked back at the people dancing and seized a cup of some strange red liquid on a nearby table, sipping it slowly. Jon had tasted it before in the evening. It wasn't wine, but it was very sugary. It looked like a mix of fruits or something similar. The cooks of Casterly Rock loved to make refined plates. In the North, feasts consisted of a lot of food and everyone ate very well in these events, but no such effort was made to prepare plates and drinks that couldn't be found in the nature. Everything was so different here. How could the North remain in the same Realm than such a different kingdom? He couldn't see much resemblance between the Northerners and the people of the Westerlands or the Reach.

Jon knew immediately that it wasn't true. When he looked at people like Daven or Garlan, knights who took no interest in tourneys and preferred to train in the eventuality of a war or any conflict, he didn't see much difference between them and the Glovers or the Cerwyns or his own family. And the North itself was very different from one part to another. There wasn't much in common between the Boltons of the Dreadfort, the northern clans with their herds, and the Manderlys with their harbor and their ships. Despite this, they all swore fealty to his lord father. The North wasn't that different from the Realm in that perspective. Very different people swore fealty to the same king or the same lord, and when he called for their help, they answered it.

A silence settled between Jon and Mira. She was still looking straight ahead of her. It looked like the moments of silence they shared when they prayed in the godswood. This silence wasn't awkward or uncomfortable. It was soothing, on the contrary. Sometimes, on the Kingsroad, while he followed her in her evening walking, they wouldn't say a word, and they were both very well with that. He looked at her once again. Her dress was quite beautiful. Mira dressed more richly and finely than the girls Jon met in the North, but there was something that made her dressing more modest than those of all the other highborn ladies here at Casterly Rock. Even Joy wore gowns with more finery than her.

Jon brought his attention back to the people at the tables. Garlan Tyrell was drinking with his wife, Lady Leonette Fossoway, though none of them seemed drunk. For Teron and some of his friends, the situation was completely different. He saw Daven who still danced with Lady Desmera. Sera Durwell was talking with Ser Lucion Lannister. Tyrion still discussed with his wife, several cups before them. Jon wondered if they were empty or full.

The music came to an end and some people applauded. The singer wasn't done however. There was now a flutist and another woman with blond hair and a red bonnet over it who had a lute in her
hands. A man with a small drum completed the set of musicians. They began to play a new song. It began with the flute alone, then the lute joined it.

"Jon, would you like to dance with me?" Mira asked him.

Jon laughed at it. "You want me to walk on your feet?"

"You won't. It's not so difficult to dance. I'll show you."

Jon surrendered. "As you wish."

Mira took his arm and they walked to the dancing floor. For the second time this evening, Jon would dance with a lady, which was more than he ever did within a single evening in Winterfell. Mira explained him quickly how to position himself, and soon he was holding her, one hand on her shoulder, the other one on her hip. She was the one leading him, and Jon found it quite easier than with her friend. Not a single time did he threaten to stumble, and he even made her twirl on herself after a time. All the while, the woman kept singing with her rich voice.

"Cross the oceans"

"Far away"

"Lead me angel, my way"

"Cross the sky"

"Far and wide"

"This child is the one I must guide"

"The wind calls to me"

"To lands of mystery"

"And when the night falls"

"We'll see all stars guiding us home"

"Guiding us home."

"Lead me back home"

"I'm sorry, your world was never meant to be"

"But the humans couldn't see"
Their hearts blinded with hatred

But you are, the essence of the one star

That will guide us all

In the shadows we'll seek out the light

Pure and true through the night

Sacred the beauty of such wonderland

The skies burn with fire from Hudraer's breath

As the wind blows the essence of life

Dear child, this dream is not mine

Your heart burns with fire so keep it alive

As the wind blows the essence of life

When the song ended, Jon released her from his arms, but his eyes remained locked on hers. She still smiled at him, the same way she always did. There was something with her green eyes he found fascinating. He looked at them for a very long time, or so he thought.

"I think I should go. Sera will believe I abandoned her," she suddenly said.

She granted him one last smile and walked past him. Jon followed her with his eyes for a moment, watching her walk away, her brown hair almost black dandling a little against the white of her dress. The musicians started to play again and Jon left the floor to let the others dance. Why did he feel hollow right now? He was all right only a few minutes ago. Now he felt as if there was a sting somewhere in his chest.

He found Teron and the others engaged into a drinking contest. They waved him to join them and Jon complied. Soon, he was drinking with them, cup after cup. He started to feel dizzy again, and things around him turned blurrier. Two of them were already asleep, their heads resting on the table. Each cup was more difficult to swallow, but it also felt easier at the same time. The music kept playing in the background, but Jon heard it as if it came from another world.

Jon stopped drinking for a moment. He didn't think it would be wise for him to stand up right now. He may end up on the floor, like Willas Tyrell when he tried to dance with Mira. The dancing floor was almost empty now. Only half a dozen people were still there, and their dance was very slow to match the music, that was now very quiet. Jon supposed it would have been a good time to play the *Rains of Castamere*. However, Lord and Lady Lannister were still at the high table. Instead of it, the musicians played another song, one that wasn't that different from it, but the song they played didn't
praise Lannister deeds. Jon understood the words of this one very clearly.

These scars long have yearned for your tender caress
To bind our fortunes, damn what the stars own
Rend my heart open, then your love profess
A winding, weaving fate to which we both atone

You flee my dream come the morning
Your scent – berries tart, lilac sweet
To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

The wolf I will follow into the storm
To find your heart, its passion displaced
By ire ever growing, hardening into stone
Amidst the cold to hold you in a heated embrace

You flee my dream come the morning
Your scent – berries tart, lilac sweet
To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

I know not if fate would have us live as one
Or if by love’s blind chance we’ve been bound
The wish I whispered, when it all began
Did it forge a love you might never have found?

You flee my dream come the morning
Your scent – berries tart, lilac sweet
To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy

Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

The song was sad. Very sad. Jon looked around him. Half the ladies still present were crying. There were even men who cried. He saw some of his friends among them, knights who loved to show their prowess with a sword. Jon burst into an uncontrollable laughter.

Some time later, he was in one of the many corridors of the Rock, holding his head against the cold wall of the tunnel. It was much colder than the walls at Winterfell. Everything was still blurred all around him. He remembered someone told everybody the feast was over and it was time to go back to their rooms. Jon didn't know exactly what happened afterwards. He probably walked away from the Great Hall, though he couldn't remember doing it, nor how he arrived here.

Jon straightened up and looked around him, trying to see where he was. The tunnels were all so alike here. How would he find his way back to his room? His throat was dry. He chose one side of the tunnel to follow, not knowing for sure where it would lead him. He arrived at a junction, with one way right and one left. He chose right. Three times the same thing happened, and he didn't recognize the place any more. If only he could cross someone's path, ask him where he was, he could reorient himself in the right direction.

He wandered through deserted corridors for a very long time. There were doors, all closed, and he didn't know who was behind them, or if there was someone on the other side, or if they were sleeping. He had to lean against a wall more than once to not stumble.

He rounded a corner and finally saw someone. She closed a door and looked at him. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Jon? What are you doing here?"

"I…" Jon tried to speak a first time. By the Old Gods, his mouth was drier than parchment. "I'm sorry. I think I lost my way."

"You're drunk," she stated. Mira looked at him with disapproval.

"Aye, I am." There was no use in hiding it. He blinked his eyes, the fire from the torch nearby difficult for his eyes.

Mira sighed. "Come. I'll bring you back. You'll never find your way in your state."

She almost grabbed his arm and forced him to follow her. Jon wasn't really in a state or a position to refuse, mentally or physically. Mira didn't hold his arm very tightly, but her hold was strong enough to force him to follow her. They made a dozen of turns at intersections, and at the end Jon thought he recognized the place where they were. In no time, he was back to his rooms. Mira opened the door for him and they went in together.

Jon fell on his bed, or perhaps it was Mira who dropped him on it. The world was turning all around him. He heard a cry next to him, then a fur rubbing against his leg. Ghost had woken up, or maybe he was already awoken and waiting for him. Jon absently rubbed his white fur on his back. It gave him something to focus on. He found it funny, just rubbing the fur of his best friend.

"Here." Mira was standing right in front of him, handing him a goblet. "It's water. If you don't want to feel worse in the morning, you should drink it all, and more."
Jon sat up on his bed and took the cup he was offered. He struggled to grab it at the beginning, but in the end, he managed to hold it and brought it to his lips. He sighed in relief as the liquid went through his mouth, on his tongue, then in his throat. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Jon kept drinking the cup slowly. After a time, he noticed Ghost wasn't there any longer. He didn't need much time to find him. Mira was sitting on another chair, and Ghost was next to her, whinnying. She smiled at him while she rubbed the fur behind his ears.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" Ghost made a sound that had to mean he agreed, or so Jon supposed. "I wonder if you'll keep growing. Some say there are direwolves as tall as men."

Jon smiled at it. Ghost was always very quiet when Mira was around, and she was one of the few to not fear him at all. Jon had wondered for a short time if she was mad the first time she stroked Ghost's fur in the godswood of Winterfell, but his friend seemed to have taken a liking on the girl immediately. They were a good pair right now, Ghost with his white fur and Mira still wearing her white dress.

Jon went to take some more water two or three times. After the fourth cup, he laid it on a nearby table and remained sitting on his bed, feeling a little better, though the room still seemed to turn on itself. He half-closed his eyes.

"You liked the feast?" Mira asked him.

"Aye, I did. Sorry I forced you to drag me here."

"You're not the only one I had to for tonight. I just accompanied back Sera to her chamber when you arrived."

"Sera? Your friend? She was drunk too?"

"Yes, and worse than you, believe me. Half of what she said made no sense. That's not the first time it happens. I'm often the one to escort her back at the end of any feast or ball."

"You never get drunk?" Jon asked her.

"Never," she replied shortly, as if they talked about weather.

"There were others who had to be much drunker than me. They cried at the end of the last song."

"It doesn't surprise me. I almost cried myself," she revealed. "This is a very sad song, and the story behind it is very sad as well."

"Aye. Sansa would have liked it. I never heard it before. Did you?"

"No. But I knew the song."

"What do you mean?" How could she know a song if she never heard it before?

"It's a song from a story. I read it not long ago."

"A sad story, I suppose."

"Yes, in a way."
She remained silent for a long moment, continuing to stroke Ghost over his head. He tried to lick her at some moment, and she ducked while chuckling a little. Her smile seemed distracted, as if she was lost somewhere. Jon didn't want to break the silence. He felt well, only looking at her caressing Ghost.

"The story is happening in another world," she said after a time. "A world where there are magical beasts, where men and women can have magical power, where kings are being advised by mages and witches. The story is about a hunter with such magical power who fell in love with a witch. A woman with dark hair like ravens and violet eyes." She made a muffled sound with her throat. "It is proof enough that it is not happening in Westeros. The only people with such eyes here are the Targaryens and none of them were black of hair."

"Did one of them die?" If both the song and story were sad, it had to be that.

"No. For years, they only saw each other from time to time. Finally, they settled on an island called Avalon where they lived together. But then demons came after them and made the hunter’s love prisoner. He went after her but lost his memory after a battle. He forgot her. He met another witch, younger, with red hair, and fell in love with her." That story was weird. "He regained his memory later and remembered her. They were reunited in the end, and they fought and defeated the demons."

"So, everything ended well, finally? They lived happily together, forever?"

"We're not sure. The end of the story is not clear. We don't know if he went back with his first love, or if he stayed with the second. It's not even clear if he lived with one of them afterwards."

"Strange, a story with an unclear end."

"It allows the people who read it to imagine how it ended. Or to choose the end they like the most." She looked back at him, a smile coming back to her face. "Do you know how the hunter was called by some?"

"No idea."

She looked at Ghost. "The White Wolf." She looked back at him and they shared a short laugh. She stood up after they looked at each other for some time. "I should go. We both need some rest. Good night, Jon."

"Good night, Mira. Thank you again."

She bowed her head a little to acknowledge his thanks, ruffled Ghost's fur one last time, and left. Jon laid on his bed immediately after she was gone. He watched a nearby candle slowly burning out. He felt Ghost touching his hand that hang over the floor when he came to rest next to him. The light died in the room, and slowly he fell asleep.

He was in a dark place. A dark place all made of stone. He had remained in this place for quite some time. He had to stay there too often. He wanted to go out. He stood on his paws and walked to the entrance. He tried to push what kept him inside, but he failed. It wouldn't give. He could smell his master, sleeping not far away from him, and another smell as well, a smell he liked very much. He scraped the wood with his claws, to no avail. He wanted to get out.

Then he was at Winterfell, with his brothers and sisters. He was sparring with Robb as the snow fell all around them. He blocked one of his brother's blow with his shield and brought his blade near his neck. His brother laughed and pushed the blunted sword aside with his hand.

"What are the lords going to say? The future Lord of Winterfell, defeated by his half-brother," Robb
They heard someone scream not far away. They turned to look at Sansa receiving snowballs from Arya, Bran and Rickon. She began to chase after Arya, but Rickon called for her, and she ran after him instead. As small as Rickon could be, he was faster than Sansa. She quickly lost track of him, and Arya yelled to attract her attention. Sansa took the bait and chased her then. Jon couldn't contain his laughter, and no more could Robb. They watched Sansa chase after Bran, only to see him go out of reach when he began to climb the walls.

"Bran! Stop that! Come down immediately!" Lady Stark burst into the courtyard at this moment and put an end to the chasing, forcing Bran to leave the walls with a disapproving look.

For once, Jon wasn't the boy she looked at with disapproval. But the next moment, Catelyn Stark was sending her son away with a smile after a very short scolding. That never happened with him. He and Robb went back to sparring on Ser Rodrik's call.

Jon woke up in the morning with a severe headache. He took some more water, but the headache persisted. Ghost was still sleeping, laying right before the door. He noticed he was still all dressed from the last night. He got rid of his clothes and put on new ones. He opened the flaps of his window and was blinded by the light of day. A sound behind him announced that Ghost was awaken.

"Hi, boy. You had a good night?" Ghost kept looking at him, his tongue out. Jon smiled and rubbed the top of his head. "Come, time to eat."

Jon walked with Ghost at his side to the Great Hall where he took his breakfast every morning like most of the household. After taking some stew with bread, he headed to the table where he ate with Daven and the other knights. This morning, it wasn't full as it usually was. More than half the men were missing.

"Ah, glad to see you, Jon," Daven said. "We're a small lot this morning. Come, we've got all the place we need."

"Where are all the others?" Jon asked.

"Probably still recovering from last night. Some of them may have fallen asleep in the stables or in other places. My cousin Lucion was found in a pantry by a kitchen maid."

"What was he doing in a pantry?"

The knight shrugged "Perhaps he was hungry, but most likely he wandered there in a state between sleep and awakening, thinking it was his chamber or some other place he wanted to go. Perhaps he was looking for a tumble with a girl."

"In a pantry?"

"There are stranger places to do it."

"Like what?"


"That's not a strange place. Everyone knows half the septons do it there," Daven Lannister retorted.

"The training yards?" another one suggested.
"Not private enough. I'm quite sure no one ever did it there."

"The rookery," Ser Artus said.

"Quite strange, true, but I wonder how they would get unnoticed by Creylen. He's sleeping next to it and the ravens would warn him immediately."

"The gardens?" another one proposed.

"You really have no imagination, don't you?"

"The library."

"That's not strange at all."

"The godswood," someone suggested.

Daven laughed after a moment. "True. Difficult to find a stranger place, especially our godswood."

"And what about the Hall of Heroes?" Jon asked.

Daven looked at him, all surprised. Then he laughed. "Anyone has something better?" No one said a word. "You found the strangest one, Jon Snow."

Everyone laughed. Jon returned his attention to his bread, but as he finished it, Tywin Frey approached.

"Lord Snow. Lord Lannister and Lady Lannister are summoning you to their rooms," the squire told him.

Everyone looked at Jon with a questioning look. Jon shook his head and shrugged. He had no idea why he was summoned. "I'm coming as soon as I'm done." He designated the bowl of stew before him with a movement of his head.

"They said you had to come immediately," the squire insisted.

"Very well." Jon dropped his spoon and followed the boy, Ghost still with him.

"I don't think the wolf will be allowed in my lord's rooms," Tywin Frey said. He was eyeing the said wolf with caution.

"He will stay outside," Jon told him. Tyrion Lannister was at ease in the presence of Ghost, but Jon believed his wife was a little more afraid of him.

Jon wondered why Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery asked for him. They were early in the morning, and normally it was the little lord who wanted to speak to him alone. The Lady of Casterly Rock was never part of the discussion and she never asked to speak to him. Why did they want to see him together now? Jon felt there was something wrong.

Before the doors, he was allowed inside after ordering Ghost to wait for him. Ty, like everyone called Lord Tyrion's squire, led him into the solar. Jon had been inside before, and it didn't seem to have changed. The only difference was that the last time, he had been alone with Tyrion. Now his wife was present. However, that wasn't the strangest thing. Lady Margaery seemed... upset. Jon couldn't remember seeing her upset or angry before.

"Thank you, Ty. Leave us alone," Lord Tyrion said. He looked different as well, his face serious and
dark. As soon as his squire left, he turned towards Jon and talked with gravity. "I'm afraid we have bad news for you, Snow." Why didn't it surprise him? "Your father has been arrested."

That surprised him. More than surprising him, it took his breathing away. He was speechless for a very long time. "Arrested?"

"Yes." Slowly, the information made its way. That was impossible. How could his father be under arrest?

"Why? What happened?"

"He is accused of treason, for trying to seize the Iron Throne."

"But that's impossible! My father would never do something like that. He and King Robert are friends."

"Robert Baratheon is dead," Lady Lannister said at this moment. She was standing next to her husband's desk. She sighed, snatched a small piece of paper on the desk and handed it to Jon. "You should read this. We received it in the night."

Jon took it and read.

To all noblemen and noblewomen of Westeros,

King Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, died in a hunting accident. In the hours following his death, Lord Eddard Stark, Hand of the King, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, attempted to murder the children of his king to seize the Iron Throne for himself. He was stopped by the loyal servants of our beloved Robert and waits for justice.

Joffrey of the House Baratheon hereby becomes King of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynars, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, the First of His Name. May the gods grant him strength, courage, piety, wisdom, and a long and plentiful reign.

Jon tried to understand, but he couldn't. He looked at the king's seal next to the signature. The message looked authentic. His father was now waiting for justice. Waiting for justice. Jon knew very well what that meant. He saw his father execute more than enough traitors to know what to expect for him.

Jon threw the message on the floor and walked toward the door, but before he could make a few steps, Tyrion Lannister called after him.

"I hope you're not thinking of doing anything foolish."

Jon faced him. "My father is charged with treason, and my sisters are in King's Landing as well."

"No harm will come to them. They're only children, with no part in all this, and anyway, they're too valuable as hostages to be killed or mistreated."

"Hostages?" Jon felt anger rising in him. "My father would never betray the king. He would never do this! These are lies!"

Tyrion Lannister looked unimpressed. "Well, we seem to agree on one thing, at least."

Jon ignored what he said. "You want me to do nothing while my father is about to be killed?"

"Jon Snow." Lady Lannister's soft but firm voice deflected his attention away from the lord to his
wife. "We understand what you're going through. We don't believe your father is guilty, but you won't save him by riding straight away to King's Landing. The last Stark who did this ended up dead with his father. You won't help him with your death."

Of course, Jon knew what happened when his uncle Brandon Stark rode to the capital after his sister Lyanna was kidnapped, but right now he couldn't think about anything else but trying to save his father and his sisters.

"Wait. You don't believe my father is guilty?" he asked.

"Well, I doubt Eddard Stark would try to seize the Iron Throne," Lady Lannister said. "We only met him briefly at Winterfell, but it was obvious he didn't want to go in the capital. He only went there because King Robert ordered him to. Why would he want the throne so suddenly?"

"If he wanted the Iron Throne, he would have seized it fifteen years ago. He was the first to enter the Throne Room after the Mad King died. I know it, my brother told me. He was there when your father went inside the Great Hall," Tyrion Lannister added.

"Why is he accused of treason then?" Jon asked.

Tyrion shrugged. "No idea, but there are a lot of strange things that happened recently. Jon Arryn's death, or murder, depending whom you ask. The double assassination attempt against your brother Bran. And now your father's arrest."

Jon was without voice for a time. Surely he misheard. "What did you say?"

The little lord raised a brow. "Your family are not the only ones to suspect that Jon Arryn's death wasn't accidental. Or that your brother's fall in Winterfell was no accident."

Jon couldn't believe what he just heard, but before he could say anything, Lady Lannister spoke up. "I surprised a conversation between Lady Stark, your brother and a few other people at Winterfell. We know your family is suspecting us to be behind all this. We also know that Lady Stark went to King's Landing to investigate and that it is why you crossed her path on the Kingsroad."

"I… I don't know what you're talking about. I… I never met Lady Stark on our way," Jon stammered.

The Lady of Casterly Rock gave a short and condescending laugh. "You, Starks, are not very good at lying. Mira told me about what happened at the inn."

Tyrion and Margaery Lannister were both looking at him as if he was a child, and right now Jon almost felt like one. They knew everything. His family thought they hid their suspicions well, but the Lannisters knew all along what they were doing.

"Did you try to kill Bran?" Jon finally asked. He hoped not.

"Of course not!" Lord Tyrion snapped. "Your family may think we had a hand in this, but on that they are wrong. I have nothing to see with the attempt of murder against your brother. I don't know who did this, but it wasn't me. Casterly Rock has nothing to see with that."

"We have men in the capital," Lady Margaery explained. "They sent us reports concerning Jon Arryn. The circumstances of his death are… confusing. The symptoms of the disease are similar to those of a very rare poison called the tears of Lys. The poison acts quickly and eats the bowels of his victim. We believe your brother Bran surprised a conversation between people who took part in this murder at Winterfell, and that it is why he was pushed from the top of that tower and that later
someone was sent to kill him."

"Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you tell Robb at Winterfell?" Jon asked.

"Because we have no proof," Lord Tyrion replied. "We are not even sure that Jon Arryn was assassinated. We only have suspicions. I asked my uncle Kevan who is Master of Laws to investigate the matter, but so far he found nothing. And to be honest with you, Jon Snow, I doubt your father, your mother or your brother would believe me. From the way Lord Eddard Stark spoke to me at Winterfell, he seemed more eager to trust a wildling than a Lannister."

A silence followed. It was true that Jon’s family didn't trust the Lannisters at all. "My lord father went to King's Landing to discover who murdered Jon Arryn. Do you have any idea who could have done this?"

"No. All I know is that there's something wrong going in the capital, and I highly doubt that your father's arrest is a coincidence. The official message that King's Landing sent is that your father committed treason, but my uncle sent a raven of his own and it seems the circumstances of your father's arrest are quite unclear to everyone in the capital. I'm afraid the official message is in part a lie. Now that Robert is dead, my nephew is on the Iron Throne and Cersei is certainly the one whispering in his ear. My sister never forgets a slight, real or imagined. She takes dissent for treason. It's possible that Lord Stark opposed her and she had him arrested."

Cersei Lannister. Whenever Tyrion talked about her, it was never with good words. "Jon Snow, tell us, why did your father believe Jon Arryn was killed?" the lord asked. "I doubt your family has spies in King's Landing like we do."

Jon thought about it for a moment. Could he reveal the truth? He could put in danger his brothers and sisters' aunt if he told the truth. On the other side, if Lord and Lady Lannister suspected that Jon Arryn's death was no accident, telling them might help to discover the truth. They didn't believe his father was guilty of treason.

"We received a letter from Lady Arryn. She claimed that Lord Arryn was murdered. She said the Lannisters were behind this."

The two Lannisters looked at each other in something that looked like bewilderment. Then Lady Lannister turned to him with an incredulous expression. "Lysa Arryn? Did you ever meet her?"

"No."

"If you did, you wouldn't trust her word a single moment. The woman is mad," the lady declared.

"What?"

"I saw her during Joffrey's Tourney, and she spent all her time locked in her rooms with her son, a frail boy of nine or ten who looked like he was six, and she kept complaining about the capital and how it was a dangerous place for him. Half of what she said made no sense. She saw enemies and dangers everywhere. I even saw her feeding her son at her breast in the middle of our conversation."

Jon remained still for a time. Was that really the woman whose words convinced his lord father to go to King's Landing? A mad woman? "We must write to the capital and explain them."

"That won't do any good," Tyrion declared. "If your father tried something against Joffrey or Cersei, this won't arrange anything. It might even make them worse. Joffrey and Cersei could go as far as declaring Lysa Arryn a traitor too, and this will start a war."
"But my father didn't know Lysa Arryn wasn't trustworthy."

"It won't matter to Cersei or Joffrey."

"So what do we do? I can't let my father and my sister in the capital. They are in danger."

"I agree," Lady Margaery said. "And that's why we need you, Jon Snow. The message you read was sent through all the Seven Kingdoms. It will arrive at Winterfell very soon. When it does, when Robb Stark learns that your father and your sisters are being held, what do you think he will do?"

"He won't stay still."

"That's what we're afraid of. Do you think your brother could call his banners?"

Jon thought about it for a moment. "Aye, he could."

"And that's what we cannot allow. We need you to go back to Winterfell and convince him to stay in the North," Tyrion declared.

Jon looked at the lord he spoke with so often back in the North. "What?"

"You heard me. Robb Stark cannot march on King's Landing. Only you can stop him. We cannot send a raven signed by your hand. He may believe we forced you to write it. You must speak with him in person."

"You want me to tell Robb to do nothing while our father may be executed?"

"Your father is already accused of treason. If his son marches on the capital with an army, that treason will turn into a rebellion, and your whole family will be branded traitors. Is that what you want?"

"My father is being accused wrongly, and you're asking me to stand by and do nothing?!"

"No," Lady Lannister's voice was calm but firm. "We're asking you to give us time. Tyrion and I are leaving for King's Landing tomorrow with two thousand men. We're going to find out what really happened and to put some order in that mess. We'll make sure your father and your sisters come back from this alive."

"You can?"

"We can. Cersei and Joffrey just alienated the North, the Riverlands and probably the Vale against them. They need Casterly Rock and Highgarden more than ever. They won't be able to oppose us."

"We'll get all your family in King's Landing out of this, and no one will die," Tyrion added. "There's no need for a war when we can get them out of this through politics. But for that, we need you to get your brother to stay away from the capital. The moment he marches on the city, it's over. Your family will be branded traitors, and this time your father and your sisters will really be in danger. You don't need to tell your brother to disband his army if he already has one when you arrive. Tell him to keep it north of Moat Cailin. As long as it remains in the North, there will be no problem. It might even put further pression on Cersei to free your father."

Jon looked at the Lord of Casterly Rock attentively. He looked sincere. "Do I have your word? Do you promise you will save my family?"

"You have my word. I have no wish to start a war, but warn your brother. If he marches against..."
King's Landing, I'll have to fight against him. Joffrey is my nephew and my king, and Cersei is my sister. Even if they are in the wrong in all this, they are still my family. The moment your brother is at war against them, so am I against him. If he attacks the capital, he will have the full power of the Westerlands standing before him."

"And the power of the Reach too," Lady Margaery added.

"Tell that to your brother. If it comes to war, I'll do what I can to protect your sisters and your father, but I might not be able to ensure their safety. Tell Robb Stark that he has a choice between seeing his father and sisters alive and well, or risking their lives even more with a war."

Jon could see that Tyrion Lannister and his wife were dead serious. They would fight Robb if he started a war. Jon loathed to admit it, but they couldn't fight Joffrey. Their best chance was to allow Tyrion Lannister to settle things in the capital before it all went too far.

"All right. I'll leave for Winterfell as soon as I can," Jon said.

"The sooner the better," Tyrion replied.

"Then I'll leave this morning."

"As you wish. We'll make sure you have everything you need for your journey to the North. I'll also give you a letter for your brother, explaining the situation and my intentions. My squire will bring it to you before you leave."

Jon nodded. "I'll go and prepare my things immediately. My lord. My lady."

He left on that and went to his chamber. He spent enough time in the Rock now to easily find his own chamber when he wasn’t drunk. Ghost walked quickly by his side, alert like Jon was. His father was in danger. There was no time to lose.

Jon didn't understand how it could have come to that. Robert Baratheon dead. His father arrested. His sisters… he didn't know what became of them. He remembered the thin sword he gave to Arya before she left. Did she try to use it? And Sansa? Were they locked in rooms or cells? Were they together or separated? He should have asked for more details, but certainly Tyrion wouldn't have been able to give him any. He was in the dark as much as Jon was.

Tyrion Lannister was right, of course. Marching with an army on King's Landing could place his father and sisters in danger as much as it could save them. On the other side, Lord Tyrion surely had more than enough influence on his sister and nephew to make sure his father wouldn't die. His uncle was sitting on the small council and he said he had agents in the city. If someone could spread some light on all the events that took place in the capital, that was him. Jon had to rely on a Lannister to save his father. How ironic it was. His father once told him he wouldn't entrust a cat to the Lannisters.

Jon packed everything he had, which wasn't much, in a small bag. He was about to buckle his sword at his belt when someone knocked at the door. It had to be Lord Tyrion's squire with the letter for Robb.

"Come in," he said. His back was turned to the door. When his sword was in place and he turned, he found himself before Mira Forrester instead of Tywin Frey. "Mira?"

"Lady Margaery told me what happened, Jon. I'm so sorry," she said. Jon nodded. He appreciated the thought. "I don't understand. I met your father twice, and I can't imagine him betraying the king, let alone try to take the Iron Throne."
"He didn't! That's a lie!" He regretted immediately that he shouted. "Sorry."

"That's all right. I don't know how I would feel if I was at your place."

Jon sighed and sat at the end of his bed. "Sansa and Arya are there too. They're in danger as well. I'm going to Winterfell to convince Robb to stay in the North, the time Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery arrange everything." He looked at her. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I won't be present for your wedding."

"Well, in fact, I won't be marrying immediately. I'm going to King's Landing with Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery."

"Really?"

"Yes. They believe a Northerner could be useful there, and since you're heading for the North, I'm the only one at their disposal. I'll go to Highgarden as soon as all this is over and marry Willas then. You could come at this moment."

"Aye. How is he, by the way?"

"I'm afraid I was right yesterday. He caught a little cold. Nothing serious, but he will have to keep bed for a few days." A long silence followed. Neither of them seemed to know what to say. "Jon, could you get a message to my father, if you ever see him with your brother?"

"Of course."

"Just tell him that I'm well, and safe. Tell him to be careful, and that I miss him, and my mother, and Talia, and all my brothers too."

"I'll tell him."

"Do you want me to carry a message to your sisters? I could give it to them while I'm there."

"Aye, thank you. Do you think you could give them a letter?"

"I think I could. I'll have to do it discreetly, but it's possible."

"Would it get you into trouble, if they saw you giving them a message from me?" He didn't want anything wrong to happen to Mira.

"Maybe, but I'll make sure no one sees me. Don't worry about me."

"All right. I… I'll write something for them."

Jon went to his desk and began to write three letters. One was for his lord father, the two other ones for his sisters. In the middle of the letter to his father, he noticed that Mira had taken his place on the bed and was rubbing Ghost's fur just like yesterday. She was smiling gently at the direwolf. Jon went back to his letters and finished the one for his father, then proceeded to write one for Sansa as well. He was almost done writing it when someone knocked on the door. Jon quickly hid the letters.

"Come in," he said without thinking.

This time, it was Tywin Frey. He had a scroll with the seal of House Lannister on it. "The letter from Lord Lannister for Robb Stark," he said. He turned in Mira's direction at this moment. "Oh, excuse me, my lady. I didn't know you were there."
"Everything is fine, Ty. I was just saying goodbye to Jon and Ghost."

"Yes, I see." Ty Frey looked at Jon's direwolf who stood next to Mira with suspicion. He gave the scroll to Jon. "Safe journey, my lord."

As soon as he was gone, Jon went back to writing the letters. He finished the one for Sansa, then wrote the letter for Arya. When they were all done, he gave them to Mira. The letter that was destined to his father was the longest, and Sansa's was the shortest. He didn't have much to tell her. He only tried to reassure her that everything would go well. He did the same with Arya and his father though he also warned and advised Arya to be careful and not get herself into trouble, while explaining in detail to his father he could trust Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery Lannister. Jon was more certain about the Imp than about his wife, but although he didn't know her personally, she seemed truly concerned about his lord father when they talked about saving him and she didn't show any animosity against his family. Furthermore, she was Tyrion's wife, and Jon knew they ruled the Westerlands together and got along very well. Sometimes, when they held court or even this morning, they seemed to have one same mind. If they could trust Tyrion Lannister, they could trust Margaery Lannister.

"Be careful with these," Jon told his friend.

"Don't worry. I'll get them to your father and your sisters. You can rely on me."

"No, I mean…" That wasn't how he meant it. "Be careful with yourself. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

She smiled at him while hiding the letters in her jerkin. "Don't worry, Jon. I can look after myself." She then took a more serious expression. "Be careful on the road."

"I will be. I promise." A silence passed between them. "It may be the last time we see each other."

He didn't think he could come to Highgarden to assist to her wedding, and after that they would be in two separate kingdoms, he at Casterly Rock, she at Highgarden.

"Maybe," Mira replied, "but I don't think so. We'll see each other again." They looked at each other like that for a very long time. Strangely, Jon didn't know what to tell her before they went separate ways. Finally, she was the one to break the silence. "Good luck, Jon. Your family needs you."

Then she walked away, left his room and disappeared behind a closed door. Ghost growled and Jon seized his bag, placing Tyrion's letter in it. He went to the door as well and looked behind him one last time. He forgot nothing. Hopefully, he would be back soon, once all this was over. He opened the door and left the chamber he occupied for the last months.

Jon went to see Joy before he left. She was sad that he left and made him promise to come back as soon as he could. Then he made his way to the stables easily and had a stableboy ready the horse he brought with him from Winterfell. As the horse was being prepared, Tyrion Lannister walked towards him.

"Good luck, Snow. You'll need it."

"Not as much as you, from the way you talk about your sister."

"I know my sister. Let me deal with her. She believes herself to be very clever, but she only has above average intelligence. As for your brother, I don't know him. He seems to be a good man enough, but I don't know him. You know him, however."

"So we both deal with the person we know better."
"Quite a good resume. Let's hope they're both smart enough to see sense."

"Aye."

Would Robb accept to leave their father's fate in the hands of Tyrion Lannister? Jon didn't know. His brother didn't seem to suspect the little lord as much as before, but Robb wasn't close to call Tyrion Lannister a friend either. Jon may have a lot of convincing ahead of him, but he had to succeed. His father's life could depend on it.

The horse was ready. Jon climbed on it. "Good luck, my lord," he told his friend.

"God luck, Snow."

Jon shook the reins and his horse and rode forward. The guards let him through the Lion's Mouth. After a long downgrade, he took the River Road. As he progressed, Casterly Rock slowly receded. It took hours before it disappeared on the horizon, but at the end of the day he couldn't see it any longer. He didn't take time to say goodbye to most of his friends there. He couldn't believe how much had happened in the past months, but now he had to focus on rescuing his father. He hoped Tyrion Lannister would succeed. Jon reflected on the fact that House Arryn's words were As High as Honor. He was named after Jon Arryn by his father. Jon hoped Tyrion Lannister's honor was as high as Casterly Rock. However, the Lannister words were different. Hear me Roar, or as many wrongly assumed, A Lannister always pays his debts.

Chapter End Notes

I told a few people that Tyrion, Margaery, Jon and Sansa, who are the four main characters of this story, would all have a romance. I suppose I don't need to hide any longer with who Jon will have his own romance.

The story Mira is telling Jon is the story of Geralt of Rivia in the Witcher games. "Wolven Storm" is a song that was created for this video game, and that is actually sung in the game by a character. Since the main character of this video game and Jon bear the same nickname, I found it interesting to include it and to make some sort of a parallel between the two.

Please review

Next chapter : Tyrion
TYRION X

“This is madness! Arresting the Warden of the North! She’s going to start a war!” Margaery calmed herself down. “Sorry, I shouldn’t yell at you.”

Margaery seldom lost her composure. When it happened, it was because something really serious happened. Just like now. She was pacing as well, something she didn’t do often either. She was angry, and truth be told Tyrion was angry too, but he controlled himself with more success. He was more used to his siblings’ rash actions and behaviours.

“I’m not happy about this me neither, Margaery. This could indeed start a war,” he said.

“Of course, it could. What was Cersei thinking about? This stinks of her. We both met Eddard Stark at Winterfell. It was obvious he had no desire to go to King’s Landing. And now, all of a sudden, he tries to take the Iron Throne?”

“I think we both agree this is very unlikely. The raven Pycelle sent everywhere is clearly made of Cersei’s words.” Tyrion sighed. This wasn’t a good way to start the day, especially not after the night he spent with his wife and the feast that marked her three years as Lady of Casterly Rock. “Cersei has always wanted power. She craves for it. Now is her chance. Robert is dead, and Joffrey sits on the Iron Throne.”

His sister always gave most of her attention to Joffrey. He was her firstborn son, and she prepared him to rule her own way. Tyrion didn’t want to imagine the result it would give. He supposed they wouldn’t have to wait long before they saw it. Joffrey was king and Cersei was whispering in his ear. If Robert was an awful ruler, then what would it be with Tyrion’s nephew and sister?

“Tyrion.” Margaery was looking at him, standing tall as he sat behind his desk. “According to Kevan, it was Cersei who arrested Eddard Stark. That’s her doing. She is dangerous.”

Yes, she was. They had discussed about it for hours when the ravens arrived in the morning. “Robert had no love for my sister. I wouldn’t be surprised if he asked Eddard Stark to look after Joffrey before he died, or if he gave him the task in his will, but he certainly left nothing to Cersei, or almost nothing.”

“So she decided to take the power with her own means. And now, because of her, we may end up with a war against three kingdoms. Eddard Stark had no reasons to take the Iron Throne. His daughter was going to marry Joffrey, and Robert Baratheon was his friend. We have to deal with her Tyrion, and in a permanent way this time.” Tyrion saw the determination in his wife’s eyes. “She tried to kill you, to turn your bannermen against you, and now she arrests the Warden of the North and threatens to bring us into a war against half of Westeros. We can’t let her stay in King’s Landing
and influence Joffrey. She will only try to mine your power and to have you killed again. That’s not something we can allow. That’s not something I can allow.”

Tyrion looked aside, his shoulders sinking. “I suppose you’re right.”

When he looked back at Margaery, she was staring at him with an expression between exasperation and sympathy. “I know she is your sister, but she tried to murder you, and she will try again.”

“I know. You’re right. It’s not that she is my sister the problem.”

“What is it then?”

After a moment, Tyrion said it. “It’s Jaime.”

“Your brother?”

“He won’t forgive me for that. The real reason why I never did anything to Cersei was because Jaime would never forgive me. No more than he would forgive Cersei if she tried anything against me.”

“Let me doubt about it. He seems to have forgiven her for trying to turn your men against you.”

Tyrion frowned. “He doesn’t know about it.”

“When?”

“During Joffrey’s name day. He didn’t seem to hold any grudge against your sister for that when we saw them at Winterfell.”

Tyrion hadn’t wanted to involve Jaime in his problems with Cersei. It was better to let him deal with their sister alone. Well, it was done and he could do nothing against it. Still, he wished his wife never told Jaime about this. “Jaime just doesn’t want to do anything against me or Cersei. He doesn’t want to fight against a member of his family.”

Margaery sighed in exasperation. “Well, we won’t harm Cersei. Let’s just send her somewhere comfortable but isolated, where she can cause no trouble. In the Reach, preferably. Maybe the Shield Islands. There isn’t much she will able to do there.”

Tyrion approved. “We’ll have to make sure that Joffrey approves. He’s the king, so he has something to say about anything that concerns his mother. Some would say that since Robert is dead, she is under the authority of her son now.”

“Others could say she is under your authority. She was given to Robert by the Lord of Casterly Rock. It was your father at the time, but since Robert is dead, you may have a right about anything regarding her as well. She never called herself Cersei Baratheon. Everyone keeps calling her Cersei Lannister. We could use that to say that she goes back under your authority now that her husband is dead. You could even force her to marry again.”

The thought of this wasn’t displeasing, far from it. To force Cersei to marry someone else. He almost smiled at the thought, though he knew Jaime would be furious about it. “Better be sure that Joffrey has nothing to say about it. We’ll find a way to get Cersei out of King’s Landing for good without having him protest in any way.”
It was unclear whether Cersei depended on her father’s family or her husband’s family now. There were no laws concerning this, only customs. Among the lords in general, it could vary from one family to another, and even within the same family it could change. However, since the Lannisters were the power behind Robert for many years, Tyrion might have a chance to get back an authority on Cersei if he maneuvered well enough.

“Then better to go there as quickly as we can,” Margaery said. She sat on a chair in front of his desk. “What a mess we’re in.”

Indeed, they were in a mess, and all that because of his sister. Jon Arryn’s death, Bran Stark’s fall, and now this. Margaery ignored it, but Kevan had sent two ravens to Casterly Rock. The first one was destined to be read by them both, and it explained that Cersei was the one to arrest Eddard Stark and his daughters and who had his whole retinue slaughtered. Kevan said he was trying his best to bring back order, but he needed Tyrion and Margaery in King’s Landing.

The second message Kevan sent was for Tyrion only. There was a special sign on it, that meant it could only be read by the Lord of Casterly Rock. Even the maester couldn’t open the scroll and read its content. Creylen knew it and he had given it to Tyrion immediately when he received it. Tyrion had thrown into the fire the small piece of paper as soon as he read it, to make sure no one would ever know about its content but him. Still, the words that were written on it would never leave his mind.

_Eddard Stark discovered the truth about Jaime and Cersei. He knows. He wrote to Stannis and to Margaery. Don’t let that message reach her, or make sure she doesn’t believe it. We’ll be at war soon. We will need the Tyrells at our side._

Margaery knew nothing about it. She didn’t know Kevan sent a second message. Tyrion couldn’t tell her. However, if the truth about his nephews and niece was about to be revealed to the entire realm, and if a message from Ned Stark was heading in their direction as they spoke, he could no longer hide the truth from her. Tyrion knew what it meant. He knew what he would have to do.

He looked at his lovely wife. They had spent such a wonderful evening, followed by a night that was just as beautiful. Three years since they were married. Tyrion couldn’t believe so much time had gone since he met this fantastic woman. He never thought he could love again after Tysha. He hoped for it, despite his certainty that it would never happen, but he was wrong. He had fallen in love with Margaery, and even more surprising, she had fallen in love with him. Tyrion found it less surprising every day, but still. Margaery was so perfect. He never thought he could be so happy. And now he would have to do something that he would probably regret for the rest of his life. He hoped he wouldn’t regret it, but he felt that his hopes wouldn’t be granted this time.

“I suppose Willas will have to marry without me,” Margaery said, regrets filling her voice. Tyrion knew how much she wanted to be there for her cousin’s wedding, but there was no way around it. They had to go to King’s Landing immediately. He left his chair and came to sit before her on the other side of the desk.

“I’m sorry.” He took one of her hands into his. She had graceful hands, just as graceful as the rest of her body. She had been running the same hand on his chest this morning when Creylen had come with the news from King’s Landing. Tyrion had wanted to kill the maester when he interrupted them, and he had wanted to kill him twice when he learned what Cersei had done. “However, maybe it would better to delay this wedding. Your handmaiden may prove useful in the capital. She is a Northerner, and we’ll have to deal with a few of them wen we arrive.”

Margaery had a disappointed expression. “Willas won’t be happy. He’s been waiting to marry Mira far too long. Their betrothal already lasted longer than it should have been.”
“You’ll only have to accompany her to Highgarden once this is all over. And you’ll be present for the wedding, this way,” he added with a grin. Margaery returned a condescending smile.

“Yes. I suppose I should tell him now, and Mira too. I don’t know what will be her feelings about it.”

She leaned forward and kissed him. Her lips were smooth. He could never get enough of them. Their kiss lasted longer than it should have considering the circumstances, but Tyrion didn’t want to break it. When their lips finally parted, she said the words he loved to hear so much.

“I love you.” Then she left. Why did her words hurt so much now? Tyrion dreaded the moment when he would have to do it.

He tried to set aside these dark thoughts and went to his desk, writing the letter for Robb Stark. When he was done with it, he called for his squire to bring it to Jon Snow. Ty told him then that Tycho Nestoris asked when they could speak. Tyrion supposed that now was a good time as ever. He wouldn’t be here tomorrow.

He let Ty go and carry out his orders. In the meantime, he took another message that arrived a few days ago. He didn’t read it until this morning when he looked among all the news they received from Westeros before they left. Creylen hadn’t though it was worthy of attention. Jeor Mormont, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, was dead. According to Maester Aemon, he was killed by a dead man in his sleep. We’ve been capturing wildlings, more every month. They’re fleeing south. The ones who flee say they’ve seen the White Walkers. The fishermen near Eastwatch have glimpsed them on the shore. One of our own rangers swore he saw them kill his companions. He swore it right up to the moment Ned Stark chopped his head off. Tyrion had liked the Lord Commander, and he respected him. If Maester Aemon was to be believed, the dead man killed four other men before they were able to put him down. Swords and arrows had no effect, and they needed fire to neutralize him.

Tyrion remembered Maester Aemon. He had spent more time at the Wall than any other living man, and despite the fact that he was old, Tyrion didn’t think he was raving. Benjen Stark said the wildlings were not the ones to give him sleepless nights. And there had been a moment, the last time he was on the top of the Wall, the night he proposed to Jon Snow to come with him to Castrly Rock, that he had the impression… that this was all true. Surely it had only been his imagination. The members of the Night’s Watch were for the most part uneducated men. Most couldn’t write or read. They probably imagined this, and reported it to Maester Aemon. Yes, it had to be this. And yet…

Aemon probably made an autopsy of the Lord Commander’s body. He would have realized at least if the Lord Commander was murdered. If a dead man killed him, he would have inflicted injuries to Mormont. That meant the Lord Commander was certainly killed. If not by a dead man, then who? One of his own men? Could it be possible that there was a mutiny? There had been some in the past. Most of the people at the Wall were criminals. Tyrion kept sending those from the Westerlands at the Wall, and he also sent gold, supplies and steel since he returned from the Wall. At least, it could help these people for the next winter. Some people at Castle Black weren’t horrible, just unlucky. Still, there were enough murderers and rapers who could try to kill their Lord Commander. Their loyalty was far from assured.

Tyrion couldn’t get out of his mind the words of Benjen Stark, Jeor Mormont and Aemon Targaryen. He couldn’t get out of his head that there might be some truth to what they said. He sighed and put a hand on his forehead. He spent too much time in the North. Jeor Mormont’s death was tragic, but they had other worries right now. He would keep sending help to the Watch, but he would believe that the dead were back when they would be back. He put aside the raven from Maester Aemon.
The representative of the Iron Bank of Braavos arrived, smiling and courteous like always. His manners reminded Tyrion of those he witnessed with other bankers and businessmen he met, including Littlefinger. He had to be careful with him. Lords, kings and cities trembled before the Iron Bank of Braavos. Even his father was always careful with them, saying they all lived in the shadows of the Iron Bank.

“Thank you for granting me this private audience, Lord Tyrion,” the representative said.

“You may sit, Nestoris.” The man did as he was told. “So, what is this private matter that brings you here? You mentioned the debt of others.”

“I’m afraid I did. Lately, he Iron Bank has been preoccupied by the Iron Throne. We invested quite important sums there, lately.”

“I suppose you considered this was a good investment, if you did it.”

“We never make investments we don’t believe to be good. And yet, it is not because the Iron Bank believes something that it is true. We can make wrong decisions.”

“Are you saying you regret lending money to King Robert?”

“King Robert was quite better at spending money than making it, or managing it. We know the Crown is over six million golden dragons in debt, and that most of this debt is owned to you, and your wife’s family.”

“I see the Iron Bank is well informed. I would say that the six hundred thousand the Crown owes to the Iron Bank is quite small and unimportant to the king when compared to the millions it owes to the Reach and the Westerlands.”

“Indeed.” Tycho Nestoris was still smiling, but behind his smile Tyrion could see a coldness when he heard that the money of the Iron Bank paled when compared to the money of Casterly Rock and Highgarden. “However, the Crown has been borrowing more money from us lately, after you reached an arrangement with the regretted Hand of the King. Not long ago, they borrowed eighty thousand, and we found out later that it was for a tourney.”

That didn’t surprise Tyrion. “Why are you telling me this, Nestoris? You should discuss it with the king. I am not the king.”

“A very regrettable situation, maybe.” Why did he say that? Was he implying something? “Although this isn’t why I came, I heard that Robert Baratheon died, and that now your nephew is sitting on the Iron Throne.”

“I see news travel fast here.”

“The Iron Bank must always be aware of what is going on. We need to protect our investments. But now that your nephew is king, I expect we can be sure that you will provide if he ever fails to repay his father’s debts.”

So, that was why he came. Tyrion straightened himself in his chair and looked right into the emissary’s eyes. “Nestoris, let us make this clear. Joffrey may be my nephew, but Casterly Rock is not King’s Landing, the Westerlands are not the Crownlands, and the Warden of the West is not the king. It will be to Joffrey to repay his debts. I always pay my debts, but Joffrey’s debts are not mine, or else I would be lending money to myself when the Crown borrows it.”

A silence followed. “You make things very clear, just like your father.”
“Yes, but I’ll make them even clearer for you, Nestoris. The Iron Bank will have its due, and you
don’t need to worry about that. I know better than to make an enemy of the Iron Bank, and I don’t
want Joffrey to make an enemy of you. If he doesn’t understand that the Iron Bank will have its due,
then I’ll remind him. I’m very good at talking some sense into him. And before you think about other
possible investments in Westeros, let me remind you that Casterly Rock and Highgarden stand
unconditionally behind Joffrey. All the other kingdoms combined can’t compete with our financial
and military power. Investing in other ventures in Westeros wouldn’t be safe for the Iron Bank.
Joffrey is the best venture.”

Nestoris’s smile widened for a moment. “Thank you, my lord, for enlightening us. And you are right.
Casterly Rock and Highgarden are the best places where the Iron Bank could invest on this
continent.” He bowed in Tyrion’s direction. “Now, although this is not the main reason of my
presence here, may I know if you intend to accept Magister Renyon’s proposition?”

“I will have a discussion with the magister later, to give him my answer. The Iron Bank is always
welcome here.”

“Thank you, my lord. I think that will be all.”

He excused himself, bowed and left. Tyrion wouldn’t accept the deal of Braavos. To allow a foreign
power to build a harbor on his lands could be catastrophic on the long term. They could come to
control the trade and place favorable conditions for the ships that would divert some of the trade
away from Lannisport and Casterly Rock. Tyrion couldn’t allow competition to settle. With
Lannisport, Casterly Rock controlled most of the trade by sea in the Westerlands, thanks to the
family ties with the minor branch of House Lannister that administered the city. If they allowed
Braavos to competition them, they could lose an important source of income.

Ty entered his solar. “I gave the letter for Robb Stark to Jon Snow, my lord. He should be leaving
very soon.”

“Good.” On a whim, Tyrion decided to seek Jon Snow. “I’ll go to make him my farewells. Tell Arfo
Renyon to come and wait for me here.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tyrion found Jon Snow near the stables and watched him go as he rode away from the Rock. Let us
hope that Robb Stark will listen to his brother. Half-brother. It was for situations like this one that
Tyrion had taken Jon Snow with him back to Casterly Rock. To forge a friendship with a Stark and
let him stay here could make the relations with the North better on the long term. Jon Snow could
also be a valuable hostage if need be. Tyrion could have kept him at Casterly Rock for that latter
purpose. However, Tyrion wanted to stop a war from happening. It wouldn’t be a good way for
Joffrey to start his reign, though it wouldn’t surprise either. Jon Snow would help more in preventing
the war if they sent him to stop his brother, or at least to slow him down. If he failed, then they still
had three Starks in King’s Landing to trade. A fourth wouldn’t have much value. And to be honest,
Tyrion didn’t want to make Jon Snow a prisoner. It was better to send him away for everyone. There
wasn’t much to lose in letting Jon Snow go, and there was much to gain.

The rest of the day was spent arranging for their departure tomorrow. The Braavosi magister was
sent back to his home with a polite refusal. Tyrion named Damion castellan of the Rock in his
absence, but charged Genna to keep an eye on everything. His aunt would be the real castellan but in
name. They also sent ravens through all the Westerlands, ordering the lords to mobilize. Tyrion left
instructions to send a first army to King’s Landing through the Goldroad while another one would
camp near the Golden Tooth on the River Road. He specified to his uncle Stafford and his son
Daven, who would command this army, to not penetrate the Riverlands under any reason. They
were only to be there as a warning for the Riverlands on their borders. If the Starks or the Tullys tried anything on King’s Landing, Tyrion would give the order to Daven and his father to invade the Riverlands and do everything necessary to make the Tullys kneel. In the meantime, the army at the Golden Tooth would stay on its position, even if the Tully forces attacked them. They wouldn’t give the other kingdoms any reason to think that they initiated the war if it came to that.

Margaery also sent a raven to Highgarden. For now, the Tyrells were not to raise armies, but they were to be prepared for that eventuality if someone raised in rebellion against Joffrey. Margaery wasn’t aware of that, but if Stannis Baratheon received word that Joffrey wasn’t Robert’s son, then both Baratheon brothers would declare war against him very soon. They would need the Tyrells then. But for now, the Reach was only to be ready for anything.

Tyrion supped with his wife alone this evening. She had been busy all day, preparing for their departure, arranging the household for the time she would be absent and visiting some of her charity works one last time before they left. Combined with yesterday’s feast and the time she spent organizing it, this led to a complete exhaustion. Margaery was seldom exhausted. Tyrion was always surprised by her energy and her ability to work as hard if not harder than him. However, it was obvious now that she needed rest. She didn’t speak as much as usual and her smiles looked forced. Tyrion supposed this was no surprise. The news from King’s Landing were not to make anyone cheerful.

Tyrion had a few other things to prepare afterwards. When he came back to their apartments, it was quite late. He should have gone to bed sooner for the journey they would start early in the morning. Margaery was talking with her handmaiden when he entered.

“Rumours could spread, Mira. If Ty mentioned this to me, he could talk about it to anybody. And someone else could have seen you enter or leave his room,” his wife was saying.

“My lady, nothing happened. I was only there to say goodbye,” Lady Mira replied.

“I know. I believe you. You’re not Sera.” He perceived a small sigh in his wife’s voice as she pronounced the name of the other handmaiden. “Still, you should be careful. Rumors are dangerous, especially for women in our position.”

“I know, my lady.”

“Good. You may go. Just be careful the next time.”

“Am I interrupting something?” Tyrion asked, coming in the open.

Mira Forrester curtsied. “My lord.”

“You may go, Mira. We must all be rested for tomorrow,” Margaery told her.

“Yes, my lady.”

Mira Forrester left and Tyrion found himself alone with his wife. “A problem with your handmaiden?” he asked.

“Nothing serious.”

“Nothing serious like finding her in a larder with a boy.”

Margaery made a muffled laugh. “Nothing of this sort. With Mira, I can be quiet. Sera is the one worrying me more often than not.”
Tyrion grinned. “You know, I may be the Lord of Casterly Rock, but I’m not going to have a friend of yours flogged just because she stole a jug of my finest wine.”

Margaery smiled in return. Tyrion came to sit next to her and took her hand in his. “I know, but still, she should be careful. She’ll get herself in trouble, and I can’t watch her every step.”

She sighed and pushed her head back. Tyrion kept rubbing the back of her hand. In ordinary times, she would have a few rings to every hand, along with bracelets on her arms. When they went to sleep however, there was only one she kept. His thumb sometimes trailed to the diamond ring adorning her middle finger, the one he gave her three years ago. Back then, he didn’t think their marriage would take that direction. He didn’t believe this ring would have more meaning than a political alliance. He was wrong.

He looked at his wife, her eyes closed, her head leaning back, her right arm hanging from exhaustion. She was still wearing the clothes she put on for today, a light green gown in her homeland’s style with golden branches on the chest. It outlined at the perfection her breasts, and the neckline allowed to see the beginning of her curves. Her hips were partially displayed, and Tyrion knew that half of her back was left bare. She was beautiful beyond description.

_Eddard Stark discovered the truth about Jaime and Cersei. He wrote to Stannis and to Margaery._

He wanted to tell her the truth. He wanted to tell her what really happened, why Cersei acted in this way against the Starks, why Jon Arryn probably died. He wanted to tell her everything. How could he hide this from her all these years?

She mumbled something and breathed deeply, her head moving a little. He wished he could carry her to their bed, but the nature deprived him of this privilege. Why did the gods make him a dwarf, and why did they allow him to marry such a woman? He couldn’t even place himself between her and an assassin who would try to kill her if that happened. All he had was due to his family name, to his Lannister inheritance. Without it, he would be nothing. _You’ll have to make sure the family name lives on. It’s all that lives on. You’ll need to continue the work I started._ His father’s last words resonated in his mind. He remembered something Kevan told him a long time ago, something his aunt Genna told him. _She said you were Tywin’s son. The only one of his children who could maintain what he built in the last decades and build on it._ He was the son of Tywin Lannister, for sure. He was about to betray his wife, the one woman he loved in this world, and all that for family.

So instead of telling her the truth, he only told her: “We should go to bed.”

“Yes,” she said in a tired voice. “We need some rest.” Her hand didn’t leave his a second as they walked to their bedroom.

Later, after he got rid of all his clothes and extinguished the candles, he climbed into the bed. Margaery was already laying on her back, her eyes shut. Maybe she was already sleeping. He hoped that she was. She needed to sleep, and she deserved it. She deserved so much more, and Tyrion couldn’t provide her with it. He slid inside the sheets, laid on his back just like his wife and looked at the ceiling. Considering the time a ship needed to reach Dragonstone, it was clearly possible that Stannis Baratheon already received Ned Stark’s message. The other message was on its way. If they followed the Goldroad, it would reach them while they would be in the surroundings of Deep Den.

There would be a war, without any doubt. They would have to fight Stannis and Renly. Stannis without any doubt. As for Renly, there was a small chance, however small it was, that they could convince him that Ned Stark didn’t tell the truth, but since Ned Stark was known for a man of honor, their odds of succeeding were very limited. Very few would question the man’s word. Who would believe the Kingslayer and the Imp over the honorable Lord of Winterfell?
They had to prevent a war with the North. A war with the North meant a war with the Riverlands and the Vale of Arryn as well. The North rebels, and half the Seven Kingdoms rebel as well. They had to force Eddard Stark to recant his words. Then they would only face the Baratheons, an enemy much easier to deal with. Dragonstone and Storm’s End couldn’t defeat the Crown alone, not if the Crown was supported by the Reach and the Westerlands. What would Dome do? They hated the Lannisters, but they despised the Baratheons as well. Did they hate the Starks too? It was difficult to say what they would do. Perhaps they would simply stand by and watch the other houses kill each other. Tyrion tried to imagine what he would do if he was in Doran Martell’s position. Would he join the war with someone who had a hand in the murders of his sister, his nephew and his niece? Yes, if he could take his revenge, or else he would find another way to get what he wanted. War wasn’t the only available option.

They had to prevent the North and its allies to enter war against them, they had to make sure Dome wouldn’t fight with the Baratheons... and he had to make sure the Reach would fight for Joffrey. For that, he needed to do everything necessary. He looked on his left and surprised his wife watching him.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. If only she knew the real reason why he couldn’t sleep, but as much as he wished he could tell her, he couldn’t.

“Me neither.” She moved and came to rest her head on his shoulder, near the crack of his neck. “Damn Cersei.”

“Yes, damn Cersei,” he repeated. He inhaled the scent of her hair, and his right hand came to caress the smooth skin around her left hip.

They remained in that position for some time, her hand resting against him, her breathe sending warm air on his chest. His right hand wandered on her back while the left one stroke her hair. Sometimes, he buried his face into them, filling his lungs with her scent. All the while, her left hand travelled on his chest. He could see the glint of her wedding ring as her hand moved. Her right hand was in his hair as well.

She suddenly straightened herself over him and looked straight into his eyes. “You know we’ll have to deal with Cersei for good this time.”

“I know.” On that, they agreed.

“Even if your brother hates you for the rest of your life.”

He sighed. “I know.”

He looked away from her. Jaime may hate him for that, but it would be safer for all the family, including Cersei, Jaime himself and their children. It would also be safer for Tyrion to have Cersei isolated somewhere she could do no harm. And it would be safer for Margaery. He wouldn’t let Cersei hurt her. That was the one thing where he could make no compromise. Still, Jaime wouldn’t be happy.

“Why does it matter so much to you?”

He looked back at her, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“What you brother thinks of you. Why does it matter so much?”
“Jaime is my brother.”

“Cersei is your sister. Do you care so much about her? Why?”

Her tone wasn’t accusing. If anything, it gave him the impression that she didn’t understand his love for Jaime. Why wouldn’t she? She had a brother too. He didn’t look in her eyes as he answered. “Jaime was always my big brother,” he said softly. “He was the only one to ever defend me when I was young. He was the only one in my family who really saw me as a member of his family. He was the only I was really close with, and he never abandoned me.”

A long silence followed. “There is one time he abandoned you.”

What was she talking about? He looked straight at her again. “When?”

She kept looking back at him for a time, and then she looked away before locking her eyes with his again. “Forget it.” She said it in a very low voice. Even with their faces only a few inches from each other, he could barely hear her. “I love you.”

Then she kissed him, slowly. This was a real kiss, a kiss that meant she loved him. At the beginning of their marriage, she would have made a bright smile after he asked the question she didn’t answer, then she would have kissed him deeply, with passion, so he would forget the question he asked. She didn’t do it anymore. Through the months, their lovemaking changed. They didn’t make love anymore out of duty, or out of lust. Well, that wasn’t really accurate. Every time they made love, lust was involved, but it was no longer only that. The main reason why they made love was because they loved each other. Tyrion loved her, but to know that she loved him too, that she enjoyed their time together, it brought him more happiness than anything else. It was so different from all the other women he had been with.

Soon, they reversed positions and Margaery was the one lying on her back, while Tyrion kept kissing her slowly on the lips. Then he trailed his mouth on her cheek, then her neck. Her scent was wonderful. He wished he could breathe it all day. He heard her moans as he went lower. He loved to hear these sounds from her. He loved her so much. If it hadn’t been for the damned raven, they would have spent more time together in bed this morning, doing that sort of things. His hand trailed close to her heart and he could feel its beating. At the same time, he could hear her breathing getting quicker as she let escape small sounds. His own breathing was getting heavier and quicker. Soon, he forgot everything but the woman he loved, and the world seemed limited to them and them alone.

Later, they were in their initial position, Margaery lying on her belly, her head resting in his neck, while he rested on his back, his left hand still caressing her back. She was asleep. She looked so beautiful in that peaceful state. His left hand was rubbing the back her left one, often stopping close to the ring or brushing it. He loved Margaery, more than anyone else in the world. However, he wasn’t ready to do anything for her. He could do for her many things that he would never do for anyone else, but there were certain things that he wasn’t sure he could do for her. Could he betray his family for her? Could he betray Jaime for her?

He loved her. She was beautiful, but above all this, she was intelligent, good-hearted, generous, clever, caring, and she loved him. He didn’t see what he could ask more from her. She trusted him. I am hers, and she is mine. From this day until the end of my days. Vows that he took three years ago. He meant them, and meant them even more today. And yet, that wasn’t enough. His aunt was right. He was the son of Tywin Lannister. He was going to fool the woman he loved. He was going to use her and her family. He was going to betray his wife.
I hope you don't hate this chapter too much, but we can see Tyrion struggling here. Loyalty to the family was inprinted too deep into Tyrion's mind at an early age, and this loyalty stops him from telling Margaery the truth about Jaime and Cersei. Let's wait for the consequences of his choice in the future.

Please review

Next chapter : Eddard
Eddard IV

Chapter Notes

Now, to Ned in King's Landing. As you can probably guess, things are not going very well for him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EDDARD IV

Everything around him was in a haze. He had difficulty to focus on something and couldn’t see clearly. His head pounded as if someone was knocking on it with a hammer. His right leg was painful, throbbing.

It took him some time before he could see his surroundings more clearly, and before he could remember where he was. He was in a cell. Not one of the black cells under the castle, but a tower cell. He was in a bed, his bandaged leg laying on the smooth covers and several pillows. There was a stick leaning against the small table by the bedside when he looked to his right. He looked at the window. There were bars to it, and the door was heavy with several lockers on the other side. There was a chamber pot not far away. Slowly, with great difficulty, he sat in the bed, then took the stick and tried to stand up. He had no boots, so his right foot came in contact with the raw surface of the floor. He managed to walk to the chamber pot, taking much more time than he usually did. Relieving himself was a difficult task. He had fallen more than once before. With great effort, he managed to do it without slipping this time. Then he went back to the bed, as slowly as before.

They were giving him milk of the poppy, which didn’t help him to maintain clear thoughts. From what he saw from the window, he guessed this was a good day, without rain. The climate was still too hot, but that was the least of his concerns right now.

Varys had visited him a few days ago. He wasn’t sure when exactly. The milk of the poppy kept him asleep or drowsy most of the time. The only other person he saw was Pycelle, and he didn’t talk to him at all. Varys told him that Arya disappeared and that Sansa was kept prisoner by Cersei, and still betrothed to Joffrey. Why did he ever accept to engage his daughter to this boy? From the very beginning, this match was a mistake. You’re sentencing your sweet Sansa to a horrible marriage. Tyrion Lannister told him so. The Imp warned him about Joffrey, and he didn’t listen. He also told him to not go in the capital, because it would start a war, and he had been right. If Ned hadn’t come here, he would never have discovered the truth about the queen and her brother. Tyrion Lannister certainly knew about them, or else he wouldn’t have tried to stop him from coming. At the same time, what he said about Joffrey was true.

When he spoke with Cersei Lannister, he asked her if her young brother knew about this. She had snickered. Do you really think I would tell this to the man who murdered my mother the day he came into the world? The Lord of Casterly Rock certainly found out about his siblings another way, or he suspected something at least. Ned had decided to write to Lord Tyrion’s wife instead. If he knew, then at least his wife would discover the truth, and if he didn’t, she would share the information with him and they would understand why he had to tell the king.

But now Robert was dead. His whole household had been slaughtered, even the servants, those who were not soldiers. Arya was nowhere to be found, probably lost, and Sansa was a prisoner of the
Lannisters. What would Cat do when she learned what happened? And Robb who was alone to rule the North. He was only a boy. He thought about Jon. He was at Casterly Rock. The Lannisters could take him. *Promise me, Ned.* He should have forced the boy to go back in the North, even if this meant going back into the Night’s Watch for him. At least, he would be safe there.

He could warn Stannis, that was still something. He would know the truth, and do what was needed to be done. Ned didn’t see how he could save the children after that. He might try, but would it work? He lied back. There was nothing else he could do. Lie down. He had no idea what was going on outside, no way to communicate with his family. If they wanted to kill him, then why couldn’t they do it now? There were many things he wanted to do, to say, but if he could never do them, then why to keep going on?

The locks of the door began to unlock. Probably Pycelle again. If only he could give Ned too much milk of the poppy. It would be the end of everything. However, when the door opened, it wasn’t the old maester who came in.

“Lord Stark,” he said.

“Ser Kevan?” The door closed behind him.

“I heard Pycelle is filling you with milk of the poppy. It must make you confused. I’m sorry.”

He took a chair nearby and brought to sit next to Ned. “You threw a spear in my leg.”

“And I would again. Without that, you would be dead. Jaime would have killed you.”

“You chose to fight on his side.”

“Jaime is my nephew. He is of the same blood than me. If you were to choose between me and your brother, or your wife, or your son, who would you choose?”

“He attacked us, without provocation.”

“Without provocation? You threatened to tell the truth to Robert, which would have resulted in children dying. Do you really consider this to not be a provocation? I’m not saying Jaime and Cersei did right, but you should have expected such a reaction.”

He looked at the knight for a moment. He had come to trust this man, to rely on him. “You know it. You knew it the whole time.” Ser Kevan said nothing, but his expression told everything. “You’ve been lying to me the whole time, getting me to trust you, stopping me from discovering the truth.”

“Not entirely, my lord. I tried to stop you from discovering the truth concerning my nephew and my niece, but I didn’t try to hide anything from you concerning Jon Arryn’s death. There was nothing to hide there. I didn’t discover who killed him.”

“He discovered the truth. Ser Jaime and the queen killed him to silence him.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong, Lord Stark.”

“He discovered the truth, and he was about to tell Robert. They killed him not long after, with a poison called the tears of Lys.”

Ser Kevan frowned for a moment, but the frown disappeared very quickly. “I talked to Cersei and Jaime about this, and they claim they have nothing to see with Jon Arryn’s passing.”
“Do you really think they’re telling you the truth?”

The knight sighed. “I think they are. From what they told me, Jon Arryn did talk to Cersei about his discoveries, and he was going to tell the king. The disease that killed him struck not long after. However, they’re not the ones who killed him. They had thought about it, but Jon Arryn died before they could do anything.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I don’t see any reason for them to lie about it, where we are now. I’m afraid your friend was killed by someone, or something else. I don’t know. My inquiry gave nothing, and it seems the person who could have poisoned the Hand died.”

“Ser Hugh of the Vale.” The knight nodded. Ned thought about it for a moment. If the Lannisters weren’t behind Jon Arryn’s death, then who did it? “How do I know you’re telling me the truth? You turned on me. You helped the Kingslayer and the queen to slaughter my people.”

“I have nothing to see with that. Cersei and Jaime were the minds behind this. Actually, I think Cersei was the mind. Jaime only followed her. I was unaware of their plans until they put them into execution. You admitted while you discussed with Jaime that you made threats against Cersei and her children, and when you fought, I sided with my family. What were you expecting me to do? To turn against my own blood? Jaime is my nephew, the son of my brother. If you saw your son fighting with someone, in danger to be killed, would you fight for his opponent?”

Ned waited a moment before he replied. “They committed crimes. They committed treason against the Crown.”

“They did, but they are still my family. You may think that we are without honor, Lord Stark, but a Lannister never turns his back on his kin.”

“Have you tried nothing to stop that from happening?”

“Have you tried to stop your son Bran from climbing to walls? You know how difficult it can be, and you were his father. I’m not Cersei and Jaime’s father, and I wasn’t in King’s Landing until very recently.”

“They pushed my son from a tower, they tried to murder him, and they even sent an assassin against him.”

“I’m terribly sorry. What they did was horrible, but it’s done. We cannot go back.”

“You’re defending them?”

“Wouldn’t you defend your children if some of them acted like Jaime and Cersei? Their mother discovered the truth about them when they were ten. She surprised them doing things together in a bath, things that a brother and a sister should never do together. She moved Cersei’s rooms to the other side of Casterly Rock after that and posted a guard before her door. She died before she could tell Tywin about it.”

“So your brother ignored it?”

Kevan Lannister gave a long sigh again. “I think he probably knew it, somewhere, but he denied it, even to himself. I think he didn’t want to believe it. His legacy was everything that mattered for him, the future of House Lannister was all that mattered. I was there when Cersei and Jaime were presented to him at their birth. My brother seldom smiled, but he smiled that day. To think that his
two golden children… He couldn’t allow himself to believe that. Could you, if you had been at his place?”

For a moment, Ned tried to imagine himself at the place of Tywin Lannister. He tried to imagine that he discovered that Robb and Sansa, or Arya and Bran, were sleeping together. He tried to imagine what he would have done. He wouldn’t have told anyone, for sure. He would have tried to stop it. He would have done everything to hide this, to get them as far away from each other as he could. He thought about how Cat would feel if this had happened to their children. For a moment, he thought he understood why Tywin Lannister denied the facts.

“They killed Robert.”

“Something regrettable. Robert wasn’t a good king, but he didn’t deserve to die. Of course, if you hadn’t revealed Cersei’s secrets, none of that would have happened.”

“Her sons have no right on the Iron Throne. Stannis Baratheon is Robert’s true heir.”

“So you say. But to the rest of the Seven Kingdoms right now, you are a traitor who tried to seize the Iron Throne from Joffrey and who tried to proclaim himself king.”

“That’s an outright lie!”

“Lie or not, that’s what most of the lords and knights were told. Ravens were sent all over the Seven Kingdoms with this message. The one sent at Winterfell was written by your own daughter Sansa under Cersei’s dictation. For most of the realm, you are a traitor right now, Lord Stark.”

“It doesn’t change the truth.”

“It changes what people believe to be the truth. What proof do you have of Joffrey being not Robert’s son? A book?”

“Stannis knows, and so will Margaery Tyrell soon.”

“Stannis is only one man, and many know that he despised his brother. It will be easy for Cersei to represent him as a jealous brother trying to snatch away the throne from his elder brother’s son. As for Lady Margaery, I sent a raven to Tyrion warning him about this. The way I know him, he will stop your messenger before he reaches his wife, and she will never read your words.”

“Tyrion Lannister is aware as well? He knew about his brother and his sister?”

“Tyrion is no fool. He is the most cunning and intelligent among his father’s children. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s known it for years.”

Ned looked away, at the walls. “He told me to not come here. He said it could get me killed, and start a war. He even warned me that Joffrey wouldn’t be a good husband for Sansa.”

“And everything he told you was true. You should have listened to him.”

“I did my duty,” Ned retorted.

Ser Kevan nodded, his eyes down, for a moment. “You should never have revealed the truth about Cersei’s children.”

“They have no right on the throne.”

“And do you think Robert had more rights on it? Do you really think we chose him because he had
some Targaryen among his ancestors? The people agreed for him to be the king because they saw it as the best choice, or the lesser evil, after the Mad King died. The Targaryens built the Iron Throne, and they conquered the Seven Kingdoms. They had no right by birth on it at the beginning. It’s not birth that determines who is the king.”

“Then what determines it?”

“Blood. Fire and Blood. These are the words of House Targaryen, and this is how they created the realm. With fire and blood. That’s how Robert became king as well, and that’s how people remain king. Do you think Tywin would have remained Lord of Casterly Rock if he hadn’t put down the rebellions of the Reynes and the Tarbecks? Do you think your own house would rule the North right now if you hadn’t defeated the Boltons and all your enemies in successive wars? The person who is king is the person that the people accept as their king. They might accept him as their king for a time because of his birth, but in the end, that’s not what decides who is king and who is not. Or else you would never have rebelled against the Mad King.”

“The Mad King murdered my father and my brother.”

“Yes, and I would have rebelled against him just like you did at the time, if I had been you. However, Joffrey did nothing against you. He didn’t kill anybody you loved. His only crime is to not have Robert as a father.”

“He is not the rightful heir.”

Kevan Lannister gave another long sigh. “You could have kept the secret hidden, and no one would have known. Now that you revealed it, the realm is on the brink of war. The Seven Kingdoms will suffer, and your family will be in danger, all that because you revealed a secret that was necessary for keeping the peace.”

“I’m not a coward who hides, Ser Kevan. I’m not Varys or Littlefinger. I gave a chance to Cersei to run away with her children, to save them.”

“And she should have accepted. But you should have known that she would refuse. You spent months here. You had time to see what kind of person she was.”

“I gave her a chance.”

“Did you really think she would take it?” Ned didn’t answer. He had to give Cersei Lannister this chance, for the sake of her children. Did he truly believe there was a chance that she would accept? He didn’t know, but he had to try. “You blame my brother easily for killing the Targaryen children, Lord Stark, and yet you had no hesitation to give Stannis an information that could only lead to the death of children.”

“She could have ridden away.”

“She didn’t. And now that Stannis knows, he will do everything he can to kill them all, Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella.”

Stannis Baratheon was a hard man. A just man, but a hard man as well. It was true that he wouldn’t let the children of the queen live after this. He looked at Ser Kevan straight in the eyes.

“Everyone told me since I arrived, that your nephew, Lord Tyrion, is the real king of the Seven Kingdoms and has more power than everybody else.”

“It’s the case. The Crown is supported by House Lannister and House Tyrell through our alliance.”
“What does Lord Tyrion think of all this business between his brother and his sister?”

“He disapproves, I’m quite sure of that, just like me. But there wasn’t much we could do against it. Cersei is the queen and Jaime is a kingsguard. It was difficult to find a way to keep them away from each other.”

“Tell him to find a way out of this. Tell him to send his brother to the Wall, to join the Night’s Watch, and to send Cersei among the Silent Sisters. And tell him to send the children far away in Essos, somewhere Stannis cannot reach them.”

“He will not accept. Stannis would chase them wherever they go. They will always be a threat to his rule, and so their children will be. Tyrion will never let Stannis hurt his nephews and his niece, especially not Tommen and Myrcella. There will be war Lord Stark now, whatever happens.”

Ned breathed deeply and looked aside. He had failed. His king was dead, and now the Lannisters held the Iron Throne. “Why have you come here, ser? To tell me everything I’ve done wrong?”

“No, my lord.” Ser Kevan leaned back into his chair. “I think you ought to know how things are going. First, your daughter Sansa is well. No one hurt her. I’m afraid we haven’t found the Lady Arya, but we’re still looking for her. Our men received clear orders to not hurt her when they find her, and even Cersei knows better than to cause her any harm. My nephew is probably heading for King’s Landing as we speak, and reports from the North told us that your son is gathering his bannermen to save you.”

“Robb? He’s just a boy.”

“Boys have led armies before. Your son is older than Daeron Targaryen when he conquered Dorne. How old were you when you marched to war against the Mad King?”


“In fact, Lord Stark, I came here to bring you a proposition. This is something I brought up as a solution to our current problems and that could save many lives.”

“What is it?”

“For now, officially, you tried to take the Iron Throne and betrayed your king. I know that you are a man of honor, and so does Cersei. I propose that you recognize the official version. Confess that you tried to steal the throne from Joffrey, acknowledge him as your true king. In exchange, we will allow you to go to the Wall and join the Night’s Watch. Your son Robb will bend the knee before Joffrey and will be recognized as Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. Your youngest daughter Arya will be sent back to Winterfell when we find her and Sansa’s betrothal with Joffrey will be maintained to ensure the peace between our families. When she comes of age, she will be queen.”

Ned couldn’t believe it. Did this man truly believe that he would accept something like that? “You want me to serve the woman who murdered my king, who butchered my men, who crippled my son?”

“I want you to serve the realm, Lord Stark! Have you forgotten? This is why you came to King’s Landing.” Ser Kevan had stood up and was pacing the room now. “We are almost at war, and you could stop that from happening. You can’t stop Stannis, but you can prevent the conflict from escalating further. You can prevent all our houses from bleeding.”

“I grew up with soldiers. You think I’m not ready to fight for what I believe?”
“You won’t be fighting, Lord Stark. Your sons will be fighting. Should I remind you that we have one of your daughters, and that we will likely have the other one soon, and that while we don’t have her, she’s somewhere out there, in danger? And what about your bastard son at Casterly Rock? Do you really want to put your whole family in danger? Have you ever visited the Reach? The Westerlands? Highgarden? Casterly Rock? Oldtown? The Arbor? The Golden Tooth?”

“No.”

“Then you know nothing, Lord Stark. Together, Casterly Rock and Highgarden can raise more men and more ships than all the other kingdoms combined. They will support Joffrey, you can be sure of that. How many men can your son raise? Twenty thousand? Maybe more? What do you think he will do when he faces an army of a hundred thousand? Are you ready to sacrifice the life of your family? Aren’t their lives worth anything to you?”

Ned stayed silent after that. He remained silent for a very long time. “I think you’ve said everything that you needed to say.”

“Very well.” Ser Kevan seemed tired as he brought back the chair to its original place. Then he turned to face Ned. “Think about my proposition, Lord Stark. If you care about your children’s life, I suggest you think about it carefully, and quickly. This is the best I can do for you. I don’t have much power left.”

“What do you mean? You don’t have much power left?”

The knight had started to walk to the door, and he turned to look back at Ned. “After the slaughtering of your men, I tried to take back the control of the situation. Tyrion gave the order to the red cloaks to follow my orders if a situation like this one happened. I tried to control Cersei, to prevent things from getting worse. However, the next day, the Red Keep was flooded with Janos Slynt’s gold cloaks.”

“The gold cloaks?”

“They obey Cersei. She managed to secure their help.”

“How? You are Master of Laws. The City Watch is supposed to obey you.”

“As I told you once, my lord, the gold cloaks are led by their commander, Janos Slynt. He is a corrupted man, and his officers are just as corrupted as he is, along with most of his men. Cersei must have given him something to buy his loyalty. My two hundred red cloaks are no match for their two thousand men.”

Ned tried to see any lie on the man’s face, and again he couldn’t see any. Was he betrayed by his niece just like she turned against Ned? “I advised you while you were Hand, my lord. I advise you again to accept my offer. The next to bring you one might not be as honest as I am. Very few people can be trusted in this city. Accept my offer and quickly, while you still can. I may not be here for long, and I don’t want you to die.”

Ser Kevan Lannister, brother of Tywin Lannister, walked away on this. Was he trying to fool Ned, or did he really want to help him? Why did the Lannisters always seem trying to help him while working against him at the same time? The North was much simpler. Maybe Lord Tyrion and Ser Kevan were right and he should never have left Winterfell.

There were so many things to consider. Duty and honor demanded that Ned support Stannis Baratheon, the true heir of the Seven Kingdoms, if only in Robert’s memory. He couldn’t allow a
woman like Cersei Lannister to hold the Iron Throne, or her children to sit on it. On the other side, there was Sansa, and Arya, and Jon. He had to think about them. Promise me, Ned.

He wished he had Catelyn with him. They could talk about this together at least. He was glad that she wasn’t here, since she would face the same dangers than him if she was, but he wished he could discuss about it with someone. He couldn’t, so he would have to take the decision himself. He had ridden to war against a king once. Back then, it had seemed so simple. He was heartbroken to learn about his father and Bran’s deaths, but he had to avenge them, and to save his sister. Now, however, it was different. He had gone to war, twice, and each time he won. But seventeen years ago, he was a young man who hadn’t experienced war yet and who only thought about avenging his father and saving his sister. In the end, it hadn’t mattered. If only Robert had known the truth, how futile his war had been. Lyanna died. They couldn’t save her. What if the same happened to Arya, or Sansa? What if Robb died on the battlefields? And what about Jon? He made a promise, a promise he swore to keep, a promise he did everything to honor.

He’s spent half his life fighting Robert’s wars. He owes him nothing. Your father and brother rode south once on a king’s demand. Ned knew what had happened to them, and yet he came. But he had no choice. Robert had asked him to help him. That’s what men always say when honor calls. That’s what you tell your families, tell yourselves. You do have a choice, and you’ve made it. He knew very well what Cat would tell him to do. But could he do that?

Pycelle visited him later in the day, changing his bandages and giving him some more milk of the poppy. Ned didn’t drink all the vial that Pycelle gave him, to keep his thoughts clear when he would wake up, but he fell into a deep slumber all the same.

He was in King’s Landing, eighteen years ago. Robert just arrived with the bulk of their army. The city had fallen He was still limping from his injuries, but that didn’t stop him from boasting and roaring, or laughing.

“So, I hear Aerys is dead. Good riddance. You did it?” he asked Ned as they entered the Great Hall.

“No, he was already dead when we arrived. Murdered by Ser Jaime Lannister.”

“Really? Jaime Lannister?” He exploded in a laugh that made him cough. “Maybe the Lannisters were not as useless as we thought. I heard they took the city.”

“They sacked it,” Ned specified. “Thousands of people were killed, they raped women beyond count.”

“Still honorable, Ned. This is a sad thing, but this is war, and there’s nothing we can do against it.”

“True enough.” Before Ned could react to this, Ser Jaime Lannister came out from behind a column and stood before them. “There’s nothing anyone can do once my father decides he is an enemy. Too bad Aerys didn’t realize it in time. He might still be alive.”

“What do you want?” Ned asked with hostility. This arrogant man murdered the king he swore to serve.

“I came to pay my respects to the king. Your Grace.” The Kingslayer bowed before Robert.

“So tell me, is that true? You killed Aerys?” Ned’s friend asked the knight, and the knight in question shrugged.

“I think everyone knows it, now.”
“How did you kill him?”

“I shove my sword into his back, and then I slit his throat.”


Ned looked at Robert with rounded eyes. Did he hear well? The heavy doors opened behind them at this moment. A group of men in red armors and red cloaks arrived. At the head of them was Tywin Lannister, the Lord of Casterly Rock. His blond hair were beginning to turn grey, but his gaze was as hard as steel. Next to him stood his brother, Ser Kevan.

“Your Grace.” He said the words to Robert on a respectful tone as he bowed, though his expression remained as hard as before.

“Father.” It was Ser Jaime who said that, but his father barely acknowledged his presence. His attention was on Robert.

“You are late, Lord Tywin,” Robert said.

“I beg your forgiveness for not welcoming you as soon as you arrived, but the city is still in chaos after the battle.” Ned would call it a butchery rather than a battle.

“I wasn’t talking about this. I was talking about the war. You took your time to join us.”

“We needed time to gather our forces, and we were waiting for the most opportune moment to help you, your Grace. Without our armies’ convenient intervention, you would have needed a long siege to take the city. King’s Landing would have fallen in time, for sure, but it might have taken months for you to take it, while we seized it within a single day. Now your army is free to save Lord Stannis at Storm’s End.”

Ned couldn’t believe what he heard. The man was lying to the face of the man he called king. He joined them only because the Mad King had no chance of winning anymore. If they had been defeated, he would have continued to swear fealty to Aerys just like he did a moment ago to Robert.

“Still, I could call you the Late Lord Tywin Lannister if I wanted to. You only joined the fight in its final hours,” Robert said.

Tywin Lannister’s gaze turned harder than before, as unlikely as it seemed. Ned didn’t believe the man could be colder than he already was, but it seemed he could.

“We may have joined the fight in its last hours, but the fact remains that we gave you the victory you needed. It is customary to present a gift when you swear fealty to your king. Please accept this as a token of fealty.”

Two men came forward, each one holding something wrapped into a red cloak. When they laid it in front of Robert’s feet and that Ned saw what was inside, he couldn’t contain a gasp of horror. The two small bodies wrapped in the Lannister cloaks were covered with blood. The girl was covered with scars from sword’s blows, while the baby next to her was barely recognizable, his head ruined, smashed, brain parts coming from it. Ned had heard the rumors about what happened to Rhaenys and Aegon, but he didn’t see their bodies up to now. His men had been searching for them, without success. Now he knew why. Tywin Lannister hid them, to show them to Robert when he would arrive.

“Well, that makes two less people to kill.”
For a moment, Ned wasn’t sure if he heard well. Was it Robert who really said that? Was that really his voice that he heard? He looked to his friend, to the new king, and realized to his great horror that he was smiling. Ned looked back at the scene of horror before him, to the small bodies covered with the red of the cloaks to better hide their blood, then he looked again at Robert. He was still smiling. He didn’t imagine anything.

“Robert… This is… This is murder!” That was all he could say.

“You should show some respect when you speak to your king, Lord Stark, and address him as his Grace,” Tywin Lannister retorted.

“Enough, Lannister. I am the king. Ned has the right to call me however he likes.” After reprimanding Lord Tywin, Robert turned towards Ned. “That kind of things happen in war, Ned. This is no crime to kill someone on the battlefield. This is war.”

“They were no more than babes. Your daughter Mya back at the Eyrie is no older.”

Robert looked at the children, disdain plain on his face. “I see no babes. Only dragonspawn.” Robert averted his head to look into the eyes of Tywin Lannister. “I thank you, Lord Tywin. Your gift is appreciated.”

It took everything Ned had to not explode from rage, but later, when they were alone in the small council chamber with Jon Arryn, he let go all his anger.

“What Tywin Lannister did is an atrocity!”

“Ned, calm down. I think we all agree that the death of these children is a horrible thing,” Jon said.

“A horrible thing?! I’m going to tell you what was horrible!” Robert roared. “It was horrible how the Mad King roasted Ned’s father alive! It was horrible how he forced his brother to strangle himself as he tried to rescue him! It was horrible how Rhaegar kidnapped Lyanna and raped her! Do you wonder how many times he raped her before I killed him?”

“These children didn’t kill my brother and father, they didn’t kidnap Lyanna,” Ned opposed.

“Their father and their grandfather did it. They were Targaryens…”

“They were children!!!” Ned shouted like he never did in his life. “Have you looked at them? Have you really looked at them, Robert?”

Robert’s face was hard, almost as hard as Tywin Lannister’s face. “I saw Rhaegar’s children. I saw dragonspawn. Nothing more.”

Ned couldn’t believe what he was hearing, once again. He never thought his friend, his friend for years as they grew up together at the Eyrie, was saying it. “Look, you are both tired,” Jon Arryn began to say. “We should retire and rest a little, and we’ll continue this conversation later.”

“No.” Ned refused to rest. He looked at Robert. “I followed you to war without doubts, to avenge my family, and to save my sister. I didn’t wage war against the Mad King to see you do the same crimes than he did.”


“I will not be a part of this. The blood of innocents will not be on my hands. Sully your honor without me.”
And on that, Ned left the room. When he slammed the door behind him, he woke up. He hadn’t dreamed of that day for a very long time. He’s spent half his life fighting Robert’s wars. He owes him nothing. Cat’s voice resonated again. Another voice joined her. Promise me, Ned. He remembered something he told Jon before he left for the Wall. The next time we see each other, we’ll talk about your mother. I promise. Could he ever see Jon again? If he died, he could never tell him. Mark my words, Lord Stark. One day, you will regret accepting Robert’s demands. The voice of the Lord of Casterly Rock was joined by the voice of another Lannister. Are you ready to sacrifice the life of your family? Aren’t their lives worth anything to you? A man of honor would say he had to serve the king, no matter the cost. But Ned knew that was impossible. He couldn’t let his family die. He couldn’t die knowing that Sansa, Jon, Arya, Robb and Catelyn were all in danger. You do have a choice, and you’ve made it. Yes, Catelyn was right. He had a choice, and he made it.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to do it for the last chapter I uploaded, so now I won't forget it. "A Rose and a Lion" reached the amount of 100 bookmarks recently. I want to thank everyone who reads this story, and even more those who left kudos, comments and who bookmarked this fanfiction. I feel privileged to see this story so popular. Thank you all for your support.

I wrote the dream where Ned remembers the killing of the Targaryen children to mirror the scene between Robb and Rickard Karstark after Martyn and Willem were killed. And of course, in each situation, the person to who they spoke had lost someone they loved and didn't care to see innocents dying to avenge them.

Please review

Next chapter : Sansa
Sansa V

Chapter Notes

A Sansa chapter that will remind many people of Season 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

SANSA V

She had donned an olive green gown made of silk and brushed her hair in braids. She had to make the best impression for today. Her father’s fate may depend on it, and she couldn’t allow herself to make any mistake. She repeated what she needed to say again and again before today, and she was ready. Joffrey, her prince… no, her king now, was her only chance. Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you’ll realize it before it's too late.

Lately, these words turned around in her mind without stopping. She heard them in her sleep, during breakfast, at dinner and at supper, as she sew, as she wrote, and even when she relieved herself. No matter how much she tried to ignore them, the words of Margaery Lannister were more alive now than they ever were. She hadn’t seen Joffrey since the morning of the day she went to speak with Queen Cersei. She told her that her father wanted to send her back to Winterfell, and begged the queen to convince him to stay. She had then been confined in her rooms. She saw no one for two days, and the servants who brought her food didn’t talk.

Finally, the queen summoned her and told her that her father tried to betray Joffrey. Sansa still didn’t understand how her father could have done this, and she had wanted to see him, to know what happened, but the queen refused. She wrote a letter to Robb on the orders of the queen, telling him to come to King’s Landing and kneel before Joffrey. Sansa hoped they could end all this when Robb arrived, but she strangely felt that Robb wouldn’t come. Things were not right here. In the last weeks, she was given free movement in the castle, though there were two guards following her everywhere. Cersei claimed they were an honor guard for her future daughter-in-law, but Sansa didn’t feel safe with them around. They scared her more than anything else.

Sansa had no news of Arya. No one wanted to tell her anything. It was as if she became a ghost. There were also fewer people in the Red Keep. As she walked to the Great Hall, she saw another example of how deserted the Red Keep was. Where a hundred men would stand on the floor for an audience, they were only twenty or thirty today. None of them paid her any attention as she took her place in the attendance.

Gold cloaks and red cloaks were lined along the columns, a hundred of them. Janos Slynt, their commander, was there. His men had been patrolling the Red Keep ever since Sansa got the permission to leave her rooms. She never saw the gold cloaks here before. They appeared at the same time her father was arrested and her sister disappeared. Their presence didn’t make her feel safe. She looked at Janos Slynt who stared angrily at her. She looked away.

“Lady Sansa.” Her eyes fell upon Ser Kevan Lannister, the Master of Laws. He was always kind with her since she arrived, and he was the first person to address her today. He was also a friend of her father.

“Ser Kevan.”
He bowed before her. “I’m surprised to see you here, my lady. You’re not forced to assist, if you don’t want to.”

“It is my duty, ser. I have to.”

“Have it your way. I will keep you company, if you wish.”

“Thank you, ser.”

He smiled reassuringly. They stood there in silence for a long time, waiting. “I heard that your son Lancel was knighted. I’m very happy for him,” she said timidly and with a voice so low that she was afraid for a moment he didn’t hear her.

“Thank you, my lady. Lancel is very proud of it,” he returned in the same whisper.

“Shouldn’t you be on the dais with the rest of the small council?” The Grand Maester Pycelle was already there, just like Lord Petyr Baelish. The others should arrive soon.

“I am no longer on the small council, my lady.”

“What happened?”

The knight sighed. “There were changes, after your father was arrested.”

Unable to refrain herself, she asked him. “How is he? Where is he? Are they going to kill him?”

Ser Kevan looked at her with an empathic smile. “He’s alive, and well. I assure you. He was injured in the recent events, but he’s being well taken care of.”

“Are they going to kill him?”

He pursed his lips. “It’s too soon to say what will happen, my lady, but no one wants to see him dead. He’s a good man. No sane man would want him dead.” If no one wanted her father to die, then she had a chance. “My lady, if I may give you an advice, trust no one here.”

Sansa frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Trust no one, you hear me? You can only trust yourself in this city, and no one else.”

He looked ahead of him once more. “Shouldn’t I trust the king?” Sansa asked in another whisper.

“You should trust no one,” he repeated.

Did he mean that she couldn’t even trust Joffrey? Joffrey was her betrothed, the king, the man she loved. How couldn’t she trust him? However, there was a reeking feeling in her that made her afraid of Joffrey. Why did she have this impression? Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you’ll realize it before it’s too late. No, that couldn’t be true. And yet, she kept the impression that she was missing something about Joffrey.

She looked at Ser Kevan. He was Joffrey’s granduncle. There was something he told her once. Of all the children my niece and the king had, Joffrey was always the most difficult. But he seems to behave well with you. She remembered her discussion with Lady Margaery before she left Winterfell. He’s always in a bad mood. He was insulting for all his name day. If you ask my opinion, Joffrey is a spoiled brat. Was it possible that Lady Lannister told her the truth? Was Joffrey a charming prince with her, but entirely different with everyone else? There had been a time after the Kingsroad when he seemed furious with her, or annoyed. He would barely look at her. But
everything got better later, and he apologized to her. If he was different with her, if he was good with her, then there was hope for her lord father. Make sure Joffrey remains someone good, my lady. As his wife and his queen, that will be your main duty, and maybe the most difficult. Ser Kevan told her that one day. She could make Joffrey better.

“Ser Kevan, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Well… back at Winterfell, I spent time with Lady Margaery Lannister, you see.”

“You never told me, my lady.”

“She told me… certain things about Joffrey. She told he wasn’t a good person. Is it true?”

Before the knight could answer, the great doors opened to let a long trail of people through it. A herald’s voice rang out.

“All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the First Men, and the Rhoynar, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. All hail his lady mother, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm.”

Ser Barristan Selmy led the way. Ser Jaime Lannister escorted the queen behind him, and Ser Arys Oakheart escorted Joffrey behind them. The four other kingsguards, Ser Mandon Moore, Ser Boros Blount, Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Preston Greenfield, closed the march. The seven White Swords were present. Joffrey climbed the steps and sat on the Iron Throne. Queen Cersei sat by his side, while the rest of the small council stood next to them. Sansa looked at Ser Kevan. She regretted he wasn’t on the dais like the others. Her father said he was a good man. He kept his face straight, dignified. Sansa wondered how he felt about being left aside, when not long ago he was advising King Robert. She felt sympathy for him.

Sansa looked back at the throne to Joffrey, who had a golden crown on his head. She never saw him with a crown before. One day, she would sit by his side. Strangely, the prospect didn’t cheer her up like it used to, and yet, he wore the crown like a true king. His eyes stopped on Sansa for a moment, then he looked ahead of him. He smiled. He smiled at her. However, there was something in his way to behave that gave her the impression she saw this before, and it didn’t make her feel good. She remembered the Hand’s Tourney, when he looked away from her as she tried to catch his eyes. Just like now. She was looking at him, expecting something, hoping for something, but he didn’t look back at her. Lady Lannister’s words came back.

“It is a king’s duty to punish the disloyal and reward those who are true,” he declared. “Grand Maester Pycelle, I command you to read my decrees.”

The Grand Maester took a scroll from his heavy robes and began to read slowly. “King Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the First Men, and the Rhoynar, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and of Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm, and the small council, hereby summon the following people to present themselves and swear fealty to His Grace as soon as possible. Lord Stannis Baratheon, his wife Lady Selyse Florent, and his daughter Lady Shireen Baratheon. Lord Renly Baratheon. Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne, his brother Prince Oberyn Martell and his son Prince Trystane Martell. Lord Mace Tyrell, his wife Lady Ailerie Tyrell, their son Ser Loras Tyrell and their daughter Lady Margaery Tyrell. Lord Tyrion Lannister. Lord Hoster Tully, his brother Ser Brynden Tully and his son Ser Edmure Tully. Lady Lysa Arryn and her son Lord Robin Arryn. Lady Catelyn Stark and her children, Robb, Arya, Brandon and Rickon Stark. Lord Balon Greyjoy, his wife Lady Alannys
Harlaw, their son Theon Greyjoy, and their daughter Yara Greyjoy. Lord Alester Florent, his wife, and their children. Lord Leo Lefford and his daughter Lady Alyssanne Lefford. Lord Sebastian Farman. Ser Gregor Clegane. Lord Jason Mallister. Lord Bryce Caron. Lord Tytos Blackwood. Lord Walder Frey and his son Ser Stevron Frey. Lord Karyl Vance. Lord Jonos Bracken. Lady Sheila Whent. Lord Yohn Royce. If they were to fail to obey this command, they would be adjudged traitors, their lands and titles forfeit to the throne.”

It took a very long time to read all these names. Sansa reflected that it would take a lot of ravens to carry these commands. The Grand Maester took another scroll and was about to start reading it when Ser Kevan Lannister stepped forward. He stood before the king, and he did nothing else.

“Ser Kevan, if you have a matter to set before your king, you will have to wait until his decrees are read,” Cersei Lannister said.

“I came here to talk to the king, not to his mother,” Ser Kevan said. Sansa saw the smile on the queen’s face tense. The knight turned to Joffrey. “Will His Grace let his lady mother decide who he can hear and when?”

“No,” Joffrey answered after a moment. “You may speak, Uncle Kevan.”

“Thank you, your Grace. I believe that summoning all these lords is useless.”

“They must swear fealty to their king,” Cersei pointed out.

“Your Grace, you allowed me to speak, but not your lady mother. A king should maintain obedience among the members of his own family.”

Joffrey looked at Cersei. “Mother, you will allow Ser Kevan to speak. You will only express yourself when I give you the right to.”

There was something in the queen’s gaze that Sansa didn’t like. Ser Kevan continued. “Your Grace, your crowning didn’t happen in the best circumstances we could hope for. Summoning all these people to the capital would be a great mistake. Some will need months to arrive. A pledge by raven and an official oath taken during an organized ceremony in a few months would be far more appropriate, and cause fewer trouble.”

“I see. However, there are traitors among them.”

Whispers traveled the crowd. “Your Grace, they are not traitors. Your decree specifies that they would be branded traitors only if they failed to swear fealty to you. You say so in your own decree.”

Joffrey was silent for a moment. “I will consider what you said, Uncle.”

“There’s something else, your Grace. I don’t believe this is wise to command people like Robin Arryn, Brandon Stark and Arya Stark to take an oath. They are young, no more than ten-years-old. They probably don’t even know what a traitor is. It would be useless to ask them to take an oath. They may not even understand what the oath means.”

Joffrey tapped his leg with his hand. “If they can’t understand what an oath to me is, then this means they are actually traitors and I should kill them.”

Sansa gasped in horror. Did he just say he would kill Bran and Arya? No, he said he should kill them. He would be obliged to kill them. He didn’t really want to kill them.

“Your Grace, with your respect, this is a foolish.”
The Great Hall went silent. Sansa held her breath. Joffrey was looking at his granduncle. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Your thinking is foolish. You will unite half the Seven Kingdoms against you with that kind of thinking.”

Joffrey looked at his mother, then back to Ser Kevan. “What did you say?!” Joffrey’s voice raised as he stood up. Sansa had never seen him like this. Well, no, there was one time when he was like this. She remembered. It was on the Kingsroad, when he fought with Arya.

“This is no way to address your king, ser,” Cersei said.

“I am advising the king, and if the only way for him to listen to advice is to talk to him in this way, then I’ll do it,” Ser Kevan retorted. “And this is not the only stupidity contained in this decree. You threatened your own uncle and your own aunt, the two people who are more loyal to you than anyone, your Grace.”

“If they come and swear fealty to Joffrey in time, they have nothing to fear.”

“And how much time do they have before you decide to strip them from their titles? I suppose you’ll make sure a decree deprives them of everything the day before they arrive.”

“Joffrey, perhaps we should get to the matter concerning Ser Kevan Lannister immediately,” the queen suggested as she gazed at her son.

“Oh, yes. Do it, Mother,” Joffrey said, sitting back into the throne.

Cersei Lannister smiled as she looked down at her uncle. “In these times of treason and turmoil, it is the view of the council that the life and safety of King Joffrey be of paramount importance. Ser Kevan Lannister, you served the Realm long and faithfully, lately as Master of Laws, and before that as advisor for the Lord of Casterly Rock. Every man and woman in the Seven Kingdoms owes you thanks. Now it is time for you to retire.”

“Retire?” The knight looked perplexed.

“You allowed Eddard Stark to conspire against me, Uncle. You failed to protect me,” the king said.

“It was your duty to uncover such a conspiracy and to warn the king, and you failed,” the queen continued. “You are not fit to be Master of Laws. Still, in his generosity, the king decided to grant you a handsome tract of land north of Lannisport, beside the sea, with gold and men sufficient to build you a stout keep, and servants to see to your every need.”

Ser Kevan burst into laugh, though Sansa had the impression he didn’t laugh because he found that funny. “And you believe you will be able to buy my loyalty with this, Cersei? These lands belong to House Lannister, to Casterly Rock, and only the Lord of Casterly Rock can grant them. Unless you believe that you are Lady of Casterly Rock, but you’re not. I am loyal to House Lannister and to my lord, and to your father’s memory. I was with him in his last hours. He said many things, but there was only one time he talked about you, and I will never forget what he said. Of all the members of my family, Cersei disappoints me the most. She believes she is clever when she is not. And she doesn’t know her place.”

Sansa could see that the queen was furious. There was real anger in her eyes this time. Ser Kevan addressed Joffrey. “Your Grace, if I were you, I would remind my lady mother of her place, and quickly. As for me, if you no longer have need of my services, I will go back to my wife and my children. I thank you for your offer, but I must decline it. I wish you good fortunes in the wars to
Ser Kevan bowed and left. There were no sounds in the throne room for a long moment, except for the great doors opening and closing as Ser Kevan Lannister walked out. No one dared to speak. Sansa didn’t know Ser Kevan very well, but she felt his departure as if she lost a friend. Cersei told the Grand Maester to resume the reading of Joffrey’s decrees.

“In the place of the traitor Eddard Stark,” the old man began. The name caught Sansa’s attention. The Grand Maester seemed to have difficulty to talk. His voice was shaking more than usual. “It is the wish of His Grace that Jaime Lannister, knight of the Kingsguard, take up the office of Hand of the King, to speak with his voice, lead his armies against his enemies, and carry out his royal will. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

Ser Jaime came to stand before Joffrey and received the pin. Sansa was used to see her lord father with it. It was strange to see the handsome knight take it, though he didn’t place it on him. He only removed his helmet, took the pin into his hand, then took back his place among his sworn brothers.

“In the place of the traitor Stannis Baratheon, it is the wish of His Grace that his lady mother, the Queen Regent Cersei Lannister, who has ever been his staunchest support, be seated upon the small council, that she may help him rule wisely and with justice. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

The lords who were present murmured for a short time after this decision was revealed.

“In the place of Ser Kevan Lannister, it is the wish of His Grace that his loyal servant Janos Slynt, Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing, be seated upon the small council as Master of Laws. It is also the wish of His Grace that his loyal servant Janos Slynt be at once raised to the rank of lord, and granted the ancient seat of Harrenhal, and that his sons and grandsons shall hold this honor after him until the end of time.”

The lords muttered more than for Cersei when they heard this. Janos Slynt, now Lord Janos Slynt, stood before Joffrey and bowed, then went back to his place at the head of the gold cloaks.

“Such is the will of King Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the First Men, and the Rhoyner, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and of Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm. The council consents,” Pycelle concluded.

“If any man in this hall has other matters to set before His Grace, let him speak now or go forth and hold his silence,” the herald declared loudly.

It was time. She had come for this. It would be her only chance. She stepped forward, fearing what could happen next. She was afraid of Janos Slynt, afraid of Cersei, and afraid of Joffrey too. The words were pounding in her head. *Joffrey is not who he seems to be.* She had to be courageous, for her father, for her family. It wasn’t time to doubt. If she doubted, then everything was lost.

“Your Grace,” she said softly.

“The Lady Sansa of House Stark,” the herald announced.

“Do you have some business for the king and the council, Sansa?” Cersei asked. Her smile seemed genuine. She didn’t look angry anymore. Sansa took it as a good sign. She went on her knees and looked at Joffrey.

“I do. As it pleases your Grace, I ask mercy for my father, Lord Eddard Stark, who was Hand of the
“Treason is a noxious weed. It should be torn out, root…” the Grand Maester began.

“Let her speak. I want to hear what she says.” Sansa could barely contain her joy when Joffrey spoke. He wasn’t looking away now. All his attention was on her. She had the impression for a time that he didn’t really care for what she said, but she tossed the thought aside. He wouldn’t have asked her to speak if he didn’t care, and she couldn’t allow herself to doubt right now.

“Thank you, your Grace.”

“Do you deny your father’s crime?” Lord Baelish asked.

“No, my lords.” She couldn’t say that he wasn’t a traitor. There was only one way to save her father. “I know he must be punished. All I ask is mercy. I know my father must regret what he did. He was King Robert’s friend and he loved him. You all know he loved him. He never wanted to be Hand until the king asked him. People must have lied to him, Lord Renly or Lord Stannis maybe, or someone else. Someone must have lied to him! I know my father would never have done what he did otherwise.”

“He said that I would die. He told my lady mother that I wasn’t the king, that I had no right on the Iron Throne. Why did he say that?”

“He was badly hurt not long ago. Maester Pycelle was giving him milk of the poppy. He wasn’t himself. Otherwise, he would never have said it.”

The members of the small council looked at each other. Joffrey was no longer looking at her. The next person to speak wasn’t the king she loved, but Lord Varys.

“A child’s faith. Such sweet innocence. And yet they say wisdom often comes from the mouth of babes.”

“Treason is treason!” Pycelle opposed.

No, it couldn’t happen. She looked at Joffrey, pleading with her eyes as much as with her words. “If you still have any affection in your heart for me, please do me this kindness, your Grace.”

Her king looked at his hand as he answered. “Your sweet words have moved me. But your father has to confess. He has to confess and say that I’m the king… or there’ll be no mercy for him.” His eyes were hard, unforgiving. Again, Sansa was afraid. She felt a chill run along her spine.

She dropped her eyes to the ground. “He will.”

She should be happy. Her father was going to live. She saved him. Then why did she have the impression that things wouldn’t go as well as she hoped? She dared to look again at Joffrey, and she met the same hard stare. Her time at the inn came back to her mind, when King Robert asked her what happened. Joffrey had a similar expression back then. He hadn’t talked to her for months after this.

Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you'll realize it before it's too late. For the first time, Sansa considered that Lady Lannister could be right. For a second, she believed that maybe Joffrey wasn’t the charming prince she thought. It only lasted one second. She quickly, though hardly this time, told herself that Margaery Lannister could only have lied, or that maybe she was wrong, but she couldn’t be right about Joffrey. If she was right, then her father was lost.
Very similar to Season 1 Episode 8, but there are divergences.

Barristan Selmy wasn't removed from the Kingsguard, Jaime was named Hand of the King, and Kevan was the one to be dismissed. I hope I made him leave enough like a boss. I would like you to consider that Kevan made sure for everyone to see that he disagreed with Cersei. He did it on purpose.

Sansa is already different from her version in the show. She's still blinded and she still wants to believe that Joffrey is a good person, but to the opposite of the canon, she has come to have doubts about her betrothed. Margaery's words did their work. The reason why Sansa keeps convincing herself that Joffrey is a charming prince is because, now, she needs him to be a charming prince. It is a question of need and no longer of want. She needs him to save her father, and to not believe it would mean for Sansa that her father is doomed. However, now Sansa must force herself to believe what she previously believed easily. She's more aware of what is or might be going on. She's somewhat less naive.

I must announce that I'm going back to publishing one chapter every two weeks. I simply can't keep up the actual pace. I'm sorry. If things get better, I may go back to one chapter per week.

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Margaery XIII

Chapter Notes

Margaery is back as a POV after a long absence. The chapter is told from her perspective, so there are things that she might be missing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XIII

You could barely see ten feet ahead of you. The heavy rain formed an opaque wall the eye couldn’t pierce. The road was all muddy, half submerged under water. There were moments Margaery wasn’t sure they were following the right path. Large drops of water fell all around them, creating a cacophony that left her deaf. She had to listen very carefully to hear the hooves of her horse splashing into the deep water.

She had become accustomed to the roads of the Westerlands in the last years, and she had known what it was to ride under the rain on these occasions. The Westerlands were a mountainous land, a succession of hills and valleys. To facilitate the movements across the land, both the Goldroad and the River Road were built in the valleys, meandering between the mountains were the mining activities gave the lords their riches. There were tracks descending from the hills to the main roads, but travellers moved from town to town and from castle to castle following the main roads. They were the most used ways of transportation, the few rivers running among the Westerlands being insufficient to allow sea travel to take any major part in the economy of the region. In the Reach, rivers such as the Mander and the Honeywine were the main highways, as well as an important source of fishing. The Reach took its wealth from the resources of the soil and the trade its rivers made possible. It was the most populated of the kingdoms of Westeros. The Westerlands had a smaller population and were to rely on fewer and less fertile lands to farm, but they were nonetheless the richest of the kingdoms, all that thanks to the resources of the mountains. Thousands of mines extracted gold, silver, diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems and stones. These made the wealth of Casterly Rock, the Golden Tooth, Silverhill, and Castamere before Tywin Lannister destroyed them. Without these riches in the mountains, the Westerlands might be poorer than the Crownlands. Although the landforms of the region allowed its lords to be rich, they also created major problems when heavy rains surprised them like today.

The mountains and hills of the Westerlands let the water run along their cliffs to end in the valleys, creating large regions where everything was flooded. Entire villages could be lost during the floods of autumn if they were too deep into valleys, which explained why the people preferred to build their homes in heights. Tyrion even told her once about years where the rains were so powerful that they created new lakes out of nowhere. They hadn’t reached autumn yet, and this rain wasn’t about to create a new lake, but it didn’t stop it from slowing them down. Sometimes, the water had climbed so high that they had to turn all around the Goldroad, taking a longer but surer path. Right now, the rain created puddles of about a dozen inches high.

Margaery’s cloak had been soaked early in the day, and Margaery herself was soaked from head to toe soon afterwards. They hadn’t brought a carriage with them where she could have taken refuge. The carriage would have slowed them down. The rain started three days ago, and there had been moments when Margaery wished they had brought a carriage with them, but she knew that with the
rain, a carriage would only have slowed them further. They needed to reach King’s Landing as quickly as possible, and this rain made the travelling much more difficult. They were losing time.

She released a sigh, that was immediately followed by a shiver. Margaery was used to ride, but she had done it mostly for pleasure in the past. When it was time to travel on long distance, she travelled in a carriage with her friends, and they sewed and chattered all the way until they reached their destination. After she became Lady of Casterly Rock, it had been mostly the same, though she mostly shared her carriage with Tyrion now. Her husband used the time on the road to work, and when he had time to spend, he was reading. Margaery sometimes did the same. This time, they travelled on horse all the way from the Rock to King’s Landing. This was something Margaery never did, and at a quick pace even less.

The riders before them stopped, and Margaery had to rein her horse to prevent her from bouncing on the guard before her.

“What’s going on?” she asked to no one in particular, trying to look farther ahead, but failing to see because of the limited visibility.

“I don’t know,” Tyrion replied next to her. They rode together in the middle of the column with more than enough men to protect them if they were surprised by an attack. Two thousand soldiers were escorting them to the capital.

Tyrion sent his squire Ty to take news of the head of the column. He came back a few minutes later.

“My lord, Captain Vylarr believes we should stop the march there.”

“We are only around midday,” Margaery observed.

“Yes, my lady, but the captain believes it would be wise to stop now. The men are tired, and some are about to get sick. He suggests we wait a little for the rain to calm down and for the men to rest.”

“We need to arrive in King’s Landing as quickly as possible. This rest is a delay we can’t afford.”

She looked at Tyrion who seemed thoughtful for a moment, his head half-hidden by the hood of his cloak. “We won’t be of any help in the capital if we arrive sick and half-dead. The men have been travelling in this rain at forced march for days.” He sighed, a resigned look on his face. “Tell Vylarr to find the best place to set up a camp, Ty.”

“Yes, my lord.” The young squire left immediately.

“This will delay us,” Margaery observed, her already dark mood getting worse.

“I know, but we have no other choice. Gold can buy many things, but sunny days are among those it can’t.”

Tyrion’s voice was as morose as hers. He wasn’t as talkative as he used to be. Ever since the day they learned of Ned Stark’s arrest, his traits had grown darker. He wasn’t as cordial or lively as he was before. His behaviour toward her changed as well. Margaery knew her husband very well, and she knew that something was bothering him, something else than the problems in the capital. He looked more concerned for her than before, but at the same time, it almost looked as if he was trying to put some distance between them. It was as if he was blaming himself for something, and she couldn’t guess what it was.

Later, when their tent was raised, Margaery got rid of her cloak and began to dry herself with a towel. Tyrion did the same on his side. Their clothes were all wet, so they changed them for warmer
ones. When it was done, she started to dry her hair.

“Wait.” She turned to look at her husband. “Can I do it?” he asked. There was a strange expression of his face, as if he was ashamed to ask this question, but there was also hope in his eyes.

“Of course.”

She noticed a quick and timid smile that appeared on his lips, as well as an expression of regret in his eyes, as she knelt, her back turned on him, her knees on the furs lining the ground. Seizing another dry towel, he resumed the process she already began, rubbing her hair with the tissue. Sometimes, it would be his free hand, without the towel, that would seize a lock of hair and press the water out of it. Then he would pass the towel on the small surface of bare skin below her neck, and his thumb would caress it on the way. She inhaled deeply. He seldom did this recently. They still spent their nights together on the road, but this was no good time for intimacy, and although they continued to hold each other in their bed, Tyrion stopped to rub her skin in the tender way he used to ever since they were married. If Margaery didn’t position herself closely into his arms or his lap, they would spend the night with their backs turned on each other. Tyrion didn’t make any move to reject her, but he did nothing to reach her either.

She allowed herself to drift away, being carried by the softness of the moment. After some time, she heard the towel being dropped aside, but Tyrion’s hands continued to wander on her bare skin, massaging her neck and her shoulders after he removed the clothes covering them. She kept inhaling and exhaling slowly, every breath making her feel better. From time to time, she shuddered under his touch.

“Are you cold?” he asked her, stopping his movements.

“No.” She didn’t want him to worry about her. She wanted him to resume his movements, but he didn’t.

“Are you sure? You’re shivering.”

“Perhaps because you’re touching me,” she offered as an explanation, a smile on her lips. His hands were still on her shoulders, immobile, when another wave of shivers stroke her. He removed his hands from her skin, to her great displeasure.

“We should have stopped earlier.”

She turned around to face him and took the towel on the furs. “I think it’s your turn now.”

She proceeded to dry his face and his hair, their eyes looking into each other the whole time. She didn’t give much concern to how dried his hair was, being more focused on the things his eyes displayed. There was a sadness into them, as he looked at her. Soon, she was only absently rubbing the towel behind his neck, and it wasn’t long after that for the towel to fall on the ground again. His expression didn’t change. She didn’t like to see him like that. He had the expression he had when he regretted something, when he felt he had done her something wrong. She didn’t understand why he thought so, or seemed to think so. Margery could read her husband like an open book as much as he could read her, and she didn’t like what she saw. She got closer to him and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

He almost didn’t return the kiss. He only brushed her cheek a little, as if he was afraid to touch her. He didn’t back, however. She drew back and looked at him again. He still had the same sorrowful expression.
“What is with you, Tyrion? What’s wrong?”

He looked aside, avoiding her gaze. He seemed to struggle to speak. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “I should have listened to you. We should have dealt with Cersei long before. We wouldn’t be in all this mess now if I did as you told me. I was blinded by the vain hope that Cersei could one day be a real sister to me. I placed that foolish hope before you.” He looked at her, an expression of utter defeat in his eyes. “I’m sorry. You deserve a better husband than me.”

How could he say something like that? “Tyrion, it’s not your fault if Cersei is a cunt.” He looked at her in surprise, and she made a mildly amused face. “We’re going to deal with her now, and we’ll stop her from making things worse than they already are.”

“I only hope it’s not too late.” He slowly brought his hand to her cheek and caressed it. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

This time, he was the one to kiss her. Another strong shiver ran along her body, and she didn’t think it was because of Tyrion’s kiss. He seemed to have realized it as well since he broke their embrace.

“You stay near the fire, get yourself warm. I’ll go outside and see how our men are settling.”

“Damn, you could have told me! I wouldn’t have tried to dry the water out of your face.”

He left with an almost amused look, one that she returned as she went to sit by the fire in their tent, warming her hands over it. She felt cold indeed, shudders taking a hold on her. She wrapped herself tightly in more cloaks and waited. The rain outside was as cold as the water in the caverns of Casterly Rock. Margaery had discovered them when Tyrion made her visit the Rock in the first month of their marriage. They were difficult to find even for people who lived in the Rock all their life. They were lit by torches on the walls, and the stone down there reflected the light and made it easy to see as soon as fire was placed inside a single torch. A few months after she arrived in the Westerlands, she went down to visit them again and found a deep pool with a plateau from where you could jump in it. She knew that there was no one else with her at the time, or so she thought. She got rid of her clothes and jumped into the cold water. It had felt very good, reminding her of her time swimming in the Mander back at Highgarden. It wasn’t long before she and Tyrion left to make a tour of the Westerlands. A few days later, as she took some rest in the new gardens she had organized, he joined her, and that was when Margaery said aloud for the first time that she loved him.

When they came back from the touring of the Westerlands and the signature of the Trade Agreement of Old Oak, Margaery had planned something. She invited Tyrion to see her in the watery caves, and she made sure that when he arrived, he found her swimming into the pool. She had needed some convincing, but he accepted to join her after some time. Tyrion had never learned to swim, so she taught him. And they did much more that day. Except for being a little offended when Tyrion confessed he watched her swim naked before the tour, when she thought no one was with her in the caves, the day had been perfect.

The water had been as cold as the rain was now. She and Tyrion were both shivering when they went out of the water. It was useless to remind herself what they did to warm themselves up. They could be at Casterly Rock right now if it wasn’t for Cersei. Margaery cursed her every day, more often since this heavy rain started. All that was her fault. She would make sure that her sister-in-law couldn’t lift a finger in the future when they arrived in King’s Landing, with or without Tyrion’s help.

Margaery didn’t understand why Tyrion was hesitant to act against her sister. However, what
bewildered her the most was the utter loyalty he showed towards his brother. Ser Jaime Lannister hired a whore for his brother. He made Tyrion believe that the girl loved him. He lied to him. And when he told him the truth, he let their father have the girl raped right in front of his brother’s eyes. Even though the girl was a whore, Tyrion married her. She was Jaime’s sister-in-law according to all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms, and he abandoned the wife of his brother, along with his brother as well. She could still remember Tyrion’s broken face when he confessed raping his first wife. That was his brother’s doing as much as his father. Jaime Lannister did nothing to protect his little brother. He betrayed him. And yet, Tyrion continued to defend him. For Margaery, there was nothing to understand in this. Perhaps it was because Tyrion was alone for most of his life. His father hated him the moment he was born. His sister despised him and tried to have him killed. As for his mother, he never got the chance to know her. His cousins were courteous but not very friendly with him either. Tyrion craved for the love of the others. Margaery loved this aspect of his personality. He was caring towards her for this reason, but it also made him ready to hope, no matter what happened, that his siblings could somehow love him, and because of that he was almost ready to overlook or forgive them everything. And since his brother was the sibling who was the closest to him, he clung to their friendship.

For now, Tyrion seemed ready to put an end to Cersei’s plots, but if he was to relent at some point, Margaery would take matters into her hands. The time had come for Cersei to understand who was the true queen in Westeros.

That night, she was resting next to her husband in their bed. She was wrapped into furs to protect herself from the cold. They both put on nightclothes to keep themselves warm. She could feel from his breathing that her husband wasn’t sleeping. His back was turned on her. They both didn’t seem able to sleep.

“What do you think Cersei is doing right now?” she asked him.

“Probably enjoying herself in the fact that she got what she always wanted. Or she may be looking for plots against her everywhere. She sees enemies in every corner, whether there are or not.”

“Genna once told me that she looked a lot like your mother. Is it true?”

Her husband took some time to answer. He seldom spoke about his lady mother. “Yes, as far as I know. There’s a picture of her somewhere in the depths of the Rock. There are many physical similarities between her and Cersei.”

“What about the psychological resemblances?”

He sighed. “I don’t know. Gerion used to tell me that she was kind, and that my father was never the same after she died, but I barely know anything about her, truth be told. I never got the chance to know her.”

She remained silent. It wasn’t fair that Tyrion knew so little of the woman who brought him into the world. At least, his family should have told him more about her, but it was said that Tywin Lannister didn’t want to hear people talk about his wife after her death. Margaery wondered who this woman had been, to make Tywin Lannister a better man according to his siblings. Would things have been different if she survived Tyrion’s birth? Would Tyrion have grown less lonely? Or would she have despised him for being a dwarf?

“What do you think she would have liked me?” she asked.

“Certainly.” He turned on his side to look at her. “Who wouldn’t love you?”
She smiled sadly. “Cersei.” They shared a humorless laugh. “I know that I’m saying that over and over again, Tyrion, but we need to neutralize Cersei, one way or another, once we arrive in King’s Landing.”

“I know.”

“She can’t remain queen. She’s already been queen for far too long.”

Tyrion looked at her with more intensity than before. “No matter what happens, and what Cersei does, or is, you’ll always be the only queen I have.”

It touched her more than he thought. She pulled him into an embrace, and they remained in each other’s arms until exhaustion got the better of them and sleep claimed them.

It felt as if Margaery only slept two minutes when someone shook her by the shoulder. She turned away from Tyrion to look at the intruder, and found Mira standing before her.

“My lady, forgive me, but there’s a man outside who says he needs to see you.”

“Who?” she asked.

“He didn’t want to give his name, but… From his accent and his clothes, I would say that he is from the North.”

Margaery frowned. “A Northerner wants to see me?”

“Yes, my lady. He says he rode for weeks to reach you. He says it’s very important.”

“Very well. Tell him to come in.”

Margaery turned to her husband, only to discover he already awoke. “A Northerner to see you?” he asked.

“It seems so. I don’t believe Mira could be confused about it.”

“Well, I wonder what a Northerner wants with you.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

They had enough time to dress themselves into a more presentable manner when the man came inside, escorted by Mira. He wore leather, and Margaery could recognize the northern style in his way of dressing, very similar to the one of Eddard Stark at Winterfell.

“Lady Lannister.” He bowed to her.

“You asked to see me?”

“Yes, my lady.” He eyed Tyrion. “I was given to task to deliver a message to you. Only to you.”

He looked again at Tyrion. Margaery looked at him, a question on his face. He shrugged, meaning he had no idea what this was about. “You can give this message to both of us.”

“My lady, I received a clear order to give this message to you, and only to you.”

“Then give it to me now.”
She made her voice so that it was clear there was to be no discussion about it. Reluctantly, the man produced a scroll in a suit of leather. The corners were eaten by water. He gave it to Margaery, keeping staring suspiciously at Tyrion.

“Thank you. Mira, find some accommodations for this man. See that he gets everything he needs.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Her handmaiden left with the Northerner. Margaery looked at the scroll she received, and saw that the wax was grey with a direwolf on it.

“What is it?” Tyrion asked.

“It bears the sigil of the Lord of Winterfell. Why would Ned Stark send a message to me by rider?” He could have used a raven. Margaery also found it strange that the rider was given the order to give it only to her.

“Normally, when you send a rider, it’s because you don’t trust a raven with this message.”

Margaery nodded. “Let’s see what this is about.”

She opened the letter and started to read.

To Lady Margaery Lannister,

I’m afraid the matter of this message will not please you, my lady, but my wife trusts you and I feel you need to know about it. I already sent a message to Stannis Baratheon about it, and to prevent the Realm from falling into chaos, I need your help.

I recently discovered that the children of Cersei Lannister, Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella, are not the king’s children. They are bastards. The queen committed incest with her twin brother, Ser Jaime Lannister. He is the father of all her children. Jon Arryn discovered the truth not long before he died. He was poisoned by the Lannisters because of this. I believe my son Bran fell from the tower at Winterfell because he saw the queen and her brother together, and they pushed him. They later sent an assassin after him.

I need your help, my lady. I cannot hide something like that to the king. I am bound to tell him about this as soon as possible. I’m going to offer Cersei Lannister to leave the capital with as many men as she can and with her children and her brother. I don’t know if your lord husband is aware of this situation. I will do my best to convince the king to let them escape and live in exile in the Free Cities, and I ask for your help to arrange everything with Lord Tyrion to organize their departure as quickly as possible. I will make sure that nothing happens to the queen, her children adher her brother if they accept to leave Westeros for good. I could also arrange for Ser Jaime to join the Night’s Watch and for the queen to become a septa or a Silent Sister, and the same for her children, if you prefer, but I can’t do anything better.

In the memory of your friendship with my lady wife, Lady Margaery, I ask for your help.

Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North

Margaery remained still for a long time after she was done reading the message. She stared at the piece of parchment, trying to understand what was written.

“From the look on your face, I would say this isn’t good news.”
She kept staring at the piece of paper, then she looked at her husband, who seemed worried about her. *I don’t know if your lord husband is aware of this situation.*

“Tyrion…” She looked back at the letter, then again to him. “I think you should read this.”

He took the paper. The frown on his forehead deepened as he read it. “Well, indeed, this is not good news.”

“Tyrion… Is that… Is it true?”

He looked at her, then to the parchment. He shook his head. “Cersei and Jaime have always been close, but… Incest?” From the tone of his voice, he found it quite unbelieving. “No. No, that’s not possible.”

“Are you sure?”

“I know Jaime and Cersei better than anyone. I know they wouldn’t fall into bed with each other. Cersei would never do that. She has always wanted to be queen, and she always wanted her children to be kings and queens. She would never take such a risk. As for Brandon Stark, Jaime is capable of killing children, but he would have killed him himself if it was true. Hiring assassins is more in Cersei’s style.”

“This is a grave accusation. Ned Stark wouldn’t have accused Cersei and Jaime without proof.”

“No, you’re right. Eddard Stark is an honorable fool. A fool, admittedly, but an honorable one. He would never lie about something like that.”

“Then… it means it’s the case?” Margaery saw Joffrey, arrogant, insulting, with blond hair like the sun and green eyes. Tommen and Myrcella, just the same. It was true they looked much more like Cersei than Robert, but… Could they really be born of incest? Strangely, she had no difficulty to imagine that Joffrey could be a bastard, but Tommen and Myrcella?

“There are two possibilities,” Tyrion said, passing a hand on his forehead. “The first one is that Eddard Stark is telling the truth, and that would mean that Cersei and Jaime slept together for years and that I never noticed it.” He shook his head again. “I spent years in King’s Landing to avoid my father. I would have seen something. So, it can’t be that. Or, there’s another possibility. Eddard Stark is saying what he believes to be the truth, but it’s not the truth.”

“Someone made him believe that Cersei and Jaime had an incestuous relationship,” Margaery slowly said. Everyone lied in the capital. Eddard was probably one of the very few to not lie. “Who could have done this?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re really sure that there is no truth in what Eddard Stark wrote?”

“I know this is not true,” he replied, exasperated. “I may be a fool to hope that Cersei could change one day and consider me as her brother, and forgive Jaime more than I could forgive anyone else, but I’m not blind. I know who my brother and my sister are. I know what they are capable of, and what they can’t do. And I know they would never fuck each other.” He made a grimace. “The mere thought of them together makes me sick.”

Truth be told, to imagine Cersei and the Kingslayer together made her sick as well. It was true that Tyrion knew Cersei well enough. He warned her about his sister when they visited King’s Landing for the first time, and since she didn’t listen to him at the time, she received a threat of being strangled
in her sleep from her sister-in-law. “I’m sorry, Tyrion. It’s just… By the Gods, what’s going on? We didn’t have enough of Robert’s death and Ned Stark’s arrest. Now we have this.” She put her hand over her forehead, imitating her husband.

“I know. I don’t know what’s going on in King’s Landing, but it’s not good.”

“All right.” Margaery tried to gather her thoughts. “Let’s suppose that Eddard Stark was fooled into thinking all this. How did he come to believe that?”

“There are people who hate the Lannisters in the capital. My father sacked the city during the war. Many people resent him for that. I suppose some people would like to see Cersei lose her head. And there are also people who still view Robert as an usurper. Daenerys Targaryen was recently married to a Dothraki warlord in Essos. Perhaps they saw it as a good time to cause division in King’s Landing.”

“The Targaryens would be behind this?”

“Maybe. We can’t know for sure. That’s only a supposition. But Robert didn’t do much cleaning after he won. There are still people in the Red Keep who were already there in the time of Aerys. I’m quite sure that there are some who wouldn’t mind if the dragons replaced the stags and the lions. On the other side… This letter might explain why Cersei arrested Eddard Stark. It was certainly written before she placed him into a cell. He must have gone to her, told her about his suspicions… and Cersei decided to neutralize him.”

“She could have denied it,” Margaery scoffed. “Now we might be at war soon because of her actions.”

“Yes, though… If Ned Stark had gone to his friend Robert, telling him that, I’m not sure he would have given more credit to my sister’s word than to the Hand’s word.” Margaery realized it was true. She saw in the capital how Robert cared little for Cersei, and Tyrion said himself that there was no love between them. Cersei hated her husband. “The moment Ned Stark would say to Robert about his suspicions, the children would have been in danger. You can tell what you want against Cersei, but she loves her children. She would burn cities to the ground to protect them.”

“Gods.” Margaery couldn’t believe how the situation got out of control only because Eddard Stark thought that Cersei’s children were born from incest. Then she remembered something strange in the letter. “Wait, Tyrion. Eddard Stark said that he was going to tell Robert. That means the king was still alive when he wrote this.”

“Or he believed that he was still alive.” Tyrion’s voice was grave, as if he realized something too. They looked at each other.

“Cersei killed Robert.” That wasn’t a question that Margaery asked. She made a statement. “You said it yourself. Your sister craves for power. She always wanted it. She did everything she could to overthrow you. She tried to murder you. Do you think she wouldn’t be able to kill her own husband?”

There was a moment of silence before Tyrion answered. “No, she’s capable of that. In fact, she’s probably wanted it for a very long time. As much as she would be… capable of sending an assassin to murder a child.”

Margaery sighed while looking at the roof of their tent. “That’s all her doing. She’s responsible of everything that happened.”
“I don’t see anyone else who could be behind this.”

“Tyrion, that’s unacceptable! She murdered her own husband, the king! That’s not something we can allow.”

“I agree. As soon as we arrive in King’s Landing, we will take care of Cersei. She’s whispering in Joffrey’s ear as we speak. However, we’re going to have a bigger problem than Cersei, I’m afraid.”

“What bigger problem could we have?”

“Stannis Baratheon. Eddard Stark wrote to him as well if we are to believe this message.” He waved it in the air.

Margaery knew what it meant. “He will go to war against Joffrey.”

“And you can be sure that he will tell everyone what Eddard Stark told him. Soon, the whole Seven Kingdoms will hear that Joffrey is born of incest and is no son of Robert. Stannis will claim the Iron Throne for himself, and his brother will most likely follow him. As for the Starks, the Tullys and the Arryns, they will side with Stannis as well. Maybe the Martells will join them.”

“We’re going to end up at war with all the other kingdoms.”

“It seems so.” Tyrion’s voice was full of gravity. He looked at her. “We will need your father’s armies, I’m afraid.”

She took a great inspiration. “I will write to him at Deep Den.”

Tyrion sighed. “I really should have listened to you. I should have taken care of Cersei before she did all this.”

“You’re not to blame, Tyrion. Only Cersei is to blame. We might still have a chance. If we arrive in King’s Landing before she makes things even worse.”

“There’s something we’ll have to find out once we are in the capital.” She looked at him. “Somehow, Eddard Stark was convinced that Cersei’s children were born of incest. Someone set this up. We have to discover who did this.”

Margaery nodded. “I agree. We must neutralize Cersei and the people who spread these rumors about her and your brother.” There was an opening in the flap of their tent. It was dark outside. You couldn’t see anything. The drops of water were still falling heavily on the roof of their tent.

They could face a war against all Westeros. Margaery knew that together the Lannisters and the Tyrells had as many men if not more than all the other great houses combined, but that didn’t mean they were sure to win. Their best hope was to make peace with the Starks by trading Eddard Stark and his daughters. Then they could deal with Stannis and Renly. Hearing the rain over her head, Margaery prayed they would reach King’s Landing before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Catelyn
Catelyn III

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, Catelyn advises Robb, but she's not the only one to advise him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CATELYN III

Swamps filled the land all around them. Swamps and bogs as far as the eye could see. Stretching along the Kingsroad, the banners of all the lords of the North stood proud. Norreys, Flints, Umbers, Mormonts, Karstarks, Boltons, Cerwyns, Hornwoods, Govers, Manderlys and many more, seventeen thousand men strong in all. A few had not arrived yet, mainly the Dustins and the Ryswells and a few other minor houses, but within three days, they would ride south to battle.

Catelyn had known from the beginning that King’s Landing would be a dangerous place for Ned. Ever since Lysa sent her letter, she knew he shouldn’t have gone. She was afraid something terrible could happen. She had lost a first betrothed to a king long ago, and now she was in danger to lose a husband. When Sansa’s letter arrived, claiming that her father conspired against the king, she knew it was a lie, and she knew that these words were not from Sansa. At least, they knew Sansa was still alive, but Ned was in danger to be executed. As for Arya, the letter didn’t mention her. They knew nothing of her situation.

Theon Greyjoy came behind her. “My lady, the war council is about to begin.”

“Thank you, Greyjoy.”

She was looking over the army of the North from the top of the Children’s Tower, the tower Robb took as his residence while they were at Moat Cailin. The room they chose to hold the war council was lower into the tower and she climbed down the stairs. When she arrived, the most powerful lords of the North were already there. The loyal Galbart Glover, with his long brown hair and his greyish beard. Jon Umber, called the Greatjon, missing two fingers after Grey Wind bit them off, Robb’s greatest champion. Maege Mormont, the Lady of Bear Island, the only woman apart from Catelyn in this room. Ser Wylis Manderly, the heir of White Harbor, one of the fatest man she ever met, though not as fat as his father. Rickard Karstark, with hard traits as if they were chiseled in stone, looking more like a Stark than her own son. Roose Bolton, quieter than everyone else around this table, imperturbable. Howland Reed, her husband’s friend, Lord of Greywater Watch, the smallest man at this table. And finally her son, sitting at the head, with Theon Greyjoy at his side. He made her a sign, inviting her to sit by his right.

Robb had called the banners as soon as they received Sansa’s message. Catelyn had decided to follow Robb to Moat Cailin. It was her way to make her farewells before he went to war. She would return to Winterfell, to Bran and Rickon, as soon as Robb and his army rode south. She wished she could force him to go back to Winterfell, but he was no longer a child. The boy she brought into the world seventeen years ago was now a man, as it was evidenced by the hard face he showed to his bannermen right now, the same Ned displayed in the face of his men. He addressed them with all the gravity of the Lord of Winterfell.

“My lords, my ladies, we received news from the Ryswells and the Dustins. They will be here within
two days. On the third, we will march south to save my lord father, Eddard Stark, who you swore to serve."

"We’re going to kick the ass of these Lannister bastards," the Greatjon said, causing a general laughter.

"My lords," Catelyn said, "if you permit, this is no time for japes. Your lord and his two daughters are in danger in King’s Landing. We must set our mind to free them."

"Of course, Lady Stark. Forgive us," Lord Glover offered as an apology.

"You can see on the map right there that the Lannisters have two armies," her son resumed. "One is stationed at the Golden Tooth. The other one is progressing along the Goldroad in direction of King’s Landing. Each is strong of thirty thousand men, levies from their population and sellswords all alike. We will have eighteen thousand men when the Ryswells and the Dustins arrive, while Ser Edmure Tully could muster about twenty thousand."

"What about the Knights of the Vale? How many men will they bring?"

Her son shot a quick glance to her. "The Vale didn’t give us a number yet, but my father was Jon Arryn’s ward. He was like a son for him. We can expect great support from them."

She suggested to her son to not tell the whole truth, while not lying at the same time. They sent two ravens to Lysa, and so far they received no reply. Catelyn didn’t think the two ravens could have gone lost. Lysa received them both, and yet she didn’t answer. She couldn’t understand why. Surely her sister didn’t believe the accusations thrown against Ned. She was the one to warn them about the Lannisters. She knew they couldn’t be trusted, so why didn’t she reply to tell them that she would help? Catelyn hoped the Knights of the Vale would come. Surely Lysa had a good explanation for her delay, though Catelyn had no idea of what it could be.

"My plan," Robb resumed, "is a direct attack on the Lannisters and their allies. They hold my father and my sisters. The only way to get them back is to defeat the Lannisters in the field. For that, we must force them to meet us in the field. Ser Edmure Tully is going to provoke the army at the Golden Tooth into battle while we ride for the Crownlands. If the Lannisters refuse to meet us, we will take cities and castles until they have no choice, and when their armies are defeated, they will have no choice but to give us back our lord, unless they want the capital to be besieged."

"What about the Tyrells, my lord?" Ser Manderly asked. "What do we know of their position?"

"We don’t have any news about a Tyrell army."

"Lord Tyrion’s wife is a Tyrell," Lord Bolton observed. "Mace Tyrell will not stand idle while his son-in-law fights us. We have to expect stronger armies from Highgarden than from Casterly Rock. And I didn’t talk about Lord Stannis and Lord Renly."

"We will deal with the Tyrell armies just like we will deal with the Lannisters. As for Robert’s brothers, I’m not worried about them. They know my father. They know he would never betray Robert. They won’t believe the words of Cersei Lannister."

"I don’t doubt it, my lord, but Joffrey is their nephew, and their king. They will be honor-bound to fight at his side."

"Do you doubt our cause, Lord Bolton?"

"If I did, I wouldn’t be here, my lord. I don’t doubt our cause. I’m merely pointing out that we will
face armies with more men and better weapons than us.”

“A Northerner is worth ten men from the south,” Lady Mormont opposed. “The Kings in the North defeated greater armies than these, and against worse odds. The numbers don’t win a battle.”

No, numbers didn’t win battles, but they helped. She was as conscious as Robb was that they would face an enemy who was more powerful than them. If they recruited all their available population, the Westerlands and the Reach together could field an army over two hundred and fifty thousand men, and they didn’t consider Dorne or the Stormlands.

“My lords,” Robb spoke, “I’m not saying that the task ahead of us is easy, but the Lord of Winterfell, my father, the man you swore an oath to, was taken prisoner by the Lannisters, falsely accused of treason. If we do nothing, he will die. We don’t have the numbers on our side, we don’t have the terrain, we don’t have the weapons, but we are fighting for what is right. You swore to obey my father, to answer his call when he would need you, and today he needs you more than ever. Are we going to stay hidden in our castles as the Lord of Winterfell is being imprisoned, and as we are being accused of treasons and crimes we never committed?”

The door opened at this moment. A guard came to whisper something into Robb’s ear. Robb’s expression turned to astonishment as he listened. “Are you sure? He’s here?” The guard nodded. “I beg your pardon, my lords. I have an important matter to settle. It will only take a few minutes.”

Robb walked away, the lords all rising as he left them. The lords began to chatter between them. They talked about Robb’s plan, some praising his courage and boldness, others worrying about the large forces they would meet and the odds that were against them. Catelyn was worried as well, but they had no choice if she ever was to see Ned and her daughters again.

“You’ll be leaving us soon, I heard, Lady Stark.” It was Lady Mormont who talked to her. She was sitting right next to Catelyn.

“Yes. My place is at Winterfell, with my sons.”

The Lady of Bear Island nodded. “I have daughters me too, my lady. I understand what you’re going through. We’ll make sure that all your children come back safely.”

“I thank you.”

Robb came back at this moment, holding a scroll in his hand, followed by the last person she expected. Jon Snow. She seldom thought about him lately. She didn’t see him since that day in the Inn at the Crossroads. What was he doing here? He was supposed to be at Casterly Rock. From the state of his clothes, she would say he came back from a long journey.

“My lords, please forgive me. This is my brother, Jon. He spent the last months in the Westerlands, at Casterly Rock. He brought me a message from Lord Tyrion Lannister. I would like to have your opinion about it. Here it goes.” Her son unrolled the scroll of paper he was holding and began to read it in front of all the lords. “To Robb Stark, acting Lord of Winterfell. I’m aware that the recent events in King’s Landing must have troubled you at the highest point. I do not believe that your father is guilty of the crimes he is accused of, and if he is, then I am as surprised as you are. Lady Margaery and myself are going to King’s Landing to make the light on this and to free your father and your sisters. By the time you will receive this letter, we might have reached the city already. I’m asking you to keep your armies north of Moat Cailin. In exchange, I will make sure that nothing comes to your father and your sisters.”
“I know that you suspect my family of being responsible for the murder of Jon Arryn, and that you also suspect us of being behind the assassination attempt on your brother, Brandon Stark. I assure you that me and my wife have nothing to see with that.”

Catelyn wanted nothing more than to snatch this letter away from Robb and tear it to pieces. He had the audacity to claim that he had nothing to see with the attempts on Bran’s life, when they knew the dagger used by the assassin belonged to him. They should have held him prisoner and judged him at Winterfell when he stopped there on his way back from the Wall. But Robb didn’t have proof of his guilt back then, and she didn’t have the opportunity to send him a message exposing the little lord. Robb kept reading.

“We suspect people in King’s Landing to be plotting against the Crown. Our investigations so far couldn’t bring us to them, but I hope to discover the truth when I arrive in the capital and to clear your father by the same way. However, if your armies cross the Neck, I will not be able to stop my nephew from declaring you and your family traitors. I do not want a war with you. Even though I know this is a lot to ask, I beg you to trust me…” At this moment, almost all the table reacted, from scoffs to roars to knocking on the table. “… and to let me make sure that your family comes out of this unscathed. I sent your brother with this message, when I could have held him as a hostage. I hope you see it as a sign of goodwill from my part. Tyrion Lannister.”

Robb looked at his bannermen. “What do you think of it?”

“A Lannister cannot be trusted,” the Greatjon declared.

“I agree. To trust a Lannister would be no better than to make an alliance with the King-Beyond-the-Wall,” Lord Karstark added.

“Ned wouldn’t agree,” Lord Reed said. “I was in King’s Landing with him when the Lannisters took the city. We all know how Tywin Lannister butchered the Targaryen children.”

“We are not talking about Tywin Lannister, my lord,” the bastard said. “We are talking about Tyrion Lannister.”

“With respect, my boy, I’m not ready to entrust the life of my lord and my friend into the hands of the son of Tywin Lannister.”

“He’s giving us a chance to save my father without a war.”

“And I suppose the Lannisters are going to let Lord Stark leave without anything to say after they arrested him,” Lady Mormont sarcastically said.

“Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery were not in King’s Landing when my father was arrested. They don’t agree with the actions of the queen.”

“They might be only trying to gain time,” Ser Wylis suggested.

“It’s possible, but we could use this time to our advantage,” Roose Bolton said.

“Explain yourself, Lord Bolton,” Robb said.

“Up to now, the army at the Golden Tooth didn’t move. They didn’t invade the Riverlands. If they wanted to defeat us, they could have done so immediately and taken the Tullys by surprise, but instead they wait. And instead of sending their two armies in the Riverlands to block our path on the Kingsroad, the Imp sent his other army to the capital. His strategy is of a person who is trying to defend his lands, not to conquer territory. I agree with Jon Snow. We do not stand before Tywin
Lannister. If we accept to delay our march on King’s Landing, we could gather more men for our army, give time to the Vale to join us, and try to negotiate with the dead king’s brothers, to see if they would fight for us. We could make very good use of this time.”

“As the Lannisters will,” Ser Manderly interrupted. “They could be using it to slow us down while they prepare themselves.”

“I don’t think so,” Jon Snow said. “Lord Tyrion mobilized the Westerlands as soon as he received news of my father’s arrest. When I crossed the River Road at the Golden Tooth, their army was almost complete, while the river lords were still gathering at Riverrun when I reached it. He could have invaded the Riverlands and smashed down their armies any time, but he didn’t. He mobilized his men only as a warning. He wants peace, not war.”

“And you want to give them what they want? Peace?” the Lord of the Last Hearth roared. “I say we bring them steel instead, boy.”

“Lord Umber, you’re talking to my brother. You will show him respect, just like you show me,” Robb warned.

“Forgive me, my lord. We will follow you, no matter what you decide.”

Robb was silent for a long time. Roose Bolton broke the silence. “We don’t need to take a decision yet. The Ryswells and the Dustins will arrive in the next days, and we won’t leave before. So if our lord needs time to think about all this…”

Robb looked at the Lord of the Dreadfort with cold eyes, only to meet an emotionless face. Then he looked at all the people in the room. “I thank you all for your advice, and I will consider all of this. Until our last men arrive, I want you to prepare your men for the march ahead of us. You’re free to go. Mother, Jon, Theon, please stay.”

The lords departed, and soon she was alone with her son, the bastard and the Greyjoy. Robb turned to his brother.

“Jon, you shouldn’t have argued this way with them.”

“They rejected the offer without even considering it.”

“I know, but the way you spoke, it was as if you accepted the Lannister’s offer right away.”

“Of course, I would accept it. It might our best chance to save our father and our sisters.”

Their best chance? Catelyn couldn’t believe what she heard. “Our best chance is to defeat them in the field. The Lannisters cannot be trusted,” Catelyn said.

Jon Snow looked at her. “You’re wrong. I spent months close to Lord Tyrion. I saw how he rules the Westerlands. His way of ruling is not that different from my father’s.”

Anger flared in her. He compared the Imp to Ned. “Your… father wouldn’t try to murder a child in his bed.”

“And Tyrion Lannister wouldn’t either. His wife said so to Robb. He’s not capable of ordering a child to be murdered.”

“It’s true, she told me, but I’m afraid it’s not true,” her son said.
“She probably lied,” Theon added.

“How can you be sure of that?” the bastard asked.

“Because my mother went to King’s Landing, to inquire about the attempt on Bran’s life,” Robb explained. He looked at her husband’s son. “Jon, the dagger that was used by the assassin belonged to the Imp.”

“What?” He had a bewildered expression on his face. “Are you sure?”

Catelyn stepped forward into the conversation. “I got the information from Petyr Baelish in King’s Landing. The dagger belonged to Prince Joffrey, but the Imp won it in a bet.”

Jon Snow’s eyes were hollow for a moment. “The dagger could have been stolen.”

Catelyn stared at him, furious. “Bran was almost killed on the order of this man!”

“This man stopped people from slicing my throat. I saw him sentence one of his own men to death for murdering a child in the streets while he was drunk. His wife is funding a dozen orphanages in Lannisport, and more across the Westerlands. Do you really think people like that could have murdered Bran?” He turned his head to look at her son. “Robb, you saw him give a saddle to Bran. Why would he do that if he wanted him to die?”

“Perhaps he only wanted to fool us.” Catelyn was puzzled by the lack of conviction in her son’s voice.

“Just like the Lannister lady fooled you, didn’t she, Robb?” Theon Greyjoy asked, smirking. Robb glared furiously at him.

“Robb,” Jon Snow resumed, “if the dagger found in the murderer’s hand belonged to me or Theon, would you think we are behind this?”

“There’s no link with this,” Catelyn said.

“Someone can have stolen this dagger as much as he could have stolen mine or Theon’s. and to be honest, if Tyrion Lannister really hired someone to kill Bran, would he give him a dagger that belongs to him?”

Robb sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

Catelyn looked at her son. “Robb, who else could have sent this man? My sister told us that the Lannisters are behind her husband’s death. They murdered him.”

“Lysa Arryn is mad.”

Catelyn turned her head quickly to look at Jon Snow. No doubt, he was the one to tell this. “How dare you say something like that?”

“It’s not me who said that.” He looked at her with a defying expression. She only witnessed it once, when he said goodbye to Bran. Jon Snow always looked away when she stared at him, and this time hadn’t been different, but to the opposite of the previous times, he had defied her with his eyes before looking away, after she told him to leave. This time, however, he didn’t look away, and he defied her at the same time. “It’s Margaery Lannister. How old is her son?”

“He must be ten.” Why did he ask her this?
“Well, when Lady Lannister visited King’s Landing for Joffrey’s name day, she had a private discussion with Lady Arryn, and she fed her son to her breast during the conversation.”

“That’s a lie!” Catelyn knew her sister. Lysa wouldn’t do something like that.

“Do you have any proof of that? I could say that Lord Baelish lied to you as well.”

“Petyr would never lie to me. He is a friend. I’ve known him for years. He has no reason to lie to me.”

“That’s enough!” Robb spoke with authority. “Stop it. That’s not an easy decision to take. I’m not sure if we can trust the Imp with freeing Father, but on the other side, if he is sincere… Jon, do you trust Lord Tyrion Lannister?”

“With my life.” He nodded as he gave his answer.

“It’s too great a risk to entrust your father’s life into the hands of this… man. Our best chance is to fight them. If you defeat the Lannisters in the field, they will be forced to free your father and your sisters,” Catelyn pushed forward.

“What if we lose? We’re taking as much risk if not more by defying them on the battlefield,” the bastard countered.


“You weren’t at Casterly Rock with me, Theon. You didn’t see how the Lannisters and the Tyrells fight. They have better weapons and better armors than us. Most of them were capable of beating me at sword fighting. On my way here, the Lannister army at the Golden Tooth was almost complete and ready to go to war, while at Riverrun the lords were still gathering. They have an organized army, and I’m not even talking about the army of the Reach. Are you ready to fight on the battlefield against an enemy five or ten times larger than you?”

“You father once said that one man on the walls is worth a hundred, or a thousand men in the fields, I think. And Lady Mormont just said that a man from the North is worth ten men from the south.”

“Then Lady Mormont knows nothing. I fought side by side with knights from the Westerlands, and they know how to fight.”

“We cannot let Ned’s fate, and Sansa’s and Arya’s fates in the hands of a Lannister,” Catelyn declared, cutting their argument short.

Robb didn’t say anything. Everyone was looking at him now. He clenched his fist, then unclenched it. “I’m going to think about all this. I need time.”

“We don’t have the time,” Catelyn argued. Every hour that passed was an hour where Ned and her daughters were in danger.

“We can only leave in three days anyway, no matter what happens. I’ll have taken my decision by that time.” His words were final, and she could feel it. “I’ll have a room arranged for you, Jon. It’s good to see you again.”

He patted the bastard’s shoulder and left. Theon followed, and Jon Snow was about to join them, but Catelyn called after him before he stepped through the door frame.

“You, wait. We need to talk.”
Slowly, Jon Snow closed the door behind him and looked at her, a heavy expression on his face.
“What do you want from me, Lady Stark?”

“You…” She pointed him. “You may just have condemned my husband and my daughters.”

“I’m trying to save them.”

“The Lannisters won’t show them any mercy. You might have just doomed them.”

“Tyrion Lannister and his wife may be their best chance to get out from this alive.”

“You’re a fool to believe them. You are a fool, or else you’re working for them, and you’re a traitor.”

She regretted her words as soon as she said them. They left her mouth before she could think about them. Jon Snow stared at her in utter anger. “You’re not my mother, and I’m not your son, but your husband is my father, and your daughters are my sisters as much as they are for Robb, Bran and Rickon. I want to see them safe just like you do, and I will do everything I can to save them.”

“By selling them to the Imp?”

“By trusting a man who saved my life and gave my brother a new chance to ride, and a woman who took care of Bran after you were injured. They offered me a chance to do something of my life. Between trusting them, or a mad woman and a brothelkeeper, I think the choice is not very hard.”

He stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Catelyn spent the rest of the day to worry and to pray. There was no sept at Moat Cailin, but she prayed all the same to the Father to watch over her sons and her husband, to the Mother and the Maid to watch over her daughters, and to the Warrior to make Robb strong for the coming war. However, she was afraid that Robb wouldn’t go to war. She was afraid that he would be convinced by Jon Snow’s words. He wasn’t to listen to him. Jon Snow had spent time in the Westerlands, close to the Lannisters, and like he told her, they gave him a chance to have a life somewhere else than the Wall. Catelyn suspected that the Lannisters were using him to prevent Robb from marching on the south in their own interests. They made the bastard loyal to them. Robb shouldn’t listen to him. That was her own fault if her son gave so much credit to the word of the bastard.

Ten years ago, the two were practicing in the training yard at Winterfell, under the eyes of Ser Rodrik Cassel and her own. Arya had just been born and Bran was on his way. She watched the boy who already looked too much like Ned defeat her son time and time again, sending him stumbling on the ground. After a tenth fall, Robb grew exasperated. Ser Rodrik lectured him on his stance. When he and the bastard braced for another duel, Jon Snow said he was Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword in the Morning. Robb replied that he was Eddard Stark, the Lord of Winterfell, and he started to attack with rage. Jon Snow ducked the assault and brought his sword down on Robb’s back.

“You can’t touch me. You can’t touch me,” the bastard began to chant, right before Robb swung his sword like a wild animal and got him in the chest, taking away his breath. Catelyn felt relief to see that her son succeeded to reach his opponent. The relief lasted a very brief moment. Next, Robb was smashing at Jon Snow. The bastard lost his sword, but Robb continued to hit him again and again. Catelyn soon watched in horror as her son was punching an innocent boy on the ground. She yelled at Robb to stop, and soon Ser Rodrik and two other men took him away from his victim, but the damage was done. The boy lying on the ground had several cuts and grazes on his face, and his lips were opened. Catelyn didn’t know it then, but the bruises would stay there for weeks.
Ser Rodrik was already lecturing her son after he made sure the other boy was taken safely to the maester, but Catelyn cut his lecture short and brought her son with her on the spot, dragging him by the ear. She brought him to his rooms, crying and begging her to let him go, saying he would do anything and that he was sorry, that she was hurting him. In his chamber, she forced him to sit down on a chair, and she berated him.

“What you did is wrong,” she had told him.

“He kept beating me,” he wailed. He was only six.

“That’s no reason.”

“You said that I would be Lord of Winterfell one day. That I couldn’t let him beat me. That Jon couldn’t be Lord of Winterfell.”

“I did, but that’s no reason to hurt him like you did.”

“Why?” He was really a child.

“Because he’s your brother.”

The words had come out of her mouth like this, so easily. She gave her sons a sermon on the importance of family, of being loyal to your own kin, to those of your own blood. She told him that he and Jon Snow shared the same father and the same siblings, and that if he behaved in this way, then he didn’t deserve to be Lord of Winterfell. Both he and Jon were to be entirely loyal to each other. Robb had finally understood what she said, and then he had cried, and she consoled him the best she could. No other incident of this sort ever happened afterwards between him and his half-brother.

Catelyn almost regretted what she told her son back then. She shouldn’t have allowed her children to grow too close to the bastard. It was too dangerous. She made a mistake. No matter how she tried to make things better, she always did the wrong thing. But this time, she knew that Jon Snow’s suggestion was the wrong thing to do. They had the right plan, their best chance to save Ned and the girls, and she couldn’t let Robb make a different choice.

That evening, she went to see her son. He was looking over a map of Westeros. He looked up when she entered and smiled at her.

“Good evening, Mother.”

“Good evening, Robb.” She played with her hands for a moment. “I need to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.”

“You mustn’t accept Lord Tyrion’s offer. It’s a trap, I can feel it. To trust him would be the biggest error to make.”

He sighed. “I’ve been thinking about all this in the last hours, Mother. What Jon says makes sense. It’s illogical that Lord Tyrion gave his own dagger to an assassin. It’s quite possible that someone stole it. The assassin may have had access to Lord Tyrion’s personal belongings and he took it among them.”

“If that’s the case, then it means he was in the Lannister retinue. He could only be working for them.”
“Jon told me that Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery don’t get along very well with the queen. He even told me that they hate each other. What if the queen was behind all this and that she tried to frame her brother for this? She may have bribed one of his men, and it would explain why Tyrion Lannister and Lady Margaery are trying to stop her.”

“I don’t believe this is wise to trust them.”

“You told me you trusted Lady Lannister.”

“I’m no longer sure we can trust her.”

Catelyn still wanted to believe that the Lady of Casterly Rock wasn’t involved in all this, but she couldn’t say it with certainty any longer now that Ned was under arrest. Could Lord Tyrion have done all these things without his wife knowing or suspecting anything? And Petyr told her in King’s Landing that she was with her husband the real power in Westeros. She was afraid to trust this woman.

“Jon is saying that he trusts Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery. His wife told me that the Lord of Casterly Rock couldn’t have a child murdered. And I trust Jon. If he trusts them, then I can trust them as well.”

“You’re making a mistake.”

“We will be facing an army much bigger than ours, Mother. The odds that we may win are limited. We might have more chances to save Father, Sansa and Arya if we let the Lannisters do as they say.”

“Your father and your sisters might not come out of this alive.”

“And they might die as well if we fight. If we reject Lord Tyrion’s offer, then we will have him as an enemy forever, not only his sister and Joffrey. We must give a chance to the Imp.”

“You are wrong to trust him on the word of Jon Snow. You shouldn’t trust him.”

He looked at her, skeptical. “Are you telling me I shouldn’t trust my brother?” he asked slowly.

She gulped. “Your half-brother.”

His eyes on her were hard. “It’s unfair what you’re saying, Mother.”

“I’m just stating a fact. He is not your brother. He is your half-brother.”

He looked at her for a very long time. “I took my decision. Our troops will remain at Moat Cailin to let the Imp and his wife deal with the queen. In the meantime, we will recruit more men if we ever are to march south.”

Despair sunk into her heart. She thought of Ned, of Sansa, of Arya. Robb was condemning them. “Robb, please, don’t do this!”

“I took my decision. I’m not going to come back over it. Without the Knights of the Vale, we don’t have enough men to defeat the Lannisters and the Tyrells. And if what Lady Margaery said to Jon is true, then she’s probably not about to send us any help.”

“You really believe what she told him? That your aunt is mad?”

“I’ll discard this possibility for good the day she will stand before me with the men we need. In the meantime, we stay in the North and we wait for Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery to free Father,
Sansa and Arya.”

He wouldn’t change his mind. It was set on it, just like when Ned brought the bastard boy home and said he would live with them. Catelyn wished so much that her husband never insisted on bringing up this boy. The Lannisters had succeeded. They could do as they wished in the south., and there would be no one to stop them. They used the bastard very well.

Chapter End Notes

Catelyn's behaviour is always complex when it comes to Jon Snow. On one side, she hates him for being the son her husband had with another woman, leading her to be irrationally jealous of his mother because he looks more like Ned than any child she ever had, and to be afraid all the time that he could be a threat to her own children, when Jon shows no sign at all that he could one day threaten his brothers or sisters' positions or lives. On the other side, she shows regrets and even compassion towards Jon in some occasions, though it is so discreet that almost no one around her, and especially Jon, can see it. I tried to picture it the best way I could in this chapter, with this invented anecdote from Jon's childhood. It is not from the books or the show, and it is my own creation. Ironically, Catelyn's behaviour at this moment probably made Robb and Jon closer than ever, while at the same time Catelyn doesn't want her children to fully consider Jon like their brother. (Of all Cat's children, Sansa, who was the closest to her mother, is the only one to call Jon her "half-brother", probably an influence from her mother.)

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery
Margaery XIV

Chapter Notes

Tyrion and Margaery arrive in King’s Landing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XIV

Margaery smelled King’s Landing before she saw it. She didn’t have a particularly sensible nose, but she wasn’t used to the stench of the capital of the Seven Kingdoms. At Casterly Rock, even though the evacuation systems were made so the inhabitants wouldn’t smell the odor from the mines under their feet, the winds sometimes caused a few surprises to the people of the castle. But the scent they received back at the Rock was nothing when compared to the one that surrounded the capital of the Seven Kingdoms. It seemed the Targaryens didn’t know how to organize a city like the Lannisters or the Hightowers did.

It took them a month and a half to arrive, despite their light luggage and their forced march. Finally, they made it. Margaery saw the walls of the capital when they turned to their left and that the Kingswood allowed her to look at the city. Its appearance was all normal. From where she was, nothing seemed to have changed since her last visit.

“I suppose we shouldn’t expect a warm welcome from Cersei,” Margaery said to her husband who rode next to her, like always.

“You suppose well. She will be furious. And she will be furious to see us arrive with two thousand men. She’s going to believe that we came to rule the Seven Kingdoms instead of her.”

“She’s not entirely wrong.”

“Cersei is not always wrong. I would say that she is mistaking from half to two-third of the time.”

They shared a light chuckle. “Well, it’s time for her to make mistakes somewhere it won’t cause problems to everybody in this world.”

“Yes, it’s high time. My sister should never have been queen. It should have been you.”

She was somewhat surprised by his words. They also unsettled them, since only a few years ago, all she wanted was to be the queen. “And I thought that I was already the queen.” Another small muffled laugh. “But I don’t regret the fact that I wasn’t the one to marry Robert. I leave him to Cersei. She deserved an uncaring husband.”

“Robert Baratheon might agree with you, but I think that if he was alive, he would regret marrying her more than ever. And from what Jaime told me, he regretted it from the very day of their wedding.” He remained silent for a moment before he resumed. “I liked Robert in some way. He wasn’t a horrible man deep inside.”

“You’re right. He wasn’t horrible. Just irresponsible.”

“As are many people I know.”
“Like who?”

He hesitated. “My brother.” Tyrion looked at her. “And myself.”

She hated it when Tyrion talked poorly of himself, even more recently. Before, he did it while laughing and joking, which made his comments somehow enjoyable to a certain point, even if they were only half-jokes. Now he spoke seriously. She didn’t like this side of the man she married.

Margaery hoped they weren’t too late. Cersei was capable of everything. They needed over a month to reach the capital, despite their forced march. They might have arrived one week or two sooner if it weren’t for the rains. She was never superstitious, nor much god-fearing although she believed in the gods, but the rain slowed them down so much that she wondered a few times if this was Tywin Lannister’s revenge against her for banishing the *Rains of Castamere* from the Rock. She told so to Tyrion one night, as the rain fell so hard that she feared their tent would open from the top, and she managed to make him laugh with this.

They didn’t have much cause for joy or laughter on their way to the capital. They both were in sour mood, and their meeting with Ser Kevan on their way didn’t make things better. He informed them of all the events that took place in the capital when his path crossed theirs on the Goldroad. She and Tyrion received all the information he could provide as they dined together one evening.

“So, Kevan, tell us what happened,” Tyrion asked.

“If it doesn’t bother you, we could discuss about it later. I’m afraid this journey exhausted me,” his uncle said.

“The situation is dire, Kevan. We need the latest news. Ned Stark’s message wasn’t very reassuring.”

The knight was about to bring his cup to his lips, but he stopped in his movement. “Ned Stark’s message?”

That was when Margaery talked for the first time. “He sent me a letter by rider. He claimed that Cersei’s children were all born of incest with Ser Jaime.”

He looked at Tyrion. “That’s what the message said,” her husband confirmed.

Ser Kevan looked back at her, then he sighed. “I visited him in his cell after he was arrested. He told me the same thing.”

“Do you have an idea of who could have made Ned Stark believe something like that? Why did he believe that Joffrey was a bastard?” she asked.

“Ned Stark is not the kind of person to lie, Kevan. We believe someone fooled him into thinking it. Do you have an idea of who it could be?” Tyrion asked. His uncle shook the head.

“I don’t know.”

Margaery pressed her uncle-in-law. “But there must be something that made him believe something like that. An accusation of incest against the queen is not something we do lightly.” They had to know why Eddard Stark tried to take action against Cersei.

Ser Kevan seemed to hesitate. “He claimed that he found a book, a book about the families of Westeros. For the few marriages between Baratheons and Lannisters he found in it, all children had black hair. And the king, the prince and the princess all have shining blond hair. That’s what he told
“A book?” Margaery was quite surprised. “He accused Cersei because he read something in a book?”

“Yes.”

“He can’t have done that only for this. To come to that conclusion with a book, there must be something else that draw him to think that Cersei was unfaithful to Robert, especially for him to believe that she slept with Jaime,” Tyrion thought aloud. “Kevan, did you notice something unusual with Ned Stark in the days before he was arrested? Did he act strange? Did he do something he wouldn’t do in normal circumstances? Did he talk with someone in particular?”

“Well, there is one thing, maybe. I know he spent a lot of time with Baelish.”

“Littlefinger? The Master of Coin?” Margaery asked.

“Yes. It’s normal that the Hand spends time with the Master of Coin, especially with the dire situation of the Crown’s finances, but I have a few spies in the city, and they actually saw them discussing more than I expected from Ned Stark. A few even reported that they saw Ned Stark visiting his brothel.”

“It seems that even the honorable Ned Stark cannot resist the girls of the capital,” Tyrion commented, to Margaery’s great displeasure. She made him understand her feelings about this with a gaze, and his smug expression was replaced by one of shame.

“That’s not it. He went to this brothel with Littlefinger, and they were accompanied by his guards. That didn’t make sense. People who go to these brothels try to remain unseen to a certain extent.”

“Except me. But since Eddard Stark is not the Imp and that he tried to hide Jon Snow at Winterfell, I admit that I’m surprised with his behaviour me too.”

“I spent a lot of time with Ned Stark. He despises brothelkeepers, and Baelish still bears a scar from his brother. It’s not normal that both were together so often, including outside the Red Keep, and when Baelish had no ledgers near him to work on the finances.”

“For myself, I certainly find unusual that Lord Eddard Stark got along so well with the brothelkeeper who spread a rumor that Catelyn Stark surrendered her maidenhead to him when she lived at Riverrun.” Margaery and Kevan both looked at Tyrion with utter astonishment. “A rumor that is running in the brothels of King’s Landing. It’s not recent,” he explained.

Margaery ignored the matter. She didn’t wish to speak of Tyrion’s past experiences, not right now. “Perhaps Baelish was trying to get some advantages by getting close to the Hand of the King?” Margaery suggested.

“Maybe, but Ned Stark’s behaviour is much more difficult to explain. He told me himself that he didn’t trust Baelish, and I believe he was sincere,” the knight said.

“Or else he’s very good at lying,” Tyrion said.

“The Starks don’t know how to lie,” Margaery stated. Whenever they tried to hide something from them, they failed.

“You should keep an eye on Littlefinger in the capital. I don’t trust him,” his uncle warned them.
“Is there an idiot in any village who trusts Littlefinger?” Tyrion asked. He gave her a knowing look. She knew very well what he was talking about. It was obvious for everybody who met the Master of Coin that he wasn’t a man to trust. His attempts to make her doubt about her marriage with Tyrion proved it to her a year ago.

“We should also keep an eye on Varys,” she added. “I know he gave us information, but I don’t trust him all the same. And Pycelle either.”

“For now, they all stand behind Cersei,” Kevan informed them.

“How did she manage to take all the power? I thought you were supposed to stop her from doing anything foolish, ser.”

“I tried. Eddard Stark met her and revealed his suspicions about her children. He told her to leave for Casterly Rock before Robert came back from his hunt. Cersei and Jaime reacted by killing his guards and arresting him.”

“You couldn’t stop that? The red cloaks are supposed to obey you before Cersei?”

“I only learned of their plans when they were executed. I was caught between the two sides. I tried to take back the situation under control, and the red cloaks followed me for a time, but then Cersei convinced Janos Slynt to side with her.”

“What did she offer him?” her husband asked.

“A lot of gold. Ten thousand golden dragons to the commander, five thousand to each of his lieutenants, and a hundred for the rest of the cloaks. She also gave Slynt a lordship, along with the seat of Harrenhal.”

“Harrenhal?” Margaery couldn’t believe it. “She’s going to turn all the Riverlands against us.”

Harrenhal changed of hands several times since the Conquest that made Margaery’s ancestors the lords of Highgarden. Half a dozen families ruled the castle and its territories, but each faded after three generations at best. The castle was reputed to be cursed. Still, it actually belonged to House Whent. The Whents were bannermen of the Tullys, and Lord Tully’s wife was a Whent. Catelyn Stark and Lysa Tully, respectfully Lady of Winterfell and Lady of the Vale, were her daughters. Taking Harrenhal away from the Whents and giving it to a butcher’s son would make the three northern kingdoms angrier at them, and make a peaceful solution harder to achieve.

“Joffrey granted the castle to Slynt by royal decree,” Ser Kevan explained. “I don’t see what we can do about it. Unless Joffrey revokes his own decree, but doing so early in his reign would be dangerous and give the image of a king who cannot take decisions.”

“There are two thousand men in the City Watch if I recall,” Tyrion said.

“Yes, though Slynt had begun to recruit more men when I left. I think that with the new recruits, there were about three thousand gold cloaks, maybe more. Cersei removed me from the small council and had Slynt to replace me.”

“Cersei doesn’t have enough money to pay over two hundred thousand golden dragons. I made sure she had enough to maintain a rich life, but not enough for that kind of things.”

“I believe Baelish is behind this. As Master of Laws, Janos Slynt depended of me, but he and his men are paid by the Master of Coin. Littlefinger is the only one who could provide Cersei with such an amount of gold. He controls the royal treasury. All the officials in charge of it are in his pocket,
and he has a lot of gold himself. I know he met Cersei in secret more than once.”

“So he’s the one who allowed Cersei to seize the power. What did he get from this? What did Cersei give him?”

“Nothing that I know of.”

Margaery promised herself to look into it. She didn’t trust Petyr Baelish since their discussion during Joffrey’s tourney, and his actions looked suspicious to her. If Ser Kevan was to be believed, Baelish first advised Ned Stark, and now it was Cersei that he advised. And it was odd that he helped her without getting anything in return. She didn’t like this man. He unsettled her.

“What other foolish decisions did our queen take?” Tyrion asked to his uncle.

“She summoned almost all the lords of Westeros to King’s Landing. The decree she had Joffrey make said that if they didn’t present themselves before their new king, they would be branded traitors. It included all the lord paramounts, Renly, Stannis and his family, and even you both. If she executes the decree, almost all Westeros could turn against us,” Kevan said.

“Did she give a date to answer the summon, or to come to the capital?”

“The decree was… very open to interpretation.”

“She’s doing it so she can strip anyone she wants from their lands and titles, whenever she has the envy. That includes me.”

“The decree was specific on one thing.” The knight looked at her. “She called you Lady Margaery Tyrell, and you were named next to your father and your brother. Your name was separated from Tyrion’s. I think she is planning something against you, my lady.”

Margaery looked at Tyrion. They thought exactly the same thing, and she voiced it. “Cersei must be removed. We must send her away, far from King’s Landing, far from Joffrey. Perhaps force her to marry again. We must deprive her of all the power and the influence that she has. She’s too dangerous.”

Ser Kevan nodded. “It will for the better,” he said on a resigned tone. “I questioned her before the court before I left, and I tried to make Joffrey understand that he shouldn’t follow her advice. She was humiliated when her son told her to shut up.”

Margaery pictured Cersei being ordered to shut her mouth by her own son. How ironic it would be, considering she hoped to hold the power through her son. “I don’t remember being prouder of you than now, Kevan,” her husband declared.

The knight sighed. “I hate all of this. Cersei is my niece, and despite everything she did, she is the mother of our king.”

“We cannot allow her to remain in the capital, Ser Kevan,” Margaery opposed. She was beginning to be fed up by the Lannisters’ will to spare Cersei. “She’s been ruling for a few weeks, and the Seven Kingdoms are on the brink of war.”

“I know.” He drank some wine. “Well, if we can find her a husband, it might be for the best. She can still have children, and it would be cruel to force her into widowhood for the rest of her life at this age.”

Margaery laughed in her mind. She doubted that Cersei had any wish to marry again. Unlike Ser
Kevan believed, most women would avoid second weddings if they could. So had been the case with her grandmother. She never wanted to marry again after her grandfather died. Truth be told, she never actually wanted to marry him. She married him because she didn’t want to marry the Targaryen she was promised to.

She thought about Tyrion. He was twenty-six, seven years older than her, and although they both still had many years ahead of them, she couldn’t deny the fact that Tyrion was likely to die before her. She didn’t know what would be worse. To live without him, or to die knowing that he would live without her. Would she marry again if he was to die? She didn’t think she could. After three years with him, she couldn’t imagine going into another arranged marriage, not after experiencing what love was when it was shared with the man you spent your life with. She couldn’t picture herself married to someone else. She would probably spend the rest of her life as a widow, just like her grandmother. She was well loved in Casterly Rock. The people there would certainly accept her as a dowager, and she could convince her parents to not arrange her another marriage.

But what of Tyrion? Would he marry again, if she was to die tomorrow? She knew her husband loved her, but as Lord of Casterly Rock, he had duties towards his family as well. Margaery was no heir. At best, her marriage was binding her family to another one, creating alliances, but she didn’t have to provide an heir to Highgarden like Loras had to. However, Tyrion needed an heir to succeed him. So far, they failed to have a son. If she died without children, Tyrion was expected to marry again to further the Lannister line.

Margaery wouldn’t tolerate it if Tyrion was seeing other women than her, and she didn’t like the thought that he could take another wife if she ever left. Imagining another woman sitting by his side in the Great Hall of Casterly Rock, walking with him in the gardens she planned, dining with him in the evenings, or sharing their bed… There were few things Margaery couldn’t suffer, but these thoughts were among them. She couldn’t support the idea that Tyrion might turn to another woman, replace her. She didn’t feel like she could be replaced, but on the other side, she knew that Tyrion craved after one thing, and that thing was love. He loved her almost from the very moment they met. If she was gone, would he run to the first woman who would look like she loved him in return? She thought about the tales surrounding Tytos Lannister and his mistress. Would Tyrion bring a whore into their bed to take her place, or would it be a wheelwright’s daughter, or another highborn lady?

She chased these ideas from her head. This wasn’t about to happen. Both of them were still young, and despite the fact that their union didn’t prove fruitful up to now, Margaery was still hopeful. Her mother needed three years before she had her, and another two years before Loras followed. If she was anything like her lady mother, she wasn’t far from getting pregnant.

“Kevan, tell me, how did Robert Baratheon die? And not the version Cersei is giving. I want to hear the truth.”

The knight remained silent for a long time after his nephew asked him about this. His eyes switched from Margaery to Tyrion a few times. Then he spoke.

“We know that Robert was killed by a boar during a hunting trip. Several witnesses who hunted with him attested it, Ser Barristan Selmy and my son Lancel included. They reported that the king drank a lot. He was drunk when the boar killed him, but that’s not all. Ser Barristan confirmed me that Lancel kept offering wine to Robert. I know that Robert asked for wine very often and was very displeased every time Lancel couldn’t fill his cup. Robert was angrier than usual because Ned Stark had resigned, so Lancel may only have been trying to keep the king in a good mood. However, I know that Lancel was knighted by Joffrey the day after his father died.”

He said nothing more, and he didn’t need to say more. Anyone could see the link between all of this.
It wasn’t difficult to guess how Cersei got rid of her husband. Ser Kevan was looking into an empty space on the ground. Margaery could understand how he felt. His own son probably played a major role in the king’s death.

“If Eddard Stark didn’t threaten to tell Robert that his children were bastards born of incest, none of that would have happened,” Tyrion said gravely.

“Things are not entirely hopeless, however,” the knight said. “When I last spoke with Ned Stark, I proposed him to acknowledge Joffrey as king and deny all his previous accusations, for the assurance to be allowed to take the black and to order his son Robb to bend the knee. He seemed… tempted to accept. We have his children after all. Cersei and Jaime approved my plan when I suggested it.”

“I suppose that if something can make the Lord of Winterfell forsake his honour, then it must be his family,” Margaery observed.

“Family, Duty, Honor,” Tyrion repeated.

“You have his bastard son, and Ned Stark seems very fond of him, or else he wouldn’t have taken care of him,” Kevan Lannister said.

“We don’t have him. Not anymore.”

“What?”

“He rode north the day we received the news of his father’s arrest. I let him go.”

Ser Kevan was looking at his nephew, bewildered. “Why did you do that, Tyrion? He was a valuable hostage.”

“He was a guest at Casterly Rock. Honor means a lot for the Starks. Sending him back home was a gesture of good will. And I didn’t send him back empty-handed. He brought a message to Robb Stark, telling him to stay at Moat Cailin the time I could solve the situation with Cersei. I convinced Jon Snow to talk to his brother for this. It will prevent a war with the Starks as long as we manage to send them back their father. Anyway, we already have Ned Stark and his two daughters. It’s more than enough for hostages.”

“We only have one of his daughters.”

“One?”

“Arya Stark disappeared. She is nowhere to be found.”

“Disappeared? What, in a puff of smoke?”

“She escaped when Jaime and Cersei had Ned Stark arrested. The red cloaks and the City Watch were unable to find her.”

“Do you have any idea where she is?” Margaery asked.

“No.”

Margaery shook her head. “We had four Starks that we could use to trade. Now we only have two. And if we want the Starks to bend the knee, it will be much more difficult if their youngest daughter is found dead in some back alley.” She wondered how was Sansa. If her sister was nowhere to be
found and her father a prisoner, she had to be in great distress. Margaery would have to see her as soon as she arrived in the city.

“I hope that Ned Stark accepts the deal you offered, Kevan,” Tyrion said. “And that Cersei makes no other mistake before we arrive. She already made more than enough to haunt us for a generation.”

This discussion took place a few days ago. Now they were about to get through the Lion’s Gate and enter the capital. This time, they were coming to King’s Landing with a small army. They had two thousand men, and they could count on the red cloaks inside the Red Keep. When Ser Kevan left, Cersei also removed the leader of the red cloaks and replaced him by one of Janos Slynt’s lieutenant. However, the other officers among the red cloaks were still loyal to Casterly Rock and would side with Tyrion as soon as they entered the Red Keep. Kevan ordered them to remain discreet and to obey Cersei until Tyrion arrived. Cersei had the gold cloaks of Janos Slynt, but they were only a police force, not an army, and most of them would be patrolling in the streets. They could take control of the castle without problem. It would be difficult for the guards at the gates to refuse entrance to the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock, especially with two thousand men behind them.

Tyrion joined the head of the column to talk with the captain who was responsible of the gate, and after a short exchange where her husband proved again how sharp his tongue was, they were allowed to proceed inside the city. Tyrion stayed in front while Margaery lingered behind among the Lannister men with her own guards from the Reach. Tyrion had to ride at the front with his men, to show that they were following him. This entrance in King’s Landing was in part meant to display the power of the Lord of Casterly Rock, and for that the said lord had to ride at the front with his men.

They didn’t have to pass by Flea Bottom on their way to the Red Keep. They might have to if they arrived through the Iron Gate or the Dragon Gate, but since they came from the west, they could avoid the poorer districts of King’s Landing. Despite this, Margaery had not made a few strides through the gate that someone shouted her name.

“Lady Margaery!”

In other situations, Margaery would have climbed down her horse and walk among the people, but she couldn’t afford that for now. She and Tyrion were both needed at Maegor’s Holdfast. Tyrion couldn’t face Cersei and Joffrey alone. They had to be together. They worked as a duo, completing each other, and they would need each other while they were here in the capital. Margaery limited her contact with the people by waving her hand to thank them, and she also had her handmaidens and her men throw copper coin regularly. This kept the smallfolk away from them, but only to a certain extent. The people kept chasing after her. They were trying to get past her guards who did their best to keep them away. At one occasion, she had to stop everyone because a mother with a baby in her arms was desperately trying to reach her and her guards’ horses threatened to crush them. She got on her feet, hugged the woman and took her child in her arms for a minute.

For a short moment, as she held the baby in her arms, Margaery wondered what it would be to hold her own child. Would she ever have that chance? Sera reminded her that they were supposed to move forward. She gave back the baby to his mother, but it proved to be very difficult to get back on her horse. Giving time to one person brought hundreds more to beg for her attention. For once, Margaery regretted that she was so popular with the smallfolk. Still, she believed her popularity could be useful in the future. The common people didn’t hold much power, but they had power, whether they believed it or not.

They were soon approaching the red castle on Aegon’s Hill. Margaery never found the Red Keep quite attractive, or beautiful. It could be the residence of the king, but it was quite ordinary compared to the splendor of Highgarden or Casterly Rock, or the Hightower. Even Winterfell was more
pleasant, and larger. The Targaryens, despite their dragons, couldn’t equal the work of the kings they submitted. When Margaery looked at the Red Keep, it didn’t look like a worthy residence for a king. The Rock, Highgarden and Winterfell, and even Riverrun, looked more like castles made for kings and queens.

My dear, there are crowns without a queen. And there are queens without a crown. Despite the situation, Margaery smiled at the thought of the words that her grandmother told her four years ago. Olenna Tyrell had been right, and Margaery would soon prove to Cersei which one of them was a true queen. Cersei only had to visit the low districts of King’s Landing to see who the people saw as their real queen. The thought of Cersei soiling her robes in the alleys of Flea Bottom were quite pleasant to Margaery. She may order a tapestry depicting it once she would be back at Casterly Rock. She would look at it when she felt that she needed to laugh. She was sure that Tyrion would find it funny as well.

It was at this moment that her husband came riding to her. Before she could talk, she noticed the dark expression on his face.

“Margaery, we have a problem. Come, quickly.”

They rode outside of the column, and she followed her husband until they arrived near the portcullis, that was still closed. But it wasn’t the portcullis that attracted her attention. It was the spikes over it that caught her gaze. Most of the heads were unrecognizable. They obviously had been there for quite some time, and crows and fleas made sure to feast on them. Margaery still recognized something that looked like a septa’s veil on one of the heads.

There was only one head that was recognizable, and there was no mistake of who it belonged to.

“We’re too late,” she whispered, at a loss of words.

“Yes, and we’re fucked up,” her husband added next to her.

Margaery knew what Tyrion was thinking about now, because she thought exactly the same thing. This head meant that a war couldn’t be avoided. The head of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, meant that for the first time in seventeen years, all the Seven Kingdoms would be at war. Peace was lost.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize to everyone who hoped that Ned Stark would have a different fate, but considering that Kevan was no longer in the capital and that Cersei and Joffrey were the ones ruling, this isn't such a big surprise. It was unlikely that Cersei would wait patiently for Tyrion and Margaery to arrive and decide what to do with Ned in her stead.

Please review

Next chapter : Sansa
Chapter Notes

Sansa VI

Sansa after her father's death. As you can expect, this isn't a very joyful chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA VI

Steel cut through the flesh. She woke up. The sound repeated in her head. She was hearing it again and again, day and night. When she was awakened, she dreaded the sleep for she knew it would be worse than when she was awakened. As soon as she was asleep, in her dreams, she only wanted to leave this world, but once she woke up, she realized that the reality was just as horrible as the dreams.

She couldn't take refuge in the dreams, or in the songs, or in her imagination, for every time she tried to escape the reality, all she saw and heard were the images and the sound of her father's sword falling on him. And the moment it cut through his flesh, it ended, but it started all over again soon enough. She couldn't escape it, for it happened, and there was no way to do as if it wasn't the reality, for reality, dreams and nightmares were now all the same. And they were all horrible, a hell she wanted to escape but couldn't escape.

Sansa did like she always did lately. She cried, hidden under the sheets, her face buried in the pillows, unable to move. She was a mountain covered with snow, melting under the sun. When she left Winterfell, she thought that she was a beauty who was only waiting to be taken away from her dark castle surrounded by ice to a kingdom bathing in the light, to shine like gold under the sun, her sides blooming with green and lush grass, but now she realized that she was wrong. She wasn't supposed to be exposed under the sun. It melted the snow covering her, destroying what made her so beautiful, and killing her slowly. The snow turned to water would cover her with mud, and when the water would dry under the heat, she would be as arid as the desert. The grass wouldn't grow. She would be all sand and rock, unable to bear life.

Her tears were the melting snow. She had tried to convince herself that the sun was good for her, but now she couldn't deny the truth anymore. She was all ugly because of the mud that the snow and the water left behind. She hadn't washed or bathed for days, and she barely ate anything. The sun burned her, reduced her to a lonely hill without anything of interest. The grass that should have grown would die when her tears would dry, and she would die with it. She was all alone in this world.

My father is dead. She saw him die. She stood on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor as he confessed betraying Joffrey and acknowledged him as the one true king. He recognized that he was wrong, and Joffrey had promised that he would spare him. But that wasn't what he did. Instead, he said that as long as he was king, he wouldn't let treason go unpunished. And he ordered Ser Ilyn to bring him her father's head.

Sansa had begged for him to not do this. He couldn't do this. Joffrey promised her. But he did it all the same. He didn't look at her a single time after he said the sentence. Sansa watched powerless, trying to reach her father or her prince, but failing. Someone was holding her. And when the sword came upon her father's throat, everything went black.
She didn’t know any longer when it all took place. Nothing made sense. Joffrey wasn’t supposed to kill her father. He promised that he would show him mercy. A great damp spot of water was on her sheets. She cried so much, there didn’t seem to be an end to it. She thought that she recalled people bringing her food, but she didn’t touch it. She didn’t want to eat. She didn’t even want to move, or to live. She felt that she could stay in that bed forever, waiting for her death. It had a romantic side, that a daughter would die of fasting after her father died in front of her, executed on the order of the man she loved. Perhaps they would make a song out of this. She didn’t feel any better thinking about it.

Sansa heard the door open. She kept her back turned on it. She saw no reason to look at the maid who entered. Heavy footsteps approached.

“Time to get up, little bird,” a rough voice said. A chill traveled her body. She knew that voice, and she was afraid of it almost as much as she was of Joffrey now.

A dress appeared before her, with two hands joined. “Lady Sansa, King Joffrey asked for your presence at court today. We must prepare you,” a feminine voice said.

She didn’t answer. Sansa wouldn’t go at the court. Why would she? The people there would only look at her with indifference at best, and Joffrey killed her father. She wouldn’t go to court.

“Save yourself some trouble, little bird. The king asked for your presence, so get up,” the Hound said.

“I don’t want to see him. He’s a monster. He killed my father!” she snapped.

A new whimper escaped her throat she cried more than before.

“Get out. All of you,” the Hound said.

“But the king…” another voice protested.

“Get out! Let me handle this.”

The girl who stood before Sansa left, and she heard other footsteps walking away. As soon as the door closed, a big hand seized her shoulder and she found herself only an inch from the Hound’s face. “Do you want to die?” He scared her. “Answer! Do you want to die?”

He shook her violently by the shoulder. She didn’t say anything. She just continued to cry. She closed her eyes to not see him, to not look at him. His scarred face was among the most horrific things she ever saw, and it reminded her of Joffrey. She could feel his breathing, an unpleasant smell of alcohol, on her face.

He pushed her back on her bed and she heard the sound of steel scraping. He was going to kill her. She prayed to the gods, Old and New, to make it quick. She waited for the sword to enter her belly, but nothing came. Finally, she opened her eyes to see the Hound standing in front of her, looking at her with the same angry expression that he always displayed. However, there was something slightly different in his eyes. They were hard, like they always were, but less hard than usual. They were not softer, just less hard.

“If you want to die, then do it yourself now,” he told her.

She realized he held his dagger in his hand, but from the blade. The handle was in her direction, for her to take. She looked at him, tried to understand what he was trying to do, why he was doing this, but she couldn’t find any reason. She could only see that he wasn’t as angry as he usually was.
She looked at the blade. How many times did she think that she would rather be dead these last
days? How many times did she wish that she was dead? Now she had the chance to make it real.
Why did she hesitate? She would see her father again. She would be free of this place that changed
from heaven to hell within a few days. She had no wish to live anymore, and yet, she hesitated. She
didn’t dare to take the dagger. What stopped her? To kill herself with this instead of leaving the
absence of food slowly take her away wouldn’t make any difference to singers. They would find a
way to sing about it one way or another. And she would leave this world. Wasn’t it what she
wanted?

She didn’t take the weapon. After a moment, the Hound seemed to realize that she wouldn’t seize it,
and he returned it to his belt.

“That’s what I thought. You don’t want to die. You think you want, but you don’t. I know what it is.
So listen to me. Look at me.” She dared not to disobey him. With a great effort, she looked to his
face with the torn flesh and his angry eyes. She forced herself to not look away. “If you don’t want
to die, or worse, then do what your king says. Wash yourself, dress, and come to the court.”

“What does he want from me?” she asked with a weak voice.

“He wants you to smile and smell sweet and be his lady love. He wants to hear you recite all your
pretty little words the way the septa taught you. He wants you to love him, and fear him. And he
doesn’t want to know that you said something against him.” He turned his back on her and opened
the door. Two maids were waiting outside. “Get the lady ready for the king. Make sure she is
perfect.”

The two handmaidens walked in as the Hound closed the door behind him. Sansa kept looking at the
door for a very long time. He was right. She didn’t want to die, because she was a coward. She
wasn’t like those fair maids in the songs who were ready to die for their family or the man they
loved, or at least to die with them. All she wanted was to live somewhere everything was sweet and
perfect, with a strong lord and their children. When you’re old enough, I’ll make you a match with
someone who’s worthy of you, someone who’s brave and gentle and strong. Her father also said that
Joffrey was no prince or knight, and she refused to listen. She refused to listen to many people who
warned her about Joffrey, and here she was, betrothed to a man who killed her father, forced her to
come to court even if she didn’t want to, even if she didn’t feel well enough for that.

“My lady?” one of the handmaidens asked. Sansa didn’t know her name. She never saw her before.

“Prep… Prepare me a bath.”

And so began a long process of scrubbing, cleaning, perfuming, dressing and combing. Sansa made
sure that she was presentable. She realized the sorry state in which she was when she looked at
herself for the first time in the glass, and she made all of this disappeared. When she was done, Sansa
looked just like she used to before her father died. There was only one thing she couldn’t make like
before. She couldn’t smile, or reproduce any of the expressions of joy she always did while looking
at herself before. No matter how hard she tried, she failed. She would have to make do without it.

The Hound was waiting for her outside when she came out. He didn’t say a word. He just looked at
her with the same hard eyes. She avoided his stare as soon as her own eyes met his, and walked past
him. She heard him following her behind. Joffrey surely sent him to escort her. Once, he had her
escorted back to her rooms by the Hound when she asked him for an escort. She thought he would
offer to lead her himself, but Joffrey gave her his dog instead. She hadn’t found it very gallant at the
time, but didn’t question the gesture further. She should have.

She took place in the gallery, the Hound only a few steps from her. She didn’t know if it was
because of him or because she was now the daughter of a traitor that everyone stood away from her and tried to ignore her. It was as if she didn’t exist for anyone. Anyone but the Hound. She could feel his eyes on her in permanence. Joffrey sent him to watch her.

The great doors opened and the herald proclaimed. “All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the First Men, and the Rhoynar, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. All hail his lady mother, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm.”

Sansa looked at the one she used to call her prince. She used to find him more handsome than any other man she ever saw, and to dream of the day they would marry. Now she hated everything in him. She hated his satisfied smirk, the way he twitched his fingers, the way he wore the crown and his costly clothes. She hated the way he walked, his smug lips, his childish face. Arya and Jon were right when they said he looked like a girl. How could she fall in love with him? How could she believe he would spare her father?

Joffrey is not who he seems to be. Lady Margaery had been wrong. Joffrey was exactly who he seemed to be, only she didn’t see it before.

He looked a very brief instant in her direction, a smirk on his lips. How could she love this smile before? Joffrey wasn’t brave, or gentle, or strong. He was a monster, and this monster took place on the Iron Throne. His mother, the Queen Regent Cersei Lannister, sat by his side. She looked regal, but Sansa didn’t feel any adoration for this woman anymore. She did everything the queen told her, and her father died. She was just like her son. The small council accompanied them.

As the cases were laid before Joffrey and his council, Sansa could see a pattern in their reactions. Joffrey seldom took care of the cases and left most of them in the hands of his mother and the councillors. When it happened, all the members of the small council conferred around Cersei, and she was the one to give the verdict. The Grand Maester was to her left, always quivering, and his voice, that he didn’t always succeed to keep at a whisper, was shaky. Lord Varys stood in retreat somewhere behind the queen and Joffrey, and always whispered in such a low voice that no one could hear it. As for Lord Baelish, he sat at a lower level with his ledgers spread over his knees, taking notes, but he took part to the deliberations with the queen all the same. Strangely, Ser Jaime, now kingsguard and Hand of the King, stayed away from these discussions, at Joffrey’s left.

Janos Slynt never discussed either. He stood down the steps of the dais, with some of his men, and always seemed to approve any decision Joffrey made. Ser Ilyn Payne swung the sword that killed her father, but Sansa would never forget how Lord Janos forced him on his knees, exposing his neck to her lord father’s own sword.

Sansa missed the presence of Ser Kevan Lannister. He was always kind with her, and she remembered that her father spoke of him with respect. She also remembered how he stood up before Joffrey and Cersei, contesting their decisions. He had been the only one to behave like a true knight at this occasion, and now he was gone. All the knights in the attendance stood silent, especially the seven kingsguards whose faces were hidden under their helmets. She knew that Ser Barristan Selmy was among them. Her father always called him a man of honor, and yet he did nothing right now.

Whenever Joffrey decided to take care of some matter, no one dared to speak against it. The first time was when a baker from the Street of Flour came to complain about a group of men from the City Watch who ransacked his shop.

“There were about twelve of them. The man leading them said he was Allar Deem, your Grace. He said I had to pay a toll to sell my bread. I paid all my taxes when I arrived last week, your Grace. I fulfilled every requirement for me to sell my bread in the city, and this man said that I was to pay him so I might continue to sell. I refused, and he ordered his men to take everything they wanted, then to
destroy my shop. I used all the money I had to start my trade, and they took it from me.”

“Your Grace,” Janos Slynt intervened, “Deem is my best man, the most loyal among the City Watch. He played a vital role in securing your rightful place on the Throne, and commands her Grace’s personal guard. This man… is a peasant, a commoner, a mindless idiot. Deem was only taking what is asked from every owner of a shop in King’s Landing for the royal treasury.”

“I paid all the taxes that were asked of me by the Crown’s officers. They told me everything was in order…”

“You refused to obey an officer of my City Watch?” Joffrey cut the man.

“I paid everything…”

“Except for the money you should have given to this man. The City Watch serves the king. To refuse to obey a man of the Watch, is to refuse to obey the king. To refuse to obey the king, is to refuse to obey me. And to refuse to obey the king is treason. Wouldn’t you agree, Mother?”

“Of course, my son,” Cersei replied after a moment.

“Your Grace. You must say, your Grace. I am your king.”

A longer moment passed. “Yes, your Grace.”

Joffrey turned back his attention to the man. “You are a traitor. Have him executed.”

“No. No! NO! I did nothing! I am a loyal subject…” the poor man cried as he was carried away by two gold cloaks.

“Slice his throat. I’m tired of hearing him.”

One of Slynt’s men executed the order and blood covered the floor of the Great Hall within seconds. The other cases where Joffrey intervened didn’t go much better. A woman came begging for the body of a man who was executed as a traitor. She said she loved him and that she wanted to bury him. Joffrey declared that if she loved a traitor, then she was a traitor too, and had her dragged to the dungeons. Two thieves had their hands cut in front of everyone. Another man was accused of rape, and gelded in the presence of all the lords and ladies as well. Two knights who disputed a land were forced to fight to death for this land tomorrow.

The last case that Joffrey took care of was a singer named Marillion. He had been reported to sing an inappropriate song about the late King Robert in the taverns of the city, and he had to perform the song in front of the whole court. When he was done, Joffrey applauded and offered the singer a choice between losing his hands or his tongue. Sansa watched in horror as the bard said everyone needed their hands and Joffrey ordered Ilyn Payne to cut the poor man’s tongue. Joffrey then left the other cases to his mother and the small council.

He walked away from the dais with Ser Meryn Trant. It was only after some time that she realized he was heading in her direction, his repulsive smirk still on his face.

“You look quite nice,” he told her as he climbed the steps leading to her.

Again, she wondered how she could ever love anything about him. He was no Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, and no Ser Florian either. The way he cruelly smiled made her think of the tales of Maegor the Cruel, or even the Mad King, who had her uncle and her grandfather murdered. Her parents never gave her too much detail about it, but there had been a day when she had ben talking
with Arya about Ser Arthur Dayne.

Sansa had been talking about the great knight and the tales of his bravery and his honor, but then Arya had snapped at her, saying that Arthur Dayne held their aunt prisoner at the Tower of Joy, and also that he was there when their grandfather was burned alive by the Mad King while their uncle was strangled trying to save him. After the initial shock of her sister’s rash words, Sansa had argued that Ser Arthur Dayne had no choice but to obey the king and the prince.

“If a knight obeys an evil king, then he is no true knight,” her sister had said.

“What did you say?” She realized that Joffrey was talking to her.

“I beg your pardon, my lord?” she asked.

“Your Grace. I’m king now. What did you say?”

“Nothing, your Grace.”

“You’re lying. You just said that knights following evil kings were no knights.”

She gulped. She must have said her sister’s words without realizing it. “I’m sorry. I… I recalled something that my sister Arya said one day. She didn’t know what she was talking about.”

“Your sister is a traitor, and you are the daughter of a traitor. Don’t mention her again before me, unless I ask you.”

“Yes, your Grace.” The minstrel kept screaming as Ser Ilyn Payne approached the hot dagger. Sansa tried to not look at him, but she couldn’t help but hear him.

“Now, I said you were nice. What do we say to a king who compliments you?”

“Thank you, your Grace,” she replied reluctantly. The sound was foreign in her mouth.

“Walk with me. I want to show you something.”

He walked away, and just as he left, she saw Marillion’s tongue go out. It was replaced immediately by the face of Ser Meryn Trant. She didn’t know if it was scarier that the Hound’s half-burned face. He seized her arm and forced her to turn back and follow the king.

“Do as you’re bid, child,” the Hound told her in an almost gentle way. “Let her be, Trant.”

The knight looked at the Hound hostilely and free her arm. She followed Joffrey in fear that Ser Meryn would put his hand on her again. They walked in a gallery that was close to the battlements.

“As soon as you’ve have your blood, I’ll put a son in you,” the king told her as they walked.

“Mother says that shouldn’t be long.”

They arrived to a drawbridge, and as soon as Sansa looked at what was over it, she looked away. “No, please no!”

“This one’s your father. This one here.” He didn’t stop to speak as she turned away her head. Two hands held her by the shoulders, preventing her from running away. “Look at it and see what happens to traitors.”

She refused to look. “You promised to be merciful.”
“I was. I gave him a clean death. Look at him.”

“Please let me go home. I won’t do any treason, I swear.”

“Mother says I’m still to marry you. So you’ll stay here and obey. Look at him!”

*If you don’t want to die, or worse, then do what your king says.* Very slowly, Sansa raised her head. Every inch of movement was painful. She kept her eyes closed until the end, and finally she opened them, to see her father’s head planted on a spike.

“Well?” Joffrey asked.

“How long do I have to look?” Every moment she spent looking at it threatened to bring new tears to her eyes, and she couldn’t weep, not here, not before the king.

“As long as it pleases me. Do you want to see the rest?”

“If it please your Grace,” she said hollowly, trying to look at her father’s head without seeing it, something that was impossible.

“That’s your septa there.” The head he pointed had been eaten by worms. Maybe it wasn’t really Septa Mordane. Maybe she managed to survive, maybe she escaped just like Arya. Joffrey lied to her before, he could be lying again. “I’ll tell you what. I’m going to give you a present. After I raise my armies and kill your traitor brother, I’m going to give you his head as well.”

She didn’t believe him. “Or maybe he’ll give me yours.”

She looked at him and put as much hatred as she could in her gaze. He looked at her, furious. “My mother tells me a king should never strike his lady. Ser Meryn.”

The kingsguard forced her to turn to look at him, and he hit her hard twice on each cheek. She felt blood on her lips as well as a strong pain on each side of her face. So much for powdering and making herself pretty for today. When she looked back at Joffrey, he wasn’t looking at her, but at the heads over the battlements. She then noticed the drop under their feet. No one would survive such a fall.

Maybe she wasn’t ready to kill herself, but she was ready for someone to kill her. And if she was killed for murdering the king, then so be it, at least her father would be avenged. She looked at the boy she once called her prince. He killed her father, he killed his men and all the people she knew from Winterfell. He ordered his kingsguards to beat her. He was a monster. He didn’t deserve to live. He wasn’t a king. He wasn’t her king. She wouldn’t be his wife, and she wouldn’t carry his babies.

She slowly walked to him, ready to push him to a certain death. He would die under the gaze of her father.

An arm seized her, and she panicked. But when she was turned, it wasn’t Ser Meryn Trant who was about to punch her again or worse, but the Hound, with something in his hand she never expected.

“She’s ready now.” He used the cloth to wipe the blood on her lip, almost in a tender way.

“Will you obey now? Or do you need another lesson?” Joffrey asked above her shoulder. “I’ll look for you in court.” And the king left. Once he was far away with Ser Meryn, Sandor Clegane looked at her and whispered.

“Save yourself some pain, girl. Give him what he wants.” She nodded and gave him back the cloth,
but he refused. “You’ll be needing that again.” He left too.

Sansa was alone on that drawbridge. She looked at what was left of her father. She failed to kill Joffrey. Would she try again? She didn’t think so. She didn’t have her father’s courage, or Arya’s. She looked away and walked back to her chambers. The idea of throwing herself down from the drawbridge came to her mind, but she walked away all the same. The Hound was right. She didn’t want to die.

As soon as she was inside, she sent her maids away, and threw herself on the covers of her bed. And there she cried even more than before. She held back the tears while she appeared at court, but here, alone, without anyone to see, she had no choice but to give to her sorrow. She was a prisoner. Her father was gone. Septa Mordane was gone. Arya was gone, her mother and her brothers far away from her. And the only person who showed some kindness to her today was a dog.

Water ran on her cheeks like a fountain. The maids had replaced her bed’s sheets, but her tears spoiled them once again. They would have to replace these ones too. She didn’t care. She didn’t care about anything. Her world was shattering all around her. Everything she believed, everything she loved was gone. She had been wrong about everything. She believed that Joffrey loved her like the stupid girl she was. She was warned about it. Many people warned her about her prince, but she didn’t listen. She knew that he was cruel, but she looked past it. And now her father was dead. All these times she marveled at the idea of marrying Joffrey, she was longing for her father’s murderer. Another great wail escaped her throat.

She felt so tired, and yet she barely moved for days. Mourning and sadness exhausted her. She remembered a poem she read a long time ago, back at Winterfell. She only read it once, but it remained in her mind. She could recite it by heart. The poem was beautiful, and its words were so sad that she wept while reading them, and she chose to never read it again. She heard that this poem was made into a song in Highgarden, but it was decided to never play it again in public after the first performance. The song was so sad that it was judged unfit for feasts and public events. Still, Sansa remembered the words.

I'm so tired of being here
Suppressed by all my childish fears
And if you have to leave
I wish that you would just leave
'Cause your presence still lingers here
And it won't leave me alone

These wounds won't seem to heal, this pain is just too real
There's just too much that time cannot erase

This was only the beginning of the poem. In her actual state, she didn’t think it could make her feel worse than she already felt. Other poems and songs, all which were sadder than the others, kept coming back to her. She had always been proud of how she could recall the lyrics of a song, but now she regretted it. She should have learned to fight with a sword like Arya. Then she could have killed Joffrey, at least, and that would have been the last thing she did in her life. She wondered what happened to Arya’s dancing teacher. Did Arya escape with him? She hoped she did. Her little sister would need help outside. Perhaps she should pray for her, but she didn’t feel strong enough for that.

She kept wailing and crying, the image of her father’s head refusing to leave her alone, and when it did, it was to see Joffrey’s horrible smirk, and his glee as he watched people’s tongues and hands being chopped. She had a vague conscience of sounds at her door, but gave it no mind. The world was crumbling all around her.
Someone opened the door and closed it. Like previously in the day, Sansa had her back turned on it. She didn’t see who came inside, and she didn’t want to know it. It was probably one of the handmaidens who brought a tray for dinner, or for supper. She didn’t know, and she didn’t care. She didn’t want to eat.

“Place the tray on the table,” she said, not looking at the intruder. She only heard the footsteps of someone approaching her. “I’m not hungry. Leave me alone.”

“Sansa.”

She frowned at her name. She knew this voice. Ever since she left Winterfell, she had been hearing it all the time. Only this time, it said something different. She turned her head and, against all odds, she saw Lady Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell standing before her.

“I’m glad to see you,” she said.

How was that possible? She didn’t see the Lady of Casterly Rock since her departure from Winterfell. It had been months, maybe a year ago, and yet here she was in her rooms, in King’s Landing.

“What are you doing here?” Sansa asked. She straightened herself a little, managing to sit in her bed. Somehow, the manners Septa Mordane taught came back, but to a lesser extent than before. She forgot to stand up.

“We just arrived, Tyrion and I. We came as soon as we heard about… I’m sorry, Sansa. I’m so sorry.”

Unlike the queen, Sansa saw that Lady Lannister was sincere. Cersei told her to not trust this woman, but Sansa saw for herself where the advice of the Queen Regent led her. If she had followed Lady Margaery’s advice instead... *Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you'll realize it before it's too late.* Lady Margaery tried to warn her, and she didn’t listen.

Unable to hold anymore, Sansa burst into tears. She couldn’t control it any longer. She felt a weight adding on her mattress, and the next moment a pair of arms wrapped around her head.

“Here, here,” the lady whispered.

Sansa buried her face into her chest, and let all her sorrow, all her guilt, all her tears go. Hands tapped and rubbed her head. It was the first time someone tried to comfort her since all this began. And words began to flow.

“He killed him. He killed him! Joffrey killed my father.”

“I know,” the Lady of Casterly replied softly. “He shouldn’t have done this. Your father didn’t deserve to die.”

“He promised he would spare him. He promised he would show him mercy. He had him killed.” Emotions threatened to drown her mouth, making her unable to speak. All the emotions she didn’t dare to let go surfaced all at once. “He forced me… to watch his head on a spike.” A knot in her throat stopped her for a while. “He’s a monster. You were right. He’s a monster! HE’S A MONSTER!”

All her hatred for Joffrey came out with this.

“I wish I had been wrong.” That was all Lady Margaery said.
Sansa wished it had been the case, but she didn’t see how it couldn’t have been. Joffrey was a monster, and he always was a monster, only she didn’t see it. Joffrey is not who he seems to be. For your own sake, I hope you'll realize it before it's too late. She realized it, she knew the truth now, and it was too late. Too late for her father.

Chapter End Notes

I recycled a lot of material from the show and the books in this chapter. The original content is mostly the discussion with Sandor before Sansa goes to see Joffrey, which adds some more depth to her relationship with the Hound, and of course the reunion with Margaery at the end. I admit that the goal of this chapter when I wrote it was mostly to reunite Sansa with Margaery. The most important part of this chapter is the end, though the discussion with Sandor Clegane also matters.

The poem Sansa thinks about is, of course, the lyrics of "My Immortal" by Evanescence. A very beautiful song, but I never heard one that was sadder. I think it goes very well with Sansa's emotional state.

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Tyron XI

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the little delay. I should have updated last Friday.

A family reunion, the small council gets bigger (for once) and everyone is planning plots and schemes like always in this stinking city.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION XI

“Ser Barristan, tell me everything that happened.”

They were walking in the corridors of the Red Keep, heading for the small council chambers, with one hundred men from the Westerlands behind them. Tyrion had to make sure that everyone was conscious of his power and his influence as soon as he arrived in the Red Keep, and that he didn’t come to be someone’s toy. It was also a measure of safety. Cersei already tried to kill him.

It hadn’t been difficult to enter the Red Keep and Maegor’s Holdfast. The man who was in charge of the gate was a lieutenant of the red cloaks. Cersei replaced their captain, a man that Tyrion chose himself, by one of Janos Slynt’s men, a corrupted officer of the City Watch, but the other officers of the red cloaks were still sworn to Casterly Rock, so they were bound to obey Tyrion before they obeyed Cersei or the king. The portcullis was raised without much hesitation. The doors of the Red Keep were wide open for him and Margaery. His wife was to take care of settling them while Tyrion would pay a visit to his siblings. He needed a good discussion with them.

Ser Barristan had welcomed them, his usual self, respectful, and Tyrion ordered him to lead him to Cersei and Jaime. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was reluctant at first, saying that the Queen Regent and the Hand of the King were in the middle of a meeting of the small council, but after some polite arguing, Ser Barristan complied and led the way, and now Tyrion wanted to know how the Warden of the North ended up with his head planted on a spike, decorating the battlements of Maegor’s Holdfast.

“I don’t know everything, my lord, but I’ll tell you what I know. I was hunting with the king when the events broke off. King Robert was heavily wounded by a boar during the hunt. We brought him back as quickly as possible. He asked to see Lord Stark, but while we were absent, the Lord of Winterfell was arrested. The queen placed him under arrest after he made threats against her and her children. According to the queen, he plotted to seize the Iron Throne for himself. I’m not sure of the nature of these threats, but the queen said they were serious. The king asked for Lord Stark. He was in great pain. It was decided to tell him that Lord Stark left the city and was far away, and to reduce the pain, the Grand Maester gave him some milk of the poppy. The king died before the night was over,” the knight explained.

“Who decided to hide the truth to Robert? And whose decision was it to put him to sleep with milk of the poppy?”

“The queen told us to tell this lie. She said that it would only make his final hours worse for the king, to know that his best friend betrayed him. As for the milk of the poppy, it was Pyelle’s suggestion.”
“Of course. It was Pycelle’s idea.”

Tyrion knew that the old man didn’t respect his vows more than the members of the Night’s Watch or the High Septon, and that half the maesters through the Seven Kingdoms, if not more, were better than Pycelle, but he wasn’t entirely incompetent either. Milk of the poppy was a choice to make the last hours of a dying man less painful, but it was also possible that Pycelle gave the milk on Cersei’s orders. Jon Arryn had died in curious circumstances, and if he was poisoned, then there were three possibilities. The first one was that Jon Arryn wasn’t poisoned, and then it was normal that Pycelle found nothing. The second possibility was that Jon Arryn was actually poisoned, and that Pycelle didn’t find poison in his body, or didn’t notice the signs of poisoning. Finally, Jon Arryn was poisoned and Pycelle was an accomplice in this murder. The latter would mean that he was in league with Cersei.

“King Robert died, and Joffrey was crowned. The truth about Lord Stark’s failed coup was exposed after the crowning,” Ser Barristan resumed.

“And Cersei was named Queen Regent at this moment, I suppose.”

“Yes, by our new king. It was approved by the small council. Janos Slynt was also appointed on the small council with the queen, and named Master of Laws.”

“And how did it come that Ned Stark was executed?”

“Lord Stark confessed his crimes before the Great Sept of Baelor, in the presence of the High Septon, the king, the small council and the people. The king then ordered his execution.” The knight looked tired as he said that.

“And no one tried to stop him?”

“He is the king, my lord. A king’s word is law.”

“Right, but no one opposed this? No one tried to talk him out of this idea?”

“I believe the queen tried to convince him to renounce this. He said that your sister wanted Lord Stark to be given the right to take the black.” It seemed that Cersei wasn’t entirely a fool. “He also said that the Lady Sansa asked him to show mercy for her father.” Of course, she would. “She begged him to spare her father as Ser Ilyn was about to chop his head.”

“Wait a minute. Sansa Stark was there when her father was executed?”

“Yes, my lord. She fainted when her father was killed.” The kingsguard had a sorry expression on his face.

“My nephew has a unique way of winning the heart of his betrothed. So, the only people who tried to stop this folly were two women? I’m disappointed, Ser Barristan.”

“Lord Varys ran to the king to talk to him when he took the decision.”

“Two women, and an eunuch. What about the Grand Maester? The Master of Coin? And Slynt, since he is Master of Laws now?”

“I think they were too much surprised to do anything. We all were, my lord.”

“So my brother did nothing either?”
“He stood with our sworn brothers, in position to protect the king. We had to watch the crowd. It was unruly all the time. If the gold cloaks failed to hold them off, it was our duty to protect the king.”

“And what about you, Ser Barristan? You did nothing?”

“I was surprised by this decision, my lord, and even more surprised of Lord Stark’s treason, but this was the king’s decision, and it’s not my place to question them.”

He was looking ahead of him as he said so. “If it had been your call, Ser Barristan, would you have executed Ned Stark?”

“It’s not my place to say what the king should do, my lord.”

“Ser Barristan.” Tyrion took his arm and stopped. His men behind them halted as well. “You served under three kings. I know you were there when Rickard and Brandon Stark were killed. You remember that day?”

“Only too well.”

“What do you think of this? Do you think it was right to kill these two men?”

“No,” the knight answered after a moment of hesitation. “They didn’t deserve to die, and not like this. What the Mad King did… It was horrible.”

“So you disapprove of what he did?”

“Yes, my lord. Even back then, I didn’t agree with what the Mad King did to them.”

“But you did nothing to stop him from doing so?”

“No, my lord. The Kingsguard is sworn to protect the king, to serve him. I take no pride in serving this man, but I did my duty, whether it was pleasing or not.”

“Knowing what happened afterwards, how these murders led to the rebellion, to the death of your king, his son, and his grandchildren, and even of Elia Martell, would you say it was the best thing to obey him, since obeying him led to his loss? I’m not judging you, Ser Barristan. You were not the only man to do nothing on that day. My own brother told me what happened. There were lords, knights, ladies, and none of them did or said anything. But I want your opinion. Do you think that following your orders was the best way to protect Aerys?”

A long moment of silence went. “May I speak frankly, Lord Tyrion?”

“Go on.”

“Sometimes, I wonder if I made the right decision at Duskendale. I wonder if I made the right thing when I saved Aerys that day.”

Tyrion nodded. He understood what the knight meant. Aerys’s folly took a darker turn if it was possible after the Defiance of Duskendale. There were people who said that his lord father hadn’t pressed the operations against the Darklyns because he hoped that Aerys wouldn’t survive the siege. It was even said that in the middle of a council, as Lord Tywin prepared a full-scale attack on Duskendale, after Lord Darklyn said he would put Aerys to death if any attack was launched, many of the commanders who were present opposed his father’s plan on the base that the king might die during the assault. His father replied: “He may or he may not, but if he does, we have a better king right here.” He raised his hand to indicate the heir, Rhaegar Targaryen.
Perhaps his father hoped that Rhaegar would accept to marry Cersei once he was on the throne.
Perhaps it would have been the case. If the Mad King had died on this day, Rhaegar would haveecome king, and Cersei queen as Tywin Lannister would have remained his Hand. How history
would have been different then. Tyrion wondered if Cersei would have killed Rhaegar like she killed
Robert. Maybe Jaime would never have become a kingsguard and he would be Lord of Casterly
Rock right now.

“Ser Barristan,” Tyrion began, “you swore to serve the king and to protect him, but sometimes the
best way to serve the king is not to obey him. Sometimes a king needs to be protected from himself.”

The Lord Commander looked at him in a curious way, then he nodded. “Yes, my lord,” he said
politely.

They resumed their path to the small council chambers. Tyrion had to be careful. His sister had Janos
Slynt on her side, and he had a seat on the small council. Both Pycelle and Littlefinger were possibly
her allies, and as for Varys, even though the eunuch helped him the last time he came to the capital,
Tyrion couldn’t trust him. At least he seemed to have tried to convince Joffrey to not kill Ned Stark,
which meant that he was probably the one person on the small council that Tyrion could expect to
have some good sense. The men he brought would be loyal to him, and so were Margaery’s guards,
but as for the red cloaks, he couldn’t be certain. They might obey him before they obeyed Cersei, but
he would have to be careful with their new captain for the time he needed to get rid of him, and he
couldn’t expect to give them a direct order against the queen, not after most of them spent years in
the capital near her. There was also the Kingsguard. Ser Barristan would take no side, but as for the
others, he would have to gather information about each of them, to know where their loyalties lied.
And there was Jaime of course. He didn’t try to stop Joffrey, though Tyrion couldn’t blame him for
that. Why did Cersei name him Hand of the King? Jaime was never made for that kind of things, and
Tyrion was sure that his brother had no wish to be Hand. Ser Barristan said he stood with his sworn
brothers during the execution. Whatever side Jaime was, Tyrion was sure that he didn’t want to be
Hand.

They arrived before the doors giving on the chambers. Ser Mandon Moore, one of the kingsguards,
stood before the door. Jaime once told him that he was the most dangerous member of the
Kingsguard, because you could never tell what he would do.

“Ser Mandon, open the door,” Barristan Selmy said.

“The small council is in session, Lord Commander,” he replied. “Her Grace left orders, the council in
session is not to be disturbed”

“It would be only a small disturbance, ser,” Tyrion said.

“Her Grace does not wish to be disturbed,” Ser Mandon repeated slowly, as if Tyrion was a dullard
who didn’t hear the first time he said it. Tyrion took note to make this knight understand who he was
talking to later.

“Ser Mandon,” his Lord Commander began, “Lord Tyrion is the queen’s brother and the uncle of
our king. He rode from Casterly Rock as quickly as he could. He must have very important tidings to
bring to the small council.”

“Then he will give them once the session is over. The queen doesn’t wish to be disturbed.”

That was one kingsguard who was loyal to Cersei, obviously. “The queen will want to hear what I
have to say, Ser Mandon,” Tyrion told him. “If she hears that you didn’t let me in when she hears the
news that I’m carrying, I’m afraid you might become the first target of her rage.”
“It doesn’t matter. The queen told me that she doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

He was stubborn. “I have very important, even vital news and information, that could decide of your king’s fate, Ser Mandon. So whether you let me go in, or I make my own way in.”

He snapped his fingers, and immediately the one hundred men behind unsheathed their swords, while not completely taking them out of their scabbards. “Please, my lord,” Ser Barristan said, raising a hand in an appeasing way. He looked back to his fellow. “Ser Mandon, let Lord Tyrion go inside. I’ll take the blame if the queen has anything to reproach you.”

Mandon Moore’s eyes didn’t show any fear, nor any emotion of any kind. As Tyrion was about to lose patience and to order his men to force their way into the chambers, he stepped aside and opened the door. “You may enter. They may not.”

“I’m afraid they will. I don’t trust the safety of my sister with the son of a butcher sitting at the same table than her,” he said.

“Two men, no more.”

“It will be ten, and Ser Barristan as well. We are in troubled times, we must take all the necessary precautions.” Tyrion made a movement with his head, and ten soldiers walked in. He watched Ser Mandon, waiting to see what he would do. He did nothing. “My other men will wait for me here. Use the time to get to know them.”

Tyrion joined his men, Ser Barristan on his heels. The red armors allowed him to walk before, with the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard by his side. The presence of Ser Barristan by his side would be helpful, and perhaps it would bring Cersei to think that the old knight was on Tyrion’s side. She would never trust Ser Barristan after that, which could work out in Tyrion’s favor.

They turned around a column and arrived in the middle of a conversation. The six people sitting at the table stopped anything they were doing and looked at him. To Tyrion’s surprise, Jaime was present. He stood up and came immediately to him, shaking his hand.

“Tyrion, glad to see you. We heard you were coming.” His brother was obviously relieved.

“Nice to see you again, big brother. Hi, big sister. You’re more ravishing than ever. War agrees with you,” Tyrion said to her attention.

Cersei was standing as well, but she didn’t leave her place at the table, the king’s place. It seemed that Joffrey took after his father to not attend the reunions of the small council. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought that I could bring you some small help, considering the dire situation we’re in. There was something very interesting, and unexpected, over the gates when I arrived.” He made sure from his tone and his gaze that she understood what he was talking about, and that he wasn’t happy about it.

“We’ll discuss about it once this session of the small council is over. And I will have a serious talk with Ser Mandon Moore as to why he let you enter.”

“Your Grace, I ordered Ser Mandon to let Lord Tyrion in. Lord and Lady Lannister rode tirelessly to come here. They’re carrying important news.”

“You let them in?” Cersei asked, looking at the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, a reaction that Tyrion expected and hoped for.
“We’re already settling. Margaery and I decided that since the Tower of the Hand was empty, we would reside there,” Tyrion declared.

“You did what?” Cersei said with outrage.

“We thought it would be the most appropriate place. We brought a few men with us. They need place where they can live. Now, since the welcome is done, perhaps we could get to the important matters. I have tidings of great importance to discuss with my bother and my sister. So everyone whose last name is not Lannister, or who doesn’t have a last name, get out.”

The members of the small council looked at each other. Cersei was fuming. “Get out, all of you.” She almost echoed him. This time, the whole small council did as he was told. His sister had the hold on the council, for now. “You too,” she said to the attention of the people behind Tyrion. Ser Barristan walked away after he bowed, but Tyrion’s men remained in place. “I told you to go out,” she repeated. They didn’t move.

“All right, you may go,” Tyrion told them, and they moved out. If Cersei had the above-average intelligence Tyrion granted her, she would understand that the men he brought with him were his and not hers.

As soon as they were all out, his sister was on him. “How many men did you bring with you?”

“Two thousand. They’re here to protect Joffrey, and to protect us too. You are included in the us.”

“Two thousand men? You really think you can set me aside with that number?”

“Cersei, Tyrion is our brother,” Jaime said.

“That’s something very true, Jaime, though our sister seems like she needs to be reminded of this on a regular basis,” Tyrion quipped.

“You’re taking me for a fool?” she asked, venom in her voice.

“No, I’m taking you for the queen who thinks herself more clever than she is.”

“Because you think you are so clever?”

“More clever than you. I’m not the one who endangered our whole family.”

“I did nothing.”

“Nothing?” This time, Tyrion allowed some of his rage to go out. He walked to the table where Cersei still stood nearby, took a piece of paper from his doublet and tackled it with so much violence on the table that it shook. “Then perhaps you can explain how Eddard Stark came to write to my wife, and to know about yours and Jaime’s nocturnal activities?”

He raised his voice as he said that. Time went on until Jaime spoke. “She knows?”

Tyrion stared back at his brother. “All the Seven Kingdoms will know soon enough.”

“You told that little whore of yours...”

His hand moved immediately and made contact with Cersei’s cheek, sending her on the floor. It wasn’t the first time he slapped his sister, and the last time he did was the same reason than now. “You call her again like that, and it’s more than a smack you will get.”
“Tyrion, what have you done…” his brother began.

“You, SHUT UP!” Tyrion was ready could forgive everything to Jaime, but this time he couldn’t forgive without giving free reign to his fury. “I just lied to my wife to protect you. I made her believe that Eddard Stark wasn’t telling the truth, for you both, and for the children, because you’re my family. I lied to the woman I love for you, I came all this way to prevent a war from happening, a war that could destroy our family. I arrive, and I find Ned Stark’s head on a spike! All our hopes of peace gone! It wasn’t enough to try to kill a boy of ten. You had to bring us into a full-scale war. The Baratheons and the Starks are against us, with half the Seven Kingdoms behind them. Congratulations! You just managed to repeat Aerys’s folly, only you did it at the beginning of Joffrey’s reign instead of the end. What a wonderful Queen Regent and Hand of the King you make. Father would be proud of you. His two golden children! I wonder what would disappoint his the most. The incest, or your stupidity?”

He stopped to breathe. He betrayed Margaery to protect Jaime, Cersei, Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen, and some of them would never have done the same for him, and in exchange what he got were insults against his wife and disdain. Jaime had gone to take care of Cersei lying on the floor. He tried to help her to stand back, but she pushed aside the arms he offered. As Tyrion let his anger speak, Jaime looked at him, an expression that looked like fear, or probably more like surprise, on his face. His sister had a bruise on the cheek.

“If Joffrey was present…” his sister started.

“I’m sure he would find it very funny, and interesting, to learn who his real father is.”

“Don’t ever tell him!” She pointed a menacing finger towards him.

“You have my word.” She didn’t need to threaten him for that. Tyrion hadn’t come all this way to save his family to give up on them the moment he arrived.

“Tyrion,” his brother said, “it was Joffrey who decided to kill Ned Stark. Our plan was to send him to the Wall after he confessed betraying Robert. Joffrey was supposed to spare him in exchange of Robb Stark’s loyalty.”

“It seems that Joffrey didn’t listen to you.”

“I tried to stop him,” Cersei said.

“Did you? You failed. That bit of theater will haunt our family for a generation.”

“Robb Stark is a child,” she snickered.

“And he hasn’t lost a single battle so far.”

“He didn’t win any battle. He never fought any,” Jaime said.

“The same can be said about two people here, and although you fought in battle, Jaime, you never led an army. We are as green as Robb Stark. Stannis is not, and nor are Roose Bolton, Jon Umber or the Blackfish, or Yohn Royce. And Robb Stark is Ned Stark’s son. His father is the one who truly won the War of the Five Kings, and who defeated in great part the Greyjoys when they raised in rebellion. Our father cannot boast as many victories. He couldn’t even defend his own fleet against Balon Greyjoy. And it’s not as if he taught much about war to any of you.”

“Nor to you,” his sister retorted.
“You could be surprised.”

It was true that Tywin never truly cared about his second son, but his father left him several lessons on warfare and politics before he died, and Tyrion completed this with the large amounts of books and scrolls he read since the day Creylen showed him his first letters.

“You bring us nothing,” Cersei spat. “You keep shouting and insulting us, beating your own sister for a whore who…”

He tried to slap her again, but Jaime caught his wrist. “That’s enough! Both of you!” He released Tyrion’s arm, and he knew better than to try again. Cersei had a large smile over her face. She saw every small victory as a great one, and relished in them. “We are family. The whole world is turning on us. We can’t allow to fight among each other. What would Father think of us?”

“Nothing different from what he already thought,” Tyrion replied.

“You mean what he thought about you,” Cersei corrected.

“It’s true, because I’m a dwarf. His opinion on you two wouldn’t change because you acted like idiots.”

“It’s not the time for that. We need to prepare,” Jaime scowled. “Tyrion is right. We’re going to have half of the realm on us before long if it’s not already the case. Robb Stark will know soon enough about his father’s death, and Stannis and Renly are going to take arms against us too.”

“Very well, and what do you suggest that we do, Jaime?” their sister asked. “You didn’t give a single advice since I had you appointed as Hand. Maybe it’s time for you to be the man our father always wanted you to be.”

Tyrion’s brother looked at his sister. He was wearing his armor of the Kingsguard. He took something inside his armor and handed it to Cersei. It was the Hand’s badge. “You want an advice? Very well. Name a Hand who can make sure that our son makes it through the year.”

His sister was first struck by surprise, and then her eyes were throwing daggers. It was just like Tyrion suspected. Cersei forced the position of Hand on Jaime. His brother never wanted the job.

“And who would you have me choose?” Cersei asked him. “What other fool would you suggest that I give this?”

Jaime turned around and looked at him. Tyrion grimaced. “You always believed that I was a fool. Better to choose one from your family.”

“You are both fools. What does he know of warfare?” she asked her twin.

“I know that our enemies hate each other almost as much as they hate us.”

“How clever,” she mocked. “As if I didn’t know it already. Out of the question that I make you Hand.”

“Cersei, Tyrion is our brother,” Jaime told her. “Our bannermen in the west follow him, and his wife is the daughter of Mace Tyrell. By making him Hand, you will make sure that these two kingdoms are with us.”

“I would have the same result if I threw them both into a cell.”
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, big sister,” Tyrion warned. “If you imprison his daughter, you will throw Mace Tyrell in Stannis’s arms. As for the Westerlands, you just saw a few minutes ago that they obey me, not you.”

“I am the queen. They will obey if their lord is in the dungeons.”

His sister was really crazier than he thought. He began to wonder if she still had an above-average intelligence. “I doubt it. They won’t let me be arrested. I have two thousand men with me, and they all are within these walls. How many of your own do you have?” His sister found nothing to say to that. “Aren’t the support of the Reach and the Westerlands enough for tolerating the brother you hate as Hand? Anyway, who else would you name?”

“Cersei, please,” his brother almost begged her.

Cersei considered her two brothers, then the pin that had been their father’s for twenty years. She finally stared at Tyrion and slowly walked to him, towering him with her height. He looked back at her, unimpressed, though he was ready for anything to happen.

“Joffrey is king,” she said.

“Joffrey is king,” he repeated, as if it was necessary to say. If he didn’t consider Joffrey to be his king, he wouldn’t have come. He would have left Robb Stark deal with his nephew, and then manage to profit from the war like his father did fifteen years ago. Not exactly like his father did, but he would have found a way to make House Lannister stronger from this.

“You are here to advise him.”

She threw the pin in his direction, and he caught it, probably to her regret. Tyrion looked at it. He had thought about the possibility of becoming Hand after Jon Arryn died. He went to Winterfell to convince Ned Stark of staying away from the capital. If the honorable fool had listened, he might still be alive, and they wouldn’t be in all this mess.

“Good,” Tyrion said he pinned the badge on his doublet. He proceeded to the table and poured himself a glass of wine, one for his brother and another for his sister. He needed that. “Now that we stopped squabbling amongst ourselves, perhaps we could get to serious matters.”

He sat at the seat made for the Hand. Jaime sat by his side, and Cersei went back to the king’s chair.

“Before we begin, I believe I deserve a few answers, so we can all be follow the same line. Who killed Jon Arryn?”

Tyrion waited for an answer. “We don’t know.” It was Cersei who answered.

“You don’t know?”

“He came to us, accused me and Jaime of the same crimes than Eddard Stark, and the day after he was dying.”

“And this wasn’t your doing?”

“We were planning to kill him, but he died before we could put up a plan,” Jaime explained. “No matter what or who killed him, he told Robert nothing. We should thank the person who got us rid of him.”

“What about he assassin you sent after Brandon Stark?”
“What?”

“Don’t worry, Jaime. I know that if you were to kill someone, you would do it yourself. However, there’s someone in this room who’s good at making the others do her dirty work.”

He looked at Cersei. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“A few days after you left Winterfell, a man who hid in the stables tried to murder Brandon Stark. Don’t tell me this has nothing to do with the boy’s fall.”

“We don’t know who did this. We have nothing to see with that. Jaime and I thought about killing the boy, but his mother was always by his side. It was impossible. We only hoped he would never wake up.”

“Well, he did wake up, but he had no memory of what he saw in that tower. Margaery believes it’s you.”

“Well, you’ll only have to tell her that she is wrong,” Cersei replied with a satisfied grin.

“What about Robert? I suppose this wasn’t your doing as well?”

“We didn’t kill him. He did all the work himself. We only helped. Lancel gave him strongwine during the hunt.”

“Which explains how he earned his knighthood.” Kevan had been right about his son. “And who sent our beloved uncle away from the city?”

“Kevan was too old to do anything useful.”

“Our lord father would disagree if he was alive. And I disagree as well, since I made him commander of half our forces.”

“I beg your pardon,” Cersei said, outraged.

“Our paths met on the road. I had two armies raised. One is at the Golden Tooth, and the other one is following the Goldroad. Each are thirty thousand men strong. Kevan commands the one heading our way.”

Jaime sighed in what looked like relief. “It will be good to see him again.” Cersei obviously didn’t approve.

“Still, that doesn’t answer my question. Why was he excluded from the small council?”

He looked intently at his sister, waiting for an answer. “Why do you ask me all these questions? I’m sure Kevan already gave you his side of the story.”

“I want to hear yours.”

“And why that?”

“Because you are my sister, and for the sake of your children that I love, I’m ready to believe what you say.” Which didn’t mean he would believe her.

After a moment of consideration, she spoke. “He tried to stop me, to rule instead of me, and of my son. I did what was necessary.”
“So you turned the gold cloaks against your own uncle and removed him from the small council?”

“He turned against me in the first place.”

“You could have found someone better than Slynt to replace him. How do you think both the lords and the people are looking at us, knowing we chose the son of a butcher as Master of Laws?”

“I didn’t have much time to consider.”

“You really trust this man?”

“I don’t. I trust no one, but I need him.”

Yes, YOU need him. “And Harrenhal? Your idea?”

“Littlefinger’s.”

“I think he also proposed that he could marry the young Sansa,” Jaime added.

“Littlefinger? Married to Sansa Stark?”

“He was too lowborn. I refused. For now, her betrothal with Joffrey remains intact,” his sister said. Poor girl.

“I don’t think this union will bring us much now that we killed her father.”

“We cannot break the betrothal. The High Septon is already angry that we executed Ned Stark on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor without telling him. Breaking an official betrothal could make him an enemy.”

Perhaps his sister was finally not so much a fool. “Well, you managed to create a mess much worse than I expected.”

“Tyrion, we have problems in the capital, true, but we have armies against us everywhere. Renly, Stannis, Robb Stark. We should focus on our troops,” Jaime intervened.

“Very well. Do we have a map?” Jaime brought one. “As I said, we have two armies for now. One at the Golden Tooth, led by Daven and his father Stafford, and another coming from Deep Den with Kevan. They will be here within a few days.”

“And then? What is your plan with them?” Cersei asked on a mocking tone.

“I’m planning to have them march on Harrenhal. It will serve as an excellent base of operation in the Riverlands, and we will be able to stop Robb Stark on his way to the city. And since you so kindly granted it to Slynt, we have the right to seize it.”

“Good. We will take back the Riverlands,” Cersei said.

“What about the Tyrells?” Jaime asked.

“They didn’t mobilize yet,” Tyrion answered. “Margaery only told her father to remain ready. They will need some time to raise their armies, which will leave King’s Landing without much defence for a few weeks, but between my two thousand men and the gold cloaks, it should be enough to keep Stannis at bay. The Tyrells will mostly have to take care of the Stormlands, and of Dorne if they rise against us. We’ll also need to fortify the coasts. Theon Greyjoy is the Starks’ hostage. Balon Greyjoy could side with them. I won’t have many men to spare to defend the city, but for now, we don’t need
many."

“With the south occupied with the Tyrells, and the North with us, King’s Landing might never be in danger. Stannis left with the royal fleet after Jon Arryn died, but he doesn’t have enough men to take the city by himself. Varys says he is arming ships, but Renly seems to be quiet for now. He didn’t call his banners,” Jaime resumed.

“It seems a better idea to stop the enemy before he is at our gates,” Cersei approved.

Tyrion knew very well that Cersei would never approve with one of his plans like that. She had an idea behind her head, and he had some idea of what it might be. He let slip willingly that he wouldn’t keep many men in the city. Cersei was capable of being patient, and she would bid her time before she took action against him, waiting for the Lannister armies to be far away before attempting anything. Only, she wouldn’t have enough time for that, because Tyrion would make the first move.

“Well, as long as the Tyrells fight with us, we should be all right,” Jaime said, seeming relieved.

“Yes, if the Tyrells remain true to their word. I never understood how a rose could grow strong,” Cersei commented. Look at Margaery, and you’ll know soon enough that a rose can grow not only beautiful, but strong and dangerous, big sister. “I will go. I have matters to attend to as queen.”

“Queen Regent,” Tyrion corrected. “And before you leave, there’s an important matter to discuss about the reunions of the small council.”

“What matter?” Cersei said with exasperation. She had already begun to walk away.

“I want Margaery to attend the small council meetings.” He could see the anger in Cersei’s eyes as soon as he suggested it. “We need the Tyrells at our side, and giving Mace Tyrell’s daughter a seat on the small council as an advisor will be enough to make him more eager than ever to serve Joffrey.”

Against all odds, Cersei smiled sweetly. “Of course. It might do me some good to have another woman sitting with me on the council.” And on that, Cersei walked away. Tyrion knew immediately that Cersei was planning something against him.

Jaime sighed. “She’s been insufferable ever since Ned Stark told her he knew about us.”

“How did he find out?” Tyrion asked his brother. They were alone now.

“No idea, but he did, just like Jon Arryn.”

“And you didn’t kill him?”

“No, I told you, Tyrion. Something else, or someone else, killed him. I don’t know who. Cersei hides me nothing, at least not after they’re done.” It seemed that the mystery of Jon Arryn’s death and the attempt of murder on Brandon Stark remained unsolved. “I’m glad to see you all the same, little brother.”

“Me too, Jaime.” Tyrion raised is cup to his elder brother, and they both drank.

“I’m sorry for all this, and for… what it forced you to do… concerning your wife.”

Tyrion put back his cup on the table. “I once told her that I would never hide anything from her. She trusts me, Jaime, and I betrayed that trust.”
A long moment of silence went on. “She will never know,” his brother declared. “I’ll make sure she
never knows, or believes it, if you prefer.”

“Believe would be more appropriate. Stannis will spread the word soon enough to press his claim on
the Iron Throne.”

“This man is as enjoyable as wet shit.”

“I will never understand how you can love Cersei, Jaime. Not in that way.”

“We don’t get to choose who we love, Tyrion.”

Tyrion looked down. “No, we don’t.” His thoughts went to Margaery, then to Tysha, and a long
moment of silence passed before Jaime spoke again.

“We’ll get through this, Tyrion. I promise. And everything will be like before.”

“I doubt it.” How could things be like before when he would know for the rest of his life that he lied
to the woman he loved, hid such a secret from her, when she trusted him and loved him like no one
else did before?

“It will be. It must.”

Tyrion too a sip of wine. It was time to make his first move. “As much as I hate to do that, Jaime, I
must send you far away from here.”

His brother choked as he just drank too. “Pardon me?”

“When Kevan comes and ride to war, you will go with him.” Tyrion looked at his brother and added
on a joking tone. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of war?”

“I’m not, Tyrion,” he laughed, “but I am a kingsguard. So unless Joffrey, or someone of his family
follows Kevan, I don’t see who I would have to protect in the Riverlands.”

“Jaime, you realize that soon, everyone in Westeros will hear from Stannis about your affair with
Cersei?”

“And you believe that sending me away will stop these rumors?”

“No, but keeping you here may feed them. I know you, Jaime. I know you won’t be able to stop
yourself from seeing Cersei in secret. What will we do if Margaery surprises you, or anyone else?
She hates Cersei, and she will keep a close eye on her, and my wife is not an idiot. If you stay here,
the moment you spend some time with our sister, Margaery will learn the truth, and then we will lose
the Reach.” And I will lose my wife.

Jaime looked aside. He wasn’t happy about this. “It won’t be forever,” Tyrion reassured him. “As
soon as the war is over and that Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon are defeated, you’ll come back to
King’s Landing. No one will dare to repeat their accusations, Margaery and I will go back to the
Rock, and you’ll be free to fuck your own sister behind curtains as much as you like.”

Though the latter was unlikely to happen. Jaime was a kingsguard, bound to serve the king, to stay
by his side. Tyrion didn’t intend for Cersei to remain by Joffrey’s side for long. Not if he had
something to say about it. Jaime may be furious about it, but Tyrion thought that it would do some
good to his brother to be away from Cersei for a long period.
“You really think that your wife could find out if I was to stay?” Jaime asked.

“She will find out. There’s a limit to what I can make her believe.”

With a resigned look, Jaime nodded. “Very well. I’ll leave with Kevan. It’s been some time since I fought a real war. It will be good to be on the battlefield again. I’m sick of this city and all its morons.”

“One more thing. Do you think you can refrain yourself from bedding Cersei until your departure?”

“I can, but don’t expect me to refrain much longer when I’m back.”

“Then I’ll make sure Margaery and I are somewhere else when you and Cersei are reunited.” He would make sure of that, indeed. Cersei would be far away by the time Jaime would be back to the capital.

“So, how are things with your wife?”

His brother looked concerned. “Good enough.” His voice was weak when he spoke. He tried not to think about it, or to convince himself that he did what was necessary to protect his family, but more than ever, he felt that he didn’t deserve Margaery.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Jaime, I’m sure. Things are going to be good enough as long as she is convinced that there is nothing between you and Cersei,” Tyrion snapped.

His brother nodded, and after a straining silence, Jaime stood up. “I’ll go. I’m free to dedicate myself to my duties of kingsguard now that I am free of those of Hand.”

“You really fulfilled them?” Tyrion was skeptical about it.

“No. I wish you luck, little brother. You’ll need it. The two last Hands didn’t survive,” his brother said grimly.

As he walked away, Tyrion muttered. “The last four Hands.”

Tyrion emptied his cup of wine. Jaime would be gone soon, but there was much more to do. He didn’t linger in the small council chambers and headed for the Tower of the Hand.

The last time Tyrion came here was when he negotiated with Jon Arryn over taxes. The matters he would have to attend now were far more crucial, and challenging. He climbed the many stairs leading to the Hand’s rooms, the very same who were occupied by Eddard Stark only a few weeks ago. Where northern guards must have patrolled not long ago was now filled with men harboring the colors of House Lannister. For the first time in twenty years, a Lannister was Hand of the King. See, Father. This is your legacy. Your mad grandson is king, your mad daughter is queen, your kingslayer son is member of the Kingsguard, and your dwarf son is Hand of the King. You got what you wanted. Would you be happy if you were alive to see it?

Tyrion hoped to find Margaery arranging their new living quarters when he reached the top of the tower, but when he asked one of his men where she was, he told him that she wasn’t in the tower. Tyrion went to the bedchamber, and found Mira Forrester, his wife’s handmaiden, placing the few things they brought with them all around.

“Lady Mira.”
“Lord Tyrion.” She stood straight when he entered, stopping her work.

“Do you know where Margaery is?”

“I believe she is with Lady Sansa. She went to see her right after she made sure we could handle the organization of these rooms.”

“Oh, it’s true.” The Stark girl could certainly use some company. Joffrey had always been irresponsible and a brat, but Tyrion didn’t expect that he could show so much cruelty towards the girl he was supposed to marry.

“My lord, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Lady Mira. What is it?”

She hesitated. “King Joffrey executed Lord Stark. As for me, it’s a murder.”

Tyrion observed the girl. She was from the North, and although Margaery didn’t doubt her loyalty one second and that Tyrion was aware that the northern girl was very attached to his wife, it didn’t change the fact that it was the liege lord of her family who had just been killed by his nephew.

“You’ve met Ned Stark in the past, haven’t you, my lady?”

“Yes, twice. Once when I was a child, at Ironrath. He came to visit our home. And the last time when I rode to Highgarden. My father and I stopped at Winterfell on our way.”

Her face was hard, but he could see grief on it as well. Ned Stark was respected, and even loved in the North. Margaery was loved even more in the Westerlands. Almost no one wept for Tywin Lannister when he died. Would someone weep for him when Tyrion would die?

“Don’t say that before anyone, Lady Mira,” Tyrion advised her.

“I won’t.” Clever girl.

“I won’t lie to you, my lady, this is a tragedy. My nephew may have ordered his death, but I didn’t want Eddard Stark to die.”

“I know. You and Lady Margaery did your best, but… I’m afraid for my father. He’s riding with Robb Stark. Who knows what could happen to him in this war.”

Tyrion nodded. “If I have a chance to make peace, I’ll seize it, my lady, have no doubt about it, but I’m afraid there’s going to be a war, no matter what we do now.”

“I know,” she said in a very low voice. She didn’t seem angry after him, perhaps because he was Margaery’s husband.

“Oh, my lord.” Tyrion turned to his right to see another handmaiden, Sera Durwell, carrying a pile of clothes.

“I’ll leave you to your work, my ladies. I have some of my own.”

And he worked. In the hours following his appointment as Hand of the King, Tyrion Lannister took several decisions. The first was to remove the heads from the battlements. They had been there already too long. He also had a discussion with every member of the small council, separately. Littlefinger informed him on the state of the Crown’s finances. Of course, it was to be expected that the rebellions would cause a shortfall in the Crown’s revenues. Robert had kept indebting the Realm
until his last breath, and war would increase the expenses of the Crown like never before. The
effectives of the City Watch were doubled since the death of Eddard Stark, and Janos Slynt was
already recruiting another two thousand men. When Tyrion asked who had this idea, he wasn’t
surprised to learn that it was Cersei who got it. In short, the situation of the finances would get worse.
Robert had truly been a terrible king when it came to manage the Realm. A king was supposed to
stock gold in times of peace and during summers, so he could spend it during in times of war and
during winter. Robert had the longest summer in living memory, and he used it to bring the Crown
close to bankruptcy. Once the war was over, Tyrion would have to make sure to solve this situation,
and to make sure that his nephew could reimburse the debts he owed to him and his wife’s family.

Lord Varys brought him news from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. The Riverlands and the North
both mobilized their forces, but the Vale strangely made no move. His spies in the Eyrie told him that
Lady Arryn didn’t make any preparation for war after she heard of Ned Stark’s arrest. That was all
the opposite of Stannis. He was preparing ships and men, made a Red Priestess from Asshai come to
Dragonstone, and had a letter written that was to be sent through all the Seven Kingdoms. Varys
didn’t tell him the content of this message, but it was useless. Tyrion had a very good idea of what it
would be. Renly seemed to be taking his time to assemble his men, despite messages he received
from his brother. The Martells made no movement. There were no news from the Iron Islands. The
Spider’s spies reported him nothing from this side.

The meeting with Pycelle was short, and Tyrion made sure that it was short. The Grand Maester
mostly spent the meeting congratulating him and saying that his and Margaery’s presence were a
blessing. He wasn’t sure which of the three he despised the most between the Grand Maester, the
Spider and Littlefinger. The only information Tyrion got from the old man was that Pycelle was a
lickspitter.

The interview that was the most productive was the one with Janos Slynt, newly elevated to the
position of Lord of Harrenhal and Master of Laws.

“You are welcome, my lord. We have sore need of you. Rebellion everywhere, crime rising,
spirits in turmoil and excited,” the new lord said.

“I was hoping that your new recruits would help to maintain the king’s peace, Lord Janos.”

“They do, my lord, but they need time to learn. They are only recruits, green boys, untrained.” *Like
most of your men.* “I also had to give my best man, Allar, to command the red cloaks. The queen
required the services of my best lieutenant to command her personal guard.”

“I suppose you would like to get him back in the gold cloaks. Commanding a royal guard must be
quite boring after the excitement of the streets.”

“I must admit that I miss Allar’s presence. The smallfolk respect him.” Why not say that they feared
him? “But I am at the service of the king, and he wanted my best man to command her Grace’s
guards.”

Tyrion leaned forward over his desk. “My sister is very concerned about her son’s safety, but with
the two thousand men I brought, I think that the safety of the king is assured. Your man Allar will
certainly be more useful in the streets. The real problems are in the streets, not inside the Red Keep.”

“If you say so, my lord.”

“Lord Slynt, don’t tell you don’t miss your main lieutenant who made such a wonderful job as an
officer of the City Watch.”
“I do miss him, but the queen asked for my best man.”

“She won’t need it anymore. Your men are needed in the streets, to patrol the city. You made an excellent work, Lord Janos, and the Realm is in debt towards you.”

“I thank you, my lord.” This man was easy to flatter. He had gotten rather above himself.

“And you know what we say. A Lannister always pays his debts.” Tyrion produced a large pouch full of gold and dropped it on his desk before the man. The size was impressive. Janos Slynt’s eyes grew.

“My lord, I…”

“Don’t react this way, Lord Janos. This isn’t for you.”

The man became suspicious at once. “I beg your pardon.”

“This is for your man Allar, for the excellent work he made as captain of the red cloaks.” Tyrion took another pouch, larger than the first one. “This is for you.”

The Lord Commander of the City Watch opened it and verified that it was truly gold. He was immediately satisfied when he bit the piece. “Thank you, my lord. Janos Slynt shall not forget it.”

“I’m sure of that. Allar will go back to his functions in the City Watch. I think he’s going to lessen your workload. As a lord, you shouldn’t work too hard.”

“He won’t complain before this, my lord. I assure you. May I know who will replace him?”

“I’ll name someone worthy of being your lieutenant’s successor.” That someone wouldn’t be hard to find.

“I’m your obliged.”

Janos Slynt left. He had no idea of what Tyrion was preparing, and he wouldn’t suspect anything before long. Tyrion had Vylarr called and announced him that he was once again the captain of the red cloaks. They were all Tyrion’s now.

Tyrion kept working until the time came for supper. Margaery arrived around that time too.

“Where have you been?” he asked her after she kissed him and took place at their table.

“I was with Sansa,” she said.

“How is she?”

“What do you think? Her father just died, and he was executed on the order of the man she loved.”

“Of course. That was a stupid question.”

“She needed someone. She’s heartbroken.” The first service arrived at this moment. “Tyrion, Joffrey was spoiled, arrogant, but this… This is pure cruelty. He killed the father of his betrothed right before her, and he even forced Sansa to look upon her father’s head while it was on a spike.”

He didn’t know about the latter. “It seems I misjudged my nephew. He’s worse than I thought. He’s definitely Robert’s son.”
He said it because he believed it. Joffrey had more of Robert than Jaime in him. “I wonder if it
wouldn’t be better if he was your brother’s son.” He looked at her, surprised. “We could take the
crown away from him and give it to Tommen.”

Sweet Tommen, certainly the most naïve and the kindest of all Cersei’s children. “We wouldn’t be at
war if Tommen was king, it’s true. But Joffrey is the king, and our nephew. I can’t overthrow him to
put his brother into his place.” He made her understand with his gaze that he definitely couldn’t do
that.

“I know, Tyrion. I was thinking aloud. But still… what Joffrey did… He is just as horrible as his
mother. I’m afraid he holds more from her than from his father.” Tyrion couldn’t argue about it.
“When I think that I considered the possibility of marrying him one day, if this allowed me to be
queen.”

“I’ve never been happier that you married me,” Tyrion said. Margaery returned his smile, but it
waned very quickly.

“Sansa is going to be miserable with him.”

“I said so to her father once, and he didn’t listen. But I’m afraid she will be more miserable than I
believed back then.” He felt pity for this girl. He hated to see innocent people suffering. He
remembered how the girl looked happy back at Winterfell, before the prospect to leave for King’s
Landing. Back then, he hadn’t been sure if he should warn her about Joffrey to not get her hopes too
high about him, or if he should leave her to her illusions, allowing her to be a child a little while
longer. Maybe it would have been better if he warned her, but he doubted it would make much
difference in the end. Her father would still be dead.

“She is the last Stark we have, Tyrion. If we allow Joffrey to do what he likes… He ordered his
kingsguards to beat her!”

“He did that?”

“Yes. She still had marks of it on her cheeks when I saw her.”

Tyrion dropped himself back into his chair. “I thought that we would have a Robert the Second with
Joffrey. It seems that we have Aerys the Third instead.”

“He already started a war. We cannot allow him to rule the Seven Kingdoms. No more than Cersei.”

“I agree, but it may be easier with Joffrey than with my sister. Joffrey doesn’t seem interested by
ruling. We only have to fix his mind on something else. With Cersei, it will be more difficult.”

“Perhaps, but we must neutralize her all the same.”

Tyron nodded. His plans for that were already in motion. He only wished that he could dedicate all
his time to deprive Cersei of all power, instead of having a war to fight at the same time. He needed
Kevan to head north first before he made his first move.

“I already sent a raven to my father,” Margaery resumed, taking some boar. “And I told Loras to
intercede for us with Renly. He is at Storm’s End with him right now. Hopefully, we will only have
to face three kingdoms.”

“Two, if we are lucky enough. According to Varys, the Vale isn’t moving. Lysa Arryn didn’t seem
concerned by the death of her brother-in-law.”
“Maybe it will be a short war,” she said, hope behind her voice, but Tyrion could feel her doubts. They both knew better than to expect things to go as they planned. “What of Dorne?”

“No movement from this side either. I don’t believe that the Martells want to fight for Stannis or Robb Stark more than they want to fight for us. All our families played a role in the death of his sister and her children.”

“They might try to attack the Reach, Tyrion. My father will have to keep some troops to watch our frontiers in the south. He won’t be able to send all his forces against the Stormlands or the North if necessary.”

“He shouldn’t have to keep too many men. Dorne cannot raise as many men as the historians would like us to believe. They increased the number of men the Targaryens faced to make their conquest look harder and more glorious.”

“The Martells sacked Highgarden in the past, Tyrion. My father cannot take this threat lightly.”

Tyrion had to agree that she was right. “The best way would be to make sure that Dorne sides with us, or at least remains neutral. For now, we can only count on the Westerlands and the Reach. It is likely to be enough, but I would feel safer if we had more allies. The Vale didn’t join the war yet, but with Ned Stark’s death, Lady Arryn might change her opinions and call her banners. And there are the Iron Islands. We are without news from them. Balon Greyjoy’s only son is a ward of the Starks.” Tyrion sighed and looked at his wife. “You remember what’s the best way to forge alliances?”

“Of course. Marriage,” Margaery smiled wickedly. “Robin Arryn is unwed, Prince Doran’s son, Trystane, is unwed too, Theon Greyjoy is unwed, and his father has a daughter, I think.”

Tyrion confirmed. “Yara Greyjoy. From what I know, she is unmarried too.”

“Well.” She laid her fork in her plate and crossed her graceful fingers. “We have three men, or boys, one is a lord and the others are heirs, and a lady, on the other side. And it happens that we have a king, a princess and a prince, and all are unwed as well. And my brother is an heir, and unwed too.”

They looked at each other, and exchanged the same smile. They were thinking about the same thing. Tyrion took his cup and raised it to her. “I’m listening, my queen. Who shall we marry?”

Chapter End Notes

We begin a new arc in this story, an arc where Tyrion and Margaery will truly rule the Seven Kingdoms, or at least those still obeying Joffrey. I hope you'll enjoy it. The power couple is in King’s Landing... and there are people who are going to try to take their place.

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
He swung, and swung, and swung again. His sword danced from left to right, from right to left, from left to right again. Each time, it was stopped by the trunk. Marks were left by the steel in the wood of the tree, and the tree left its marks on the steel of the sword as well. At each swing, Jon allowed a gasp, a shout, a cry to escape. He struck wood with steel again and again, until he couldn’t feel his arms anymore, and then he kept striking it.

After another blow, he burst into a sob, and fell on his knees, his sword, now ruined, still in his hands, the damp ground wetting his pants. His father was dead, executed as a traitor. He should have been there, at King’s Landing, but no, he wasn’t. Instead, he came here, to tell his brother to not march on the capital, thinking it would ensure their father’s survival. How wrong he was. Lord Eddard Stark died because of him.

He believed Tyrion and Margaery Lannister when they said they would save his father, make sure he would come back to them alive with his sisters. He couldn’t believe it when they received word of his death. Jon had thought it was a mistake first, but the messenger was very clear. Lord Eddard Stark was executed on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor by King Joffrey, sentenced to die for treason. That was his fault. He told Robb to not march south, to let the Imp deal with his nephew and make sure that their father would come back. He could never forgive himself for that.

“Jon Snow.” He turned to look at a young page with the Stark sigil on his arms. “Lord Stark summons you to his solar.”

Robb Stark, Lord of Winterfell. Jon knew it would happen one day, but no so soon. He didn’t think he would see that day before many years, and yet it had come. His brother was Lord of Winterfell. He was no longer the bastard son of the Warden of the North, but his bastard brother.

“I’m coming.” Jon stood up, the lower half of his clothes all wet. He went to his horse and rode back to Moat Cailin.

Jon had left the northern camp that stretched all around the northern side of the ancient fortress. He couldn’t stay there any longer. He needed time alone, to vent his anger, his frustration, his despair, away from the prying eyes of the men and women of the North.

They had to travel through the camp to go back to Moat Cailin, and on their way all the people turned their heads to look at him. Some had expressions that showed sympathy, but most displayed accusing looks. How could Jon blame them? He was the one to advise they should delay their advance on the south in the first place. In the eyes of many people from the North, he was no better than a traitor, and to the opposite of what people thought of his father in the south, the Northerners may not be wrong.
Jon spoke to no one on his way to Robb’s solar, and no one talked to him. He wasn’t only the bastard of Winterfell right now. He was the son who sent the man who sired him to an early grave. For the first time in months, Jon wished he had taken the black. The only person who didn’t turn his back on him was Ghost, wandering by his side. No one would dare anything against him while Ghost was around, but Jon didn’t take any comfort in that. He arrived at the top of the Gatehouse Tower. A guard opened his brother’s solar and he entered.

Robb was standing beside his desk, but he wasn’t alone in this room. Lady Stark was there as well. There had been many times when Jon felt ashamed, like he was nothing, when Catelyn Stark looked down on him, but he never felt like he deserved it more than today, and the way she looked at him was worse than she ever did before. She looked at him as if she actually wanted to kill him, and Jon had no doubt that she wanted him dead right now. Ghost bared his teeth. Jon looked at his brother. Robb had taken their father’s face, the face of the Lord of Winterfell. He tried to not show his emotions, but Jon wasn’t a fool enough to believe his brother didn’t feel their loss very painfully.

“Sit, Jon. We need to talk.”

Robb’s voice was sure, but his breathing was obviously controlled. Jon did his best to do the same, though he wasn’t as forced to look strong as his brother did. As Robb once told him, Lady Stark said he would never, and could never, be Lord of Winterfell. He had more freedom to display his true feelings than Robb ever could. Jon obeyed his brother and lord.

“I asked you both here because we have important matters to discuss,” his brother began.


Robb took something on his desk. It was a large piece of paper, a parchment made for long letters, missives that would be carried by horse and not by raven. Lords used them only for very important and secret messages.

“I received this an hour ago. It came from White Harbor. It was sent from Dragonstone by Stannis Baratheon. I think you should know about this before anyone else does, though the word of it will spread soon enough.”

He handled the letter to Jon. He was surprised that his brother gave it to him first and not to Lady Stark, but he took it without a word. Perhaps it concerned him, though he didn’t see how word from King Robert’s brother could concern him. He took a look at the message written down on the paper, and it wasn’t long before air left his lungs.

To all noble men and noble women of Westeros,

All men know me for the trueborn son of Steffon Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, by his lady wife Cassana of House Estermont. I declare upon the honor of my House that my brother Robert left no trueborn heirs, the boy Joffrey, the boy Tommen, and the girl Myrcella being born of incest between Cersei Lannister and her brother Ser Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer. By right of birth and blood, I do this day lay claim to the Iron Throne of Westeros. Let all true men declare their loyalty.

The members of House Lannister made themselves guilty of crimes without numbers and will be judged accordingly to the laws of Westeros for treason. Among the crimes held against them will be the murder of the Hand of the King Lord Jon Arryn, conspiracy against our late king Robert, the murder of the Hand of the King Lord Eddard Stark, and treason for supporting the bastard born of incest Joffrey. I attaint Ser Jaime Lannister and his sister, Cersei Lannister, them and their children. Any who shall support them in any way will be considered traitors to the Realm and face judgement from the rightful king.
Done in the Light of the Lord, under the sign and seal of Stannis of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.

Jon looked at Robb. His face was deadly serious. “Is it true? Are we sure of it?” Jon asked.

“I don’t see any reason to doubt Stannis’s word.” Jon neither. Their lord father always told them that Stannis was a just man, hard but just. He wouldn’t lie about this, not if Cersei Lannister’s children were his brother’s children.

Jon gave the paper to Lady Stark who read it very quickly. She looked lost in her thoughts after that, then she looked up to her son. One word came out of her mouth in a whisper. “Bran.”

Robb stared at his mother with a questioning look. She explained further. “Back at Winterfell, I inspected the tower where he fell. I found a blond hair on the floor.” She looked in horror at her son. “Where was the Kingslayer when it happened?”

Robb frowned, searching his memories. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

His brother looked at Jon, asking him the same question. “I have no idea. I don’t remember seeing him at the hunt. I remember Lord Tyrion was there, but I didn’t see Ser Jaime.”

“The hunt?” Lady Stark asked. “Your father was hunting with the king.” She addressed Robb when she asked this question, but didn’t deign to wait for an answer. “Was the Kingslayer with him? He’s a kingsguard. If he was with you, he should have been there to protect the king.”

Robb was still searching his memories. “No, he wasn’t there.” Robb looked up, his eyes wide open with realization. “I remember now. He stayed behind, in Winterfell. He was in the castle when Bran fell.”

Robb looked at him mouth wide open. Jon was speechless too. He thought that Cersei Lannister may have been behind Bran’s fall, but not for this. He believed that maybe Bran had surprised her discussing about Jon Arryn’s death, like Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery suggested, but he never thought about this eventuality. Cersei Lannister and Jaime Lannister, together, as lovers?

Jon heard the sound of paper being crumpled, and he noticed Lady Stark crushing Stannis’s message in her right hand. Her knuckles were white from the effort. Slowly, she loosened her grip and let the paper fall on the desk. Jon never saw her that angry. Robb looked furious as well. His fists were clenched. Jon realized that his own hands formed into balls as well. He spoke once with Jaime Lannister, and the knight mocked him for going to the Wall. If he had known what he did to Bran back then…

“I’ll kill them all.” It was Robb who spoke. “Everyone of them. I will kill them all.”

Robb’s face betrayed no doubt, no afterthought, no hesitation. He had a murderous glare.

“My boy. They have your sisters,” Lady Stark said softly, calmly. “We have to get the girls back.”

“It’s true, Robb. We need to save Sansa and Arya. They’re in danger,” Jon supported.

“And then we will kill them all.” Catelyn Stark’s voice had turned to ice as quickly as it had softened to calm down her son. Jon saw how cold she was. “All the Lannisters. The queen. The Kingslayer. Their son. The Imp. ALL the Lannisters.”

Jon looked at his brother, who didn’t seem to disapprove in any way. Jon should have approved. The
Lannisters just killed his father. They promised they would save him, and they executed him. Your family may think we had a hand in this, but on that they are wrong. I have nothing to see with the attempt of murder against your brother. I don’t know who did this, but it wasn’t me. Casterly Rock has nothing to see with that.

Tyron and Margaery Lannister said they would save his father, and they didn’t. And yet, Jon couldn’t shake the feeling that something in all that was wrong. He reminded himself of all the time he spent at Casterly Rock, practicing his swordplay with Daven or Lucion, talking with Joy, hunting down criminals. He remembered a song. The story is happening in another world. A world where there are magical beasts, where men and women can have magical power, where kings are being advised by mages and witches. The story is about a hunter with such magical power who fell in love with a witch. A woman with dark hair like ravens and violet eyes. For years, they only saw each other from time to time. Finally, they settled on an island called Avalon where they lived together. But then demons came after them and made the hunter’s love prisoner. He went after her but lost his memory after a battle. He forgot her. He met another witch, younger, with red hair, and fell in love with her.

There was something wrong. Casterly Rock has nothing to see with that. Casterly Rock had nothing to see with the attempts against Bran’s life. That’s what Tyrion Lannister told him. Jon never thought a single moment that the small lord lied to him. His father once told him that if you couldn’t look into the eye of a man and say that he was guilty, then you couldn’t kill him. He tried to recall that day. He had looked straight into Lord Tyron’s eyes. He tried to remember the best he could how they looked like. He asked him the question, if they had a hand in the attempts on Bran, and he denied it. Jon swore he was telling the truth.

“What if they’re not all responsible?” he said in a low voice. “What if…?” He realized that Lady Stark and his brother were looking at him with perplexed faces. “I mean… I didn’t think… and even now I don’t think Lord Tyron lied to me. He and his wife, I would swear they truly wanted to save Father. What if Joffrey killed him against their will?”

Jon felt he sounded stupid as he spoke, and he didn’t wait long to get a reaction from his father’s wife. “You dare to defend him after what his nephew did? Your father is dead! Your father is dead, and all you find to do is to defend the man who took part into his assassination!?”

She glared furiously at Jon, and all he could do was to look away in shame. “You told us to wait. You told us to let the Imp save Ned, and he died because of this,” she continued.

“Mother, that’s enough,” Robb said, but Lady Stark ignored her son.

“You went south with the Lannisters. You lived with them. You did what they wanted you to do. You betrayed your father!”

“Mother,” Robb warned again.

“It’s because of you if Ned died. He welcomed you at Winterfell and you were the cause of his death. You should have gone to the Wall when you were three. He should never have welcomed you in our home and call you son. You’re a disgrace. A bastard with no name.”

“MOTHER, SHUT UP!”

Robb’s voice rang to their ears, and Jon and Lady Stark both turned to him, shocked by what he just said. And just like his mother moments ago, Robb didn’t stop.

“If you want to blame someone for Father’s death, then blame me! I’m the one who decided to stay
here, who decided to delay our march. If someone is to blame for Father’s death, it’s me.”

“But…” Lady Stark began, but Robb didn’t let her speak.

“I was the Lord of Winterfell in my father’s absence. It was my call to ride south to his rescue, and I didn’t. I took the decision to wait, not Jon. The only crime Jon committed was to advise me to delay our march, but it was me who decided of it in the end. Father told me that a lord who doesn’t assume the consequences of his decisions is no true lord. So if you want to blame someone for my father’s death and to honor his memory, then blame me. I am the responsible.”

Robb was shaking when was done with his tirade. Jon saw Lady Stark hesitate. She didn’t dare to say something. Jon bitterly thought that she wouldn’t hesitate to snap at him when his father just died, but she wouldn’t do the same to her son. It didn’t matter that Eddard had been his father. The only thing that mattered was that Jon wasn’t her son, and Robb was.

“I’m sorry, Robb,” she weakly said. The three of them were only people grieving a father or a husband now.

“We were all fooled. The Lannisters fooled each one of us. Jon trusted the Imp, and we trusted Lady Lannister, Mother. We are as much to blame as he is.”

Lady Stark looked down. Jon could tell she was holding back tears, and for the first time in a very long time, he felt pity for this woman who was the mother of his brothers and sisters.

“What are we gonna do?” Jon asked to one in particular.

Robb answered. “Go south. We’ll ride to King’s Landing, destroy every army standing in our way, and kill Joffrey, and any man who had a hand in our father’s death.”

Jon looked back at his brother. Robb seemed to wait for something from him. Jon nodded. His brother turned his attention to Lady Stark. “Mother, you can’t stay here.”

“I know.” She tried to straighten herself. “It’s time for me to go home. I haven’t seen Bran or Rickon in months. They will need me. My place is at Winterfell, not with an army on the march.”

Jon hoped that his little brothers were all right. They would surely be better with their mother near them. “You can’t go to Winterfell.” Robb’s word startled Jon.

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Stark asked.

“Ser Rodrik is watching over the boys. They are safe. Tomorrow, you’ll ride east for White Harbor. Lord Manderly will have a ship waiting for you there and an escort. You’ll sail for Dragonstone.”

“Dragonstone? What would I do at Dragonstone? Why in the name of all the gods…”

“Because I need you to negotiate with Stannis Baratheon. Our army is powerful, but we are still outnumbered by the Lannisters and their allies. We will need ships to take King’s Landing. Stannis has the royal fleet with him to Dragonstone and his brother Renly rules Storm’s End for him. With their help, we will fight Joffrey one to one.”

“I haven’t seen Stannis Baratheon in years. He was a young man the last time I set eyes on him,” Robb’s mother protested.

“You know him, Mother. You know his family. Better than most men here.”
“You have a hundred other lords. Many fought alongside Stannis during the Greyjoy rebellion. They know him better…”

“Which of these lords do I trust more than you? Do you think I can entrust Lord Bolton, or the Greatjon with a critical mission like this? We need to coordinate our efforts with Stannis. We need him to attack King’s Landing at the same time than us. It won’t be possible if I don’t have someone to talk to him in my name. And I can’t imagine someone better to do it than you.”

Lady Catelyn Stark was deep in her thoughts. Finally, she sighed in resignation. “I will ride at first light.” She came close to Robb and put a hand on his arm. “Be careful.”

She left the room, not looking at Jon a single moment, as if he didn’t exist. As soon as the door was closed, Robb addressed his half-brother.

“I’m sorry for my mother’s behavior.”

“She just lost her husband,” Jon replied.

Robb nodded. “And we lost our father.”

“But she was right. I told you to trust the Imp. If I hadn’t, then perhaps…”

“It’s useless to think like that, Jon. I said we were all fooled by the Lannisters, and I said it because I believed it.” Robb suddenly looked ashamed. “Back at Winterfell, I came to trust Lady Lannister. I started to believe that the Lannisters had nothing to see with the attempt on Bran’s life. She told me during a discussion that her husband was unable to order the death of a child, and I believed her, just like that. I should have been more suspicious.”

Robb looked straight into Jon’s eyes. “It was my decision to stay here, Jon. It’s my fault if Father is dead. You’re not to blame for a decision I took. Your only crime was to trust the wrong people. But now we know where the Lannisters stand. We’re not going to make the same mistake twice. We won’t trust a Lannister again.”

“No.”

There was something that told him it wasn’t the right decision, but Robb was right as well. The Lannisters killed his father, and they had his sisters. He couldn’t trust them any longer. As hard as it was to accept, the Lannisters were now his enemies. Jon wasn’t sure he could face this.

“Robb, perhaps I should go back to the Wall. They were ready to accept me, and we’ve had no word from Uncle Benjen in some time.”

Truth be told, despite Robb’s words, Jon still felt that he was responsible for his father’s death, and he thought that joining the Night’s Watch might be a way for him to atone for that. Maybe no one would want to accept him in the North, and there was no place for him in the south either.

“That’s out of the question. I need you by my side, Jon,” his brother declared.

“Robb, I told you before everyone that we could trust Tyron Lannister. All your bannermen were there when I said it. They won’t respect you if I stay around you.”

“You won’t stay around me. You will stand next to me. You’re my brother.”

“Robb…”
“Jon, you will stay. Why do you think I sent Mother away to Dragonstone?” Jon didn’t understand for a moment, then he did as his brother explained to him. “I knew she would probably demand that you leave, and probably to go back to the Wall. That’s why I want her as far from us as possible, as soon as possible.”

“But Robb…”

“I am the Lord of Winterfell now, and I want you with me, to fight with me and to advise me as we ride south on the Lannisters. You know them better than everyone. You spent months at Casterly Rock. You know how they fight, how they think, and you even have an idea of what their strategy will be. Our father is dead. We have to avenge him, together, to bring justice to those who killed him. This is our war. I refuse to let you go to the Wall again. Your place is here. Do you think there’s a war more important than ours up there?”

No, there wasn’t. “No.”

“Good. Then you’ll stay. And the day we have Joffrey, you’ll be there when I will kill him.” Robb had approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Or you will kill him yourself.”

Jon nodded. Robb was right. They had to avenge their father, to bring justice to the people who killed him, and they also had to support Stannis. If Joffrey was no true king, then Stannis was the king and it was their duty to help him take the Iron Throne. Their father would have done the same.

“Now, we need to prepare our assault,” Robb said.

He turned to a map that laid on the surface of his desk. The crumpled message of Stannis announcing the bastardy of Cersei’s children laid at the place where King’s Landing was. Robb made nothing to push the paper aside. Jon joined him.

“Still no news from the Vale?” Jon asked.

“Nothing. No reply to our ravens. They may join us later.”

Jon reminded himself of something that Lady Margaery Lannister once told him about Jon Arryn’s widow. *The woman is mad.* Even though he wasn’t supposed to trust the Lannisters, Jon couldn’t get out the feeling that this wasn’t untrue and that the Knights of the Vale would probably not join them in their war. He said nothing to Robb, however.

“For now, we have an army at Riverrun, and another one at Moat Cailin. The Lannisters have an army at the Golden Tooth, and another one coming to King’s Landing.”

“If they’re not already there, they will be in the city within days,” Jon said. “We won’t be able to reach the capital before them.”

“What do you think they will do?”

Jon tried to imagine what Tyrion Lannister would do. What orders would he give to his men? What strategy would he take? “For now, they seem to remain in defensive positions. The Golden Tooth is a strong castle. Any man who tries to invade the Westerlands by the east would have to take the Tooth first, and that would mean either a long siege, or an attack that would cost us dearly at best.”

“A man on the battlements is worth a hundred men in the field,” Robb quoted. That was something their father taught them.

“I don’t know, Robb. I don’t know how Tyrion Lannister will act. I saw him rule his lands, but he
never led a war. The only military operations I saw were against bandits and brigands, and they were small and disorganized groups. That’s not the same thing at all. However, the Lannisters know how to fight, that I can tell you. We mustn’t expect an army of green boys and old men. The city of Lannisport itself is full of healthy young men. Sailors, fishermen, peasants who can be turn into soldiers at any time. And Casterly Rock had a very strong garrison. They have the military commanders to quickly train new men, and a population big enough to raise another army. And I didn’t mention you the Tyrells.” Jon pointed to Highgarden. “They can raise even more men. They can send reinforcements to King’s Landing. I don’t know where they are in their efforts to mobilize right now, but I’m quite sure they already have an army on the march. They could reach King’s Landing before us if we don’t act swiftly. And if we give them the time, they can probably raise one, two, or maybe three other armies. Their population is even larger than the Westerlands.”

“So, we must win the war quickly?”

“Unless we want to face a dozen different armies in the next years, yes. And if we want Stannis to help us with his fleet in King’s Landing, then we need to attack before the Redwynes can send their own fleet in the Narrow Sea.”

“That solves a problem. We know we must act now before the Lannisters and the Tyrells can do something. We must take them by surprise. A direct march on King’s Landing is our best chance,” Robb declared.

“We won’t surprise them. They’ll be waiting for us with an army, maybe two. And if we bring your grandfather’s men with us, they might have free reign to invade the Riverlands and attack us from behind. If I had an army at the Golden Tooth and saw Riverrun open before me, I wouldn’t let that chance go. They will attack us where we are weak.”

Robb seemed to ponder over the map for a moment. “We can leave some men in the Riverlands. Let the Lannisters believe is it empty while we take most of Lord Hoster Tully’s army with us. We leave enough men to harass the Lannisters while they march on Riverrun, then we let them set a siege on the castle. We march on King’s Landing with the bulk of our forces, defeat the Lannister army from Deep Den in one battle, take the city with Stannis’s help, then come back to save Riverrun.”

“Do you think Stannis will agree with this plan?” Jon asked.

“We’re going to help him to take his rightful place on the Iron Throne. The sooner he gets it, the better. I don’t think he will talk against it. If we meet the Lannister army before the walls of King’s Landing, he might even come with his own troops from Dragonstone to help us. Even without the Vale, we would have the advantage of the numbers then.”

“But King’s Landing was never taken by assault. Tywin Lannister took it because the Mad King thought he would help him and opened the doors for him. The walls of the city were never taken by storm. We might need a long siege to take it. Lord and Lady Margaery brought two thousand men with them to the capital. We would need an army of two hundred thousand to take the city, if we believe Father’s words. If we linger in a siege, Riverrun could fall before Stannis can sit on the throne, and the Lannisters could then take us by the north through the Riverlands, or the south through the Reach. We’ll have no one to stop Mace Tyrell’s troops.”

“Yes, we will. Renly.” Robb pointed Storm’s End. “He could bring his men and stop the Tyrell’s progression to the city, perhaps even arrive before them. Or he could distract them by invading their lands.”

“It won’t work,” Jon opposed. “The Reach is too large a territory. The Stormlands don’t have enough men. The Tyrells can send an army after them and still send another one to King’s Landing.
The only way would be to stop them on their way to the capital.”

“What about Dorne? Do you think we could get help from them? Maybe they could occupy the Reach with Renly, which would give us time to deal with Joffrey along with Stannis’s help?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what Dorne will do.”

“Me neither. It’s probably better to not consider them as allies for now. Hopefully, they will fight for Stannis since he is their rightful king.” Robb sighed. “You’re right about one thing Jon, though. The Reach and the Westerlands have more resources than us. If this war lasts too long, they will have the advantage. We need a quick and swift victory. A forced march on King’s Landing, a victory against the Lannisters on the way, we take the city rapidly, we kill Joffrey, put Stannis on the throne, and then everything is over and we can get back home.”

“We’ll need to win victories on several fronts. In King’s Landing, in the Riverlands and in the Reach.”

“No, there will be no need for that. Renly and Hoster will only have to delay the Lannisters and the Tyrells, to harass them, to slow them down, just enough to give us what little time we need to take the capital. Once it’s done, we can take care of the other armies more easily.”

“So, we only have to take King’s Landing as quickly as possible?” Jon asked.

“Aye. That makes it simple, isn’t it?”

Robb tried to smile, partly succeeding. Jon tried the same without much success. They had a strategy. All they had to do was to win the war now.

An hour later, Jon was standing next to his brother at his war council. All his main bannermen sat around the table. Theon Greyjoy stood on the other side of Robb. Normally, Theon would be the one to be eyed with the most suspicion, but today Jon felt many eyes on him. Men like Wylis Manderly and Galbart Glover looked at him with disdain at best. Roose Bolton’s eyes were cold and calm, like always, but Jon felt studied by him, as if he was expecting something.

“My lords, my ladies,” Robb started, “You all know by now that Lord Eddard Stark, my father, is dead. Assassinated by Joffrey. A few hours ago, I received this message from White Harbor.” Robb showed them the message that Catelyn Stark crumpled only hours ago. The widow was sitting in retreat behind Robb. “It was sent by Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone. And here’s what he says.”

Robb read the letter, and reactions didn’t wait. Rage, outrage, consternation, surprise and disgust all had their place among the lords of the North.

“I say we march on King’s Landing right now and kill that monstrosity who sits on the Iron Throne. Then we’ll drink in his skull once their Silent Sisters in the south are done with whatever is left of him,” the Greatjon roared.

Many lords approved. Robb waited for the silence to come again. He said nothing, only looked at his bannermen very seriously to make them understand that he demanded silence to speak. The lords progressively turned to silence.

“We’re going to King’s Landing.” Most of the lords approved loudly, but shortly. “I decided to support Stannis’s claim on the Iron Throne. He is our king. From now on, we shall address him as King Stannis Baratheon.” There were new signs of approvals, but not the same enthusiasm than
before. “We’re going to execute Joffrey for his crimes and all his accomplices. Then we’ll sit the rightful king of Westeros on the throne.” Again, there were approvals, stronger than the second time, but lower than the first. “The Lannisters will pay for what they did to my father.”

“We should have marched on the city long before,” Lady Dustin said. She had arrived not long ago with her men. She wouldn’t follow them south, but she would see her men leave Moat Cailin before she returned to Barrowton. “It was stupid to wait in the hope that a Lannister would free Lord Stark.”

For a very short moment, Jon had the impression he saw a smile on her face. He chased the idea from his mind. Surely he imagined it.

“So says the woman who arrived late,” Theon mocked. That earned him a murderous glare from the Lady of Barrowton.

“Perhaps if the bastard didn’t tell us that the Imp was trustworthy, we could have saved Lord Stark,” Lord Glover said, glaring angrily at Jon. Now had come the time when he would face the accusations of all the North.

“Lord Glover, Jon is the son of your previous lord. He is grieving Lord Stark as much as I do,” Robb interfered. “Lord Stark was his father as much as he was mine. I expected you would show him some respect for that.”

“Forgive me, my lord.” He still had a reproachful stare for Jon. Robb forced him to show him respect, but not to actually respect Jon.

“Still, Lord Glover has a point,” Lady Mormont. “Jon Snow told us that we could trust the Lannisters, and yet here we are, grieving our lord, wading in swamps when we should be smashing the doors of King’s Landing instead.”

“We will be smashing the doors of the capital soon enough, Lady Mormont. You have my word,” Robb promised.

“Still, if it wasn’t for Jon Snow and his assurance that Lord Eddard Stark and his daughters would come to us safe if we did nothing, Lord Stark might still be alive. The news of our march on King’s Landing could have stopped that boy king from killing Lord Stark,” Ser Manderly said.

“I don’t believe we can hold Jon Snow responsible for Lord Eddard Stark’s trespassing.” To Jon’s great surprise, it wasn’t Robb who spoke. It was Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort. “Even if we had marched south as quickly as we could, we would barely have left the Neck by the time our lord would be dead. That would have made no difference. Ned Stark is dead, there is nothing we can do about it now. Our priority should be to decide what we do next. What do we do to avenge Lord Stark and win this war?”

Lord Bolton looked at Jon in a calmer and colder way than Jon ever witnessed someone look at him. He wasn’t sure how to feel about Lord Bolton’s intervention. The Lord of the Dreadfort brought back his attention to Robb.

The Greatjon roared. “Well, better to kill some Lannisters than to stay here to talk. Let Jon Snow stand on the battlefield with sword in hand. Whether he dies or survives fighting for his father, that will be enough to amend for his mistakes.”

The argument over him was over this way. Discussions about the war followed, and they lasted long, though only minor modifications were made and few details added to the plan Jon and Robb decided together a few hours ago. Jon stayed away from the conversation most of the time, deciding it would
be best to not attract attention on him for now. The council was sent away only late in the evening.

Lady Stark left early in the morning, before everyone else. Their army was moving south immediately, and Jon made sure to be ready. As he walked to his horse, he came upon Roose Bolton and thanked him for yesterday.

“There are many people who dislike or mistrust you here, Jon Snow. I suggest you choose your allies very carefully.”

Lord Bolton’s words sent a shiver down his spine, and Jon didn’t linger to talk more with him. There were rumors that he kept skins of his past enemies in a secret room inside the Dreadfort. He remembered that the stories of Boltons garbing themselves with the skins of the Starks they killed in battles scared Bran.

They left in the middle of the morning. Jon rode with Robb at the head of the column as they followed the Kingsroad through the Neck. At some point, while Robb was riding in the middle of the column to discuss with his bannermen, a man with brown-dark hair, green eyes and a chiseled beard approached Jon. A shield made of the finest ironwood displaying a tree with a sword in the center was hooked to his saddle. Jon knew this man. He knew him very well. He reminded him of someone he missed.

“I heard Galbart gave you a hard time yesterday,” he told Jon.

“Nothing to worry about. He was quite civil,” Jon replied.

“I talked to him, Jon Snow. I think he will show you more respect in the future. All of us will.”

“I don’t think they will forget how I defended the Lord of Casterly Rock when every one of them said we couldn’t trust him.”

“This isn’t your fault. Lord Tyrion seems to inspire loyalty and trust to people around him. My daughter would probably have done the same in your place, and she’s not easily manipulated. She wouldn’t have reached her actual position if she was.”

“Are you worried about her?” Jon asked the lord.

“Aye, I’m worried. But I believe she will be all right. Margaery Lannister trusts her, and she must know that Mira is very loyal. She has nothing to fear from her. Anyway, what harm could a handmaiden do?” Lord Gregor Forrester asked, probably not expecting an answer.

“Don’t you think she could have problems? What if she tried to help you from where she is?”

“I think she will be wise enough to keep a low profile. My wife prepared her for this life. And she will know that there isn’t much she can do for us. Though she could come in handy if negotiations are needed at some point. Lady Lannister might see a northern lady in her household as an asset.” Lord Gregor sighed. “And well, if things go south for us, at least there is someone in my family who will be safe, in the south.”

He smirked. Jon nodded. He didn’t want something bad to happen to Mira. She had been his only link with the North at Casterly Rock. She was kind and good, and helped Jon a lot when he arrived. He would never forget that. She said that they would meet again before he left, but Jon was afraid now that this day would never come. He wouldn’t go back in the south after the war. He couldn’t. Mira would marry Willas Tyrell within the next months. As for himself, he didn’t know where he would be in a few months. If this war was over like he and Robb hoped, he would probably be back in the North at this time. What he would do next, he had no idea, but one thing at a time. First, they
had to win this war.

Jon had gotten to know Lord Forrester and his eldest son, Rodrik, who came with him as soon as he arrived at Moat Cailin. He transmitted them the message that Mira gave him, and they were very glad to receive news from her. Lord Forrester had been very kind with him, especially. He said Mira mentioned him in her letters once, to tell them he was at Casterly Rock now.

“You said that Mira accompanied Tyrion Lannister and Margaery Tyrell to King’s Landing, didn’t you?” Lord Forrester asked.

“Aye, she did.”

Lord Forrester didn’t seem happy. “Another delay for her wedding. Though if it is celebrated during this war, I doubt that I’ll be able to attend it.”

“Do you think the Tyrells will still want to marry Willas to her, now that they’re at war with us?”

Lord Gregor seemed to think about it for a moment. “I don’t think they will break the betrothal. From what she told us, Willas Tyrell wants to marry her because he loves her, and he’s only a nephew of Lord Tyrell. That’s not as if they could make a strategic alliance by marrying him to someone else. They already have the Lannisters with them. They don’t need more allies. She will marry him soon. I just wish I could be there for the ceremony. My first child getting married, and my wife and I wouldn’t be present.”

“If this war ends quickly, my lord, you might see in King’s Landing when we take it,” Jon offered.

“You’re right. Maybe I’ll get to see my daughter sooner than I thought.”

Indeed, that was something Jon didn’t think about before. He was riding towards King’s Landing, and Mira was in King’s Landing. If she didn’t leave the city too early, he might see her again. Maybe Mira was right. *We’ll see each other again.*

Chapter End Notes

I have a tendency to believe that Robb wouldn’t hold Jon responsible for their father’s death. The Starks are, after all, the most functional family in Game of Thrones, with the fewest conflicts among siblings. Arya and Sansa didn’t turn on each other in the show, despite the doubts they had, and I don’t believe that Robb would believe that Jon would try to get their father killed. The Starks remain the most united family, where betrayal among themselves is unbelievable. "The lone wolf dies, the pack survives.”

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery
Margaery XV

Chapter Notes

Tyrion and Margaery play the game of thrones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XV

She opened her eyes lazily. The sun hadn’t yet begun to cast its light. Their chamber was still plunged into darkness, though not full darkness. Dawn wasn’t far away. She looked at her left and saw her husband sleeping deeply. A smile came to her lips. They may not be at Casterly Rock or in Highgarden, but they were together. Their nights were still beautiful wherever they were.

Margaery removed the covers from her body. Despite the end of winter announced by the Citadel, it was still quite warm in King’s Landing, so she felt no chill. She regretted it, since at Casterly Rock she would always feel it when she woke up. She stood up and put on a light nightgown.

She looked around their rooms. Margaery had come in that part of the Red Keep during their last visit. Jon Arryn had his solar, his apartments and those of his wife and his servants inside the Tower of the Hand. Margaery had found that Lord Arryn was an honest man, loyal to the king, and trying to rule the Realm despite the follies of a man he loved like a son. Robert Baratheon wasn’t meant to be king, and from what Margaery saw of Joffrey so far, the son was no better. Cersei had wanted to send Ned Stark to the Wall, but Joffrey decided at the last minute to execute him, without a warning, after he promised to show mercy to Ned Stark if he confessed his crimes. Ever since that happened, Joffrey spent his days shooting bolts at caged animals. He didn’t attend the meetings of the small council, didn’t hold court, and fulfilled none of his duties as a king. Worse, one day that a small group of people came before the Red Keep, asking for bread, Joffrey went to the battlements. He shot on the small crowd. Tyrion gave orders right away to not allow the king to appear on the battlements with a bow or a crossbow.

Margaery walked to the balcony and looked to the city in the dark. The situation could be worse. Food came in plenty from the Reach. There was a temporary shortage of stocks because of the rebellion in the Riverlands, since King’s Landing was provisioned by both the Riverlands and the Reach, but it wouldn’t last. Joffrey would soon have no other opportunity to shoot people from the battlements. Margaery visited an orphanage, a sept or a poorhouse every day, making sure to distribute food everywhere she went. The people remained quiet. They just had to stop Joffrey from taking any decision, or to appear with anything that could kill someone from a distance. His last idea had been to march against Robb Stark with the City Watch, a concept he quickly abandoned, not because he realized that it was impossible and foolish, but because he had no desire to ride into battle. At least, Robert was courageous and eager to fight if he faced enemies, but Joffrey seemed to have inherited all the flaws of his late father, without the virtues.

She sat in a nearby chair and let the wind caress her face. The wind didn’t carry the smell of mines, which she got used to, but it carried other scents, which she found much more unpleasant. The scent of the sea that was carried to the Rock was enjoyable and fresh. It filled your lungs and when you took deep breathes, you felt your body filled with life. Here, the air seemed rotten, and taking a deep breathe was like filling your body with muddy water.
King’s Landing was a horrible place to live if you weren’t rich. To rent a room could cost your eyes, and the people who left the fields in hope to find work in the city often ended begging in the streets. The network of wells and water distribution was very primitive, not at all like those of Oldtown and Lannisport. The city was a chaos of alleys and hovels tossed against each other like the people who lived within. Margaery pitied the people who had to live here.

She felt his presence by her side before he put his hand on her shoulder. “Can’t sleep?”

She turned to him and said with a smile, “I miss our bed.” He smirked and kissed her, before he sat next to her, wrapped in nightclothes just like her. “Normally, you’re the one who can’t sleep.”

“I don’t believe it will get much better in the coming weeks.”

Tyrion had problems to sleep from the very beginning of their marriage, though it lessened as the months and the years went by. Margaery knew why he was agitated at night, and she was glad she could help him, but ever since they left Casterly Rock for the capital, the troubles increased and he was never able to sleep through the full night. They arrived in the capital two weeks ago, and he already spent two entire nights reading or working. She knew he had a lot of work to do, but she wished that she and her husband could keep their nights for themselves.

“Did you have a nightmare?” she asked him.

“No. I suppose I just woke up because I couldn’t feel you by my side anymore.”

They exchanged a knowing smile. “I’m sorry.”

“You have no reason to apologize. You can do what you want.”

“If only Joffrey didn’t think like that.”

Her husband looked down. “Yes, if only.”

Margaery sighed. “Tyrion, what are we doing here?”

“Serving the king.” Tyrion said without a single hint of enthusiasm. It was obvious he would like to be anywhere but here, trying to repair the damage caused by his sister and her son.

“Tyrion, I wonder. He shot people at the gates of the Red Keep, people who had only come asking for bread, and he shot them like they were some boars or stags. What kind of person Joffrey is? What kind of king is he going to be?”

“The kind who will probably let the small council and his family rule in his stead, and the kind of king we don’t want to rule seven kingdoms.”

“Five,” Margaery corrected.

“Four if the Vale joins the rebels, three of the Stormlands rebel. Do you really think your brother can convince Renly to stay on our side?”

“Renly has more love for Loras than he ever had for his brothers. I think he can convince him. We only have to guarantee him Storm’s End. That should be enough for Renly.”

Stannis had proclaimed himself the rightful king of Westeros, using the accusations of Eddard Stark about the supposed bastardy of Cersei’s children to legitimate his claim. Dragonstone was now in rebellion against the Crown, and since Stannis had most of the royal fleet with him, he controlled the
Narrow Sea. The Redwyne fleet would need time to reach King’s Landing, and if the Starks and Stannis launched a quick assault like they expected, they would never arrive in time to face Stannis’s armada.

“I wish we weren’t there,” Margaery said. “Joffrey’s place is not on the throne. You saw him. He isn’t fit to rule.”

“You’ll hear no denial about this from me. But he’s the king, and our nephew.”

“Yes, the king and our nephew,” Margaery repeated plattonically. If only Tommen had been the elder, they would have a king she would be more than eager to protect, but up to now Joffrey made everything to make himself despised and hated. He was the image of his parents, arrogant, selfish, stupid, uninterested in ruling, and cruel. The farther he was from the throne, the better. He shared that trait with his mother.

They watched the horizon silently. Their hands intertwined after some time, and they took comfort from each other through this gesture. They remained there for quite some time, enough to see the sun appear on the horizon. As it cast its light upon the sleeping city, they began to prepare for the small council meeting that would take place in the morning and where several important matters were to be discussed. Ser Kevan and Ser Jaime left with an army a few days ago, and now was the time to strike.

They walked together to the small council chamber. Ever since they arrived, they always joined the meeting together, to remind everyone that Casterly Rock and Highgarden stood together, and that everyone had to take this into consideration before attacking one of them, in one way or another.

When they entered, all the other members were already there. Cersei sat at the seat that the king would occupy in normal circumstances. Varys, Pycelle, Littlefinger and Slynt were sitting around her and listening to her as if she was the voice of the truth. Cersei stopped in the middle of whatever she was saying when they entered.

“I’m glad that you began this early, big sister. I hope you slept well,” her husband commented, taking a seat at the far end of the table. Margaery sat next to him. On her right sat, in the order, Pycelle, Varys, Cersei, Baelish and Slynt.

“We had important matters to discuss. It couldn’t wait,” Cersei replied.

“Then you should have warned us. We would arrive sooner,” Margaery said.

“I didn’t want to disturb your night activities.” Cersei had a smug smile on her face when she said it.

“I’m glad to see that you consider these activities to be more important than the matters of state,” Margaery shot with sarcasm. “Perhaps you could tell us why the king isn’t attending, if the matters to discuss are so important?”

“The king is busy. He entrusts the small council with this matter,” Cersei said. Yes, indeed, Joffrey was always busy, but never from overwork.

“I suppose the matter in question is about a certain letter that is circulating through all the Seven Kingdoms, sent from Dragonstone.” Tyrion said.

“I’m afraid you suppose well, my lord,” Varys acknowledged.

“Disgraceful lies!” Pycelle shot with his frail voice.
“The content of this letter mustn’t be known. Treason is vile enough, but this is barefaced naked villainy. I want all the letters he sent to be burned, every one. Any man heard speaking of incest or calling Joffrey a bastard should lose his tongue for it,” Cersei declared.

“A prudent measure,” the old Grand Maester said with respect. Margaery never had respect for this old man.

“A folly,” Tyrion countered. “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you are not proving him a liar, you’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.” A sad thing Joffrey didn’t listen to it. Cutting tongues was one of his favourite distractions since he became king.

“So what would you have us do?” Cersei demanded.

“It seems you need our help after all, your Grace, or else you wouldn’t ask us for advice,” Margaery said with a satisfied smile destined for the Queen Regent. Cersei was seething. Margaery continues. “Rumors are very frequent in Highgarden and Casterly Rock, and also here in King’s Landing. It would be useless to burn the letters. The song is sung, and everyone will hear about it before long. Unless you want to cut everyone’s tongue and ears, the whole Seven Kingdoms will be aware of Stannis’s claim before long.”

“So you suggest we do nothing?” Cersei asked in derision.

“Not at all, your Grace. But we cannot stab a rumor or an idea. Words cannot be fought with swords. They must be fought with other words. And the best way to quench a rumor… is another rumor. And Stannis just gave us a perfect one with his letter. Please give me a copy.”

Pycelle slowly and clumsily gave her one, and Margaery read a few words at the end. “Done in the Light of the Lord,” she repeated. “Quite unusual. Wasn’t Stannis’s wife, Lady Selyse, converted to a foreign religion, the same one that Thoros of Myr used to preach?”

“Indeed, my lady,” the eunuch answered. “She brought a priestess from Asshai to Dragonstone, and it seems that Lord Stannis decided to share his wife’s beliefs. According to the last information I received, he burned the statues of the Seven in the sept of Dragonstone and declared himself a champion of this Lord of Light.”

“Well, we have what we need,” Tyrion said. “Let everyone know that Stannis is burning their gods. They might think twice before calling for him. This might help us to get the Faith back on our side after the blood spilled on the steps of the Great Sept.” Tyrion shot a reproachful look to his sister when he said that.

“I don’t believe that will be enough. When it is a matter of sex or religion, people will always listen and believe the former over the latter. It’s more… interesting.”

“No need to make it only a religious matter. We can make it a sexual and religious scandal,” Margaery stated.

“And how would you do that, dear rose?” Cersei asked, sounding bored.

“Lord Varys, about this Red Priestess who’s in Dragonstone, do you know how she looks like?”

The eunuch seemed uncertain when he answered. “Well, from what my little birds told me, she is considered to be very beautiful.”

“More than Lady Selyse?”
“Much more. The truth is, one of my little birds even told me that he suspected Lord Stannis to have an affair with this woman, and he wouldn’t be the only man she would have welcomed into her bed.”

Janos Slynt spat in disgust, Pycelle muttered words of indignation, and Littlefinger looked very interested.

“Well, we have our rumor then. Let’s spread the word that not only is Stannis following a foreign god and denying the gods of his ancestors, but also that he is sleeping with the priestess who converted him. It should be scandalous enough to make people forget about the incest thing,” Margaery declared.

She and Tyrion looked at Cersei, waiting for her to speak. The rest of the council followed their lead. Cersei had to decide, and it was obvious she wasn’t happy about her having to give the verdict for once. “Very well. Send ravens to everyone in Westeros. Tell them that Stannis is fucking a foreign whore,” she told Pycelle.

“That would be a great mistake. Stannis just accused us. When talk in the back of someone after he talked first, people won’t believe you. However, if the rumor came from somewhere else, if it came from a source that no one could identify, then they would believe it easily. Lord Varys, Lord Baelish, I suppose your informants and agents can discreetly spread this rumor?”

“Indeed. Brothels are the best place to start this kind of things,” Littlefinger replied.

“We are at the service of the king,” Varys said.

Margaery looked straight at Cersei. “If you don’t want your son to look on the defensive, then just tell the truth. Tell everyone that Stannis is a traitor, a man jealous of his nephew, who never loved his brother and stole his fleet. Subtly hint that he was plotting to overthrow Robert Baratheon for some time. The way he left after Jon Arryn died will look suspicious enough. Tell everyone that Joffrey is the rightful king, and the rumor about Stannis and his foreign mistress will do the rest of the work for us. If you truly want Joffrey to be seen as the one true king, this is what you must do.”

Cersei’s stare on her was hard. Margaery displayed a serious expression, though mixed with concern, and held her sister-in-law’s stare. Cersei knew she was right, and Margaery knew it. She also knew that Cersei hated when she was told what to do when it was what she was being told that was true. Margaery didn’t give the impression to enjoy this moment. The other members of the small council were only to see the aunt who cared about her nephew.

“Very well. We’ll do it,” the Queen Regent finally dropped. She gained back her composure. “Now, we should go back to the matters of this war.”

“Indeed, your Grace,” Janos Slynt said immediately. “People from the countryside are fleeing to the city. They are afraid of the coming war. We’re beginning to have problems to house them. And with winter coming, it’ll only get worse.”

Margaery was well aware of the problem because of the time she spent among the people every day. For now, it wasn’t a major issue. There had been no fights, but some people heard that Robb Stark and Hoster Tully were marching on the south with a powerful army, and many people in the Crownlands feared what might happen when they arrived. The passage of the Lannister army may have reassured some of them, but not that much. Many recalled what happened the last time a Lannister was seen around King’s Landing. Some people living in the Riverlands also feared their own lords. She and Tyrion didn’t want the people or the lords to hate them more, so they issued orders to Ser Kevan to treat the peasants well and to pay them for anything they would requisition in
the Crownlands. Once in the Riverlands, they could take what they wanted since the Riverlands were officially in rebellion.

“You command the City Watch, do you not, Lord Slynt?” Cersei asked him, looking at her nails, as if that matter didn’t interest her, which was certainly the case.

“I do, your Grace.”

“And are you not a lord at my command?” Officially, it was Joffrey’s command.

“I owe my title and lands to your generosity, your Grace,” the man replied all the same. He was loyal to Cersei, that was obvious.

“Then do your job. Shut the gates to the peasants. They belong in the field, not our capital.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“If you need help, Lord Slynt, I can send some of my own men to help you at the gates,” Margaery’s husband offered.

“The help would be very appreciated, my lord.” Janos Slynt looked quite thankful. Since she and Tyrion arrived, they did everything to make sure he wouldn’t suspect them a single moment. He didn’t think for a single moment that some of the men they would send at the gates would be there to spy on the City Watch and to make sure the gold cloaks didn’t cause further problems.

“As much as I relish the fact we won’t accept anymore people inside the city,” Lord Baelish said, “I’m afraid we must worry about those who already are within our walls. Hoster Tully closed the Kingsroad to us on his territory. We receive no more food from this way. There are already small shortages in the poorer districts of the city. The price of the bread already increased. Nothing serious enough to cause trouble for now, but if we don’t adapt quickly, riots could start in places such as Flea Bottom. The Reach and the Crownlands don’t provide enough to satisfy the demand.”

“I am sure that Lord Tyrell will be happy to send us all the food he has, given his loyalty to Joffrey,” Cersei said, looking at Margaery.

“My father will be happy to oblige. We will send enough crops to make sure the population doesn’t starve,” Margaery replied kindly. *Don’t expect us to give our supplies freely, Cersei.*

Cersei seemed satisfied with the answer. “Now, according to our latest news, we have two armies. One is marching north, the other is sitting around and doing nothing on the River Road.” The Queen Regent stared at her brother. “I think it’s time for this army to move. I want them to attack Riverrun.”

“A wise decision, your Grace,” Pycelle approved. “The Tullys are allies to the Starks and they will fight with them. The best course of action is to destroy these rebels at once. Your father, the great Lord Tywin, may he rest in peace, knew that diligent action…”

“This wouldn’t be a wise decision,” Tyrion cut. “Riverrun is a well defended castle. The Tullys can turn it into an island by diverting the currents of the rivers crossing nearby. They can hold a siege for two years when they are fully provisioned, and I’m sure they are after the long summer we had. The castle would be impossible to take, and starting a siege would make our army vulnerable. You cannot besiege Riverrun without dividing your forces in three groups that would be separated by rivers. Even if we were to defeat Hoster Tully’s army, Robb Stark would attack us from behind and would defeat us easily. We will be in no position to defend ourselves against an attack coming from the outside if we besiege Riverrun.”
“The Tullys are in rebellion. They raised their armies as soon as they learned about Ned Stark’s arrest. They must be defeated at once,” Cersei retorted.

“They must be defeated, I agree, but there is no need to hurry. Hurrying only leads to ruin.”

“No need to hurry? No need to hurry?” Cersei spat. “Stannis rebelled against us, the Starks and the Tullys as well, and Renly Baratheon will do the same soon enough. There is hurry. We must defeat our enemies at once before they can unite and destroy us all. We have to destroy them now! I will not let them sully my name and my son’s name. They must pay for their lies.”

Everyone was silent once she was done with her outburst. Tyrion crossed his fingers and looked straight at her. “You know, Cersei, a wise man once said that violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.”

Everyone in the room looked at him, Cersei showing outrage at the implication of these words, Janos Slynt displaying complete surprise, Pycelle seeming as if he didn’t know what to think of it, and Varys and Littlefinger with interested and maybe amused expressions.

“What did you say?” Cersei said.

“You heard me, sister. Your solution is suicidal, and it will considerably lower Joffrey’s chances to stay on the throne. Attacking and besieging Riverrun will bring all the forces of the Riverlands and the North at Riverrun, where our army will be in a vulnerable position, in enemy territory and without allies. They will destroy Stafford’s army, and then they will have free way to march on the Golden Tooth and invade the Westerlands.”

“I think you overestimate the power of the Riverlands and the North, little brother.”

“No, I’m taking them seriously. They are a real threat. You seem to forget it sometimes.”

“You’re the one who seems to forget it. You maintain an army at the Golden Tooth, but they do nothing. Joffrey is in danger, and they do nothing.”

“They are a distraction,” Tyrion said. “As long as they stay on the border of the Riverlands, the Tullys must be careful to not let their territories undefended. If they march on King’s Landing with Robb Stark, their lands will be open to our troops.”

“And you’re waiting for their armies to be at our gates to send your men against them?”

“No. Kevan’s and Jaime’s army is following the Kingsroad. They are to take Harrenhal and stop any army that might march south from there. Robb Stark knows he has fewer men than us, and Stannis knows it too. They will both want to march on King’s Landing and reach it as quickly as possible, before we can organize ourselves. Robb Stark wants revenge for his father’s death, and his sisters. Stannis wants the Iron Throne. What they both want is here. This is where they will lead their assault, and they will want to take the city before the men of the Reach come. We must stop them, slow them down, to keep the upper hand.”

“I sent a raven to my father,” Margaery added. “Soon, he will have an army ready to march on King’s Landing, but they will need some time to assemble the men and arrive in the Crownlands. That’s why we must slow down Robb Stark and Stannis.”

“Kevan will take Harrenhal before the Starks can leave the Neck. The castle doesn’t have enough people to hold it. From there Kevan and Jaime will be able to stop any attempt of Robb Stark to march south. If Robb Stark tries all the same, and he will certainly do, he will bring with him all the forces of the Riverlands and the North. The eastern side of the Riverlands, which includes Riverrun,
will be left with minimum defenses. Stafford and Daven will leave the Golden Tooth when it happens. They will set the Riverlands on fire from the Golden Tooth to Riverrun. Once Hoster learns of this, he will bring back his men to protect his lands and leave Robb Stark to fend for himself. This way we will be able to fight out enemies separately, instead of facing them all together at the same time. I knew a king not long ago who said that a single army was more powerful than five, even if the five armies were larger together than the lone one.”

“And you believe Robb Stark will walk stupidly into this trap you set?” Cersei asked disdainfully.

“Weren’t you the one to say that Robb Stark was a child and a green boy?” Tyrion retorted. Cersei didn’t reply.

Margaery spoke up. “We need to divide our enemy’s forces. If we allow the Tullys, the Starks and Stannis to regroup near the city, they have a real chance to take King’s Landing. We cannot let that happen. My father’s army will not be here in time if we don’t stop them, or at least slow them down on their way. We need more time.”

“We wouldn’t need more time if your father mobilized his troops as soon as he heard about Eddard Stark’s treason,” Cersei reminded her. And we wouldn’t need to call his banners at all if you didn’t let your son chop Ned Stark’s head.

“Yet, we need time right now. You cannot deny it. Rushing into battle would be an unconsidered choice.”

“And even if Robb Stark doesn’t act like we expect him to do,” Tyrion continued, “with this strategy our armies will occupy strong defensive positions in case they are attacked, whether is it at Harrenhal or at the Golden Tooth. It would also give Ser Loras enough time to convince Renly to fight for us.”

Cersei looked at her brother quizzically. “What do you mean?”

Tyrion looked at Margaery, and she knew it was time. “When I wrote to my father in Highgarden, I also told my brother to talk with Renly. He was his squire once, and they are very good friends.” More than friends. “Renly didn’t declare for any side yet. I think Loras can convince him to fight for Joffrey. If he succeeds, we won’t have any trouble with the kingdoms south of the city, and we will be able to focus all our energies on Robb Stark and Stannis.”

“And if he fails?” Cersei asked.

“Your suggestions are welcomed, your Grace, but I believe that my father will be able to deal with Renly. The Reach has more than enough to field three armies like the two we already have. But it would be better if we could persuade Renly to stay by Joffrey’s side, we would all be better off. After all, we cannot lose a battle that is never fought.”

“Well,” Pycelle began, “Lord Renly if our king’s uncle. He is bound by blood to fight for his nephew’s rights.”

“Unless he believes Lord Stannis’s word, of course,” Littlefinger said.

“Renly never loved his brothers,” Margaery reminded everyone. “And his brothers never loved him. I think he will have better predispositions towards Joffrey. Especially if my brother tells him to fight for his nephew.”

“So we’re supposed to rely on the Knight of Flowers to solve all our problems?” Cersei asked.

“To give us a chance to have one less enemy to worry about. Unless we want our king to have no
friends and only enemies, I think it would be better to give my brother a chance. Anyway, if my brother fails to stop Renly with words, then my father will stop him with an army. And the word is already sent. My brother will try to reason Renly, and it’s too late to send a raven telling him the opposite.”

“Since we are on the matters of negotiations, perhaps it would be time to discuss about negotiations with Robb Stark,” Tyrion said.

The room froze. “Negotiate? With the Starks?” Pycelle asked, all confused.

“The Starks are traitors. We do not treat with traitors,” Janos Slynt.

“Ned Stark is a traitor,” Tyrion corrected. “Was, since he is dead. But so far, the only crime his son committed was to raise an army.”

“An army to fight Joffrey,” Cersei precised.

“They stayed in the North, so far, and neither the Tullys nor the Starks have attacked any of Joffrey’s territories yet. They didn’t even officially declare war against us.”

“And you believe this will stay like this for long?” Cersei asked with a mocking tone.

“We can try to convince Robb Stark to bend the knee to Joffrey, before this goes too far,” Margaery said.

“And you believe Robb Stark will kindly kneel?”

“Not kindly, but there’s still a chance that he would unkindly kneel,” Tyrion told his sister.

“You are a fool. Robb Stark will die before he kneels to Joffrey.” Who could blame him?

Margaery decided she should speak now. “So far, Stannis is the only one who declared to everyone that he was at war with Joffrey. He declared him a bastard born of incest and proclaimed himself king. Robb Stark, however, is a different matter. He raised his banners because his father was arrested, but he wouldn’t have gone farther is we had sent him back his father and his sisters. His father is dead now, but that doesn’t mean that war is unavoidable. We can still find a peaceful solution.”

“And what peaceful solution do you have in mind?”

“To reinstate Eddard Stark.”

“Reinstate Ned Stark?” Littlefinger asked, probably not seeking an answer.

“Ser Kevan Lannister visited Ned Stark before he was executed. The Lord of Winterfell kept saying that Joffrey wasn’t the true king, until that day before the Great Sept of Baelor. He truly believed that Joffrey wasn’t his rightful king.”

“Words of treason! This is all Lord Stark said,” Pycelle said with outrage.

“That doesn’t mean Lord Stark was right. The Lady Sansa said it. She believed as well that someone manipulated her father. And I think she was right. When we look at it, who had the most interest to make everyone believe that Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen were illegitimate children?”

“Lord Stannis,” Varys answered after some time. “This accusation allows him to claim the Iron Throne.”
“Exactly.” Margaery kept developing her ideas. “Stannis Baratheon left King’s Landing not long after Jon Arryn, and he brought most of the royal fleet with him. Don’t you find his actions suspicious? He never loved Robert, and we all know he certainly has no love for Robert’s children either. Ned Stark is a man of honor, and he fought with Stannis during Balon Greyjoy’s rebellion. He trusted Stannis. It wouldn’t be very difficult for Stannis to convince Ned Stark of anything. Stannis used Ned Stark. He lied to him, and tried to use him to depose Joffrey. And now that we stopped Ned Stark, he’s using his death to gain the support of half the Seven Kingdoms, and hopes for Renly to join him as well. Don’t you see? We have one single man who makes the perfect culprit for all this madness, a man who tries to steal the Iron Throne from his nephew.”

“So, we serve this story to Robb Stark? We tell him his father was manipulated and that he died because of Stannis? We turn our enemies against each other,” Petyr Baelish summarized.

“Yes, and we make Robb Stark understand that the execution was a mistake, and we grant him a post-mortem pardon.”

“This man tried to overthrow Joffrey. He told everyone that he wasn’t the true king. It is out of question that we grant him a pardon, even after his death,” Cersei rashly declared.

Margaery sighed inwardly. Ned was dead. It wasn’t as if he could try anything against Joffrey now. “If you want us to have even the slightest chance to make Robb Stark bend the knee, we’ll have to clear the memory of his father. He will never accept Joffrey as his king if we keep considering Eddard Stark like a traitor.”

“Then in this case there is nothing to discuss with Robb Stark.” Cersei said it with finality. She would leave no place for discussion. She really was stubborn, and so disillusioned that she didn’t know what served her son’s interests.

“I think we can discuss the terms we can offer to Robb Stark later. This would be a long and tedious discussion for the small council. Better to talk about it in private,” Tyrion said, looking intently to his sister. “However, no matter if Robb Stark refuses or accepts our offer of peace, it would be in our interest to send an emissary, if only for the sake of sowing doubts into his mind about his loyalty to Stannis. Our enemies will have a harder time to fight us if they are divided.”

Cersei stared at his brother for a time. “Very well,” she finally conceded. “We’ll send an envoy to Robb Stark, but I will decide the terms we are to offer him.”

“We won’t propose anything without your approval,” Tyrion promised.

Cersei eyed her brother suspiciously. Margaery could see she didn’t trust Tyrion. She and Tyrion didn’t trust Cersei. They were doing everything they could to mine her influence and her power, and they knew she was trying to do the same to them.

The rest of meeting went without too much trouble. Margaery and Tyrion managed to convince the others to add a new member to the small council. Cersei gave her consent at the end, saying he wouldn’t be of much help to take decisions, but that this would at least give a better image to the council. Thus, for the first time since the days of Aerys Targaryen, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was given a seat on the small council. Tyrion suggested they added Ser Barristan Selmy to the small council since he was respected and loved by both the common people and the lords. He said that it would give more respect to this council, that actually consisted of two women, a dwarf, an eunuch, an old man, a brothelkeeper and a butcher’s son. The other matters that were discussed were of smaller significance.

Once they were back in their apartments in the Tower of the Hand, Margaery let her frustration go
out as they ate. “Cersei is an ass!”

“It’s a fact,” her husband acknowledged, slightly surprised by her choice of words.

“That decision to close the gates to the peasants is stupid. How will we be able to make the
difference between people fleeing their homes out of fear and others coming to sell their crops?”

“I agree, but my sister always was one for simple solutions. And she doesn’t care about the people.”

“There are not enough refugees to justify this. And since the Riverlands are closed to us now, closing
the gates will only worsen our supplies problem.”

“It won’t last long,” Tyrion assured her. “Cersei already lost control over the red cloaks, and soon
she will have no control over any cloak. Without them, she will be powerless, and then we’ll be able
to send her away.”

“I hope this day comes soon. And while we’re at it, we could remove Pycelle from the small
council.”

“The Grand Maester always had a seat on the small council. I’m afraid we can’t remove him without
good reasons.”

“Let’s hope we find good reasons too. And I don’t trust Varys or Littlefinger or Slynt either.”

“We cannot trust anyone on this council, or even here in King’s Landing. This is a city for
backstabbing, bribing and poisoning.”

Margaery sighed. “Highgarden and the Rock seem like games for a child when compared to this.”

They managed to maneuver Cersei quite well since they arrived, but Margaery couldn’t wait the
moment they would actually get rid of her.

“Do you think Cersei will accept to send the emissary up in the North? She could still change her
mind.”

“True, but we’ll talk her around. We need to send this envoy. My father used to say that some wars
are won with swords and spears, others will quills and ravens. Well, the outcome of this one might
depend more on quills. We need to get this message to our potential ally in the North.”

Margaery nodded. “What do you think Jon Snow will do?”

“I wouldn’t expect help from him now. We promised him we would save his father, and look how
we honored it. His father is dead.”

Tyrion looked down. They both regretted they couldn’t save Ned Stark. They didn’t manage to find
yet how Jon Arryn and Ned Stark both came to believe that Joffrey was born of incest. Cersei swore
she didn’t kill Jon Arryn, but even if Tyrion believed her, Margaery wasn’t as inclined to believe her
sister-in-law. Instead, they had to make the Seven Kingdoms believe that Stannis had been the one
lying and using Ned Stark. They had no choice if they wanted to keep Joffrey on the throne.
Margaery knew they could do nothing against the fact Joffrey was king. They couldn’t rebel against
their nephew. The boy shared Tyrion’s blood, as spoiled and childish he may be.

“Robb Stark will not want peace,” Tyrion murmured. “He’s not going to accept our terms, no matter
how generous they are.”
“We must try all the same. Robb Stark will not listen to a Lannister after Joffrey killed his father, but we still have someone he may listen to, and even trust.”

“I wish her good luck,” Tyrion said. Indeed, she would need it.

“I must visit an orphanage this afternoon. I’m not sure it can compensate for Joffrey’s bolts, but we need to keep the people on our side.”

“Make them forget about Joffrey’s misbehaviour. We don’t need the people to hate our king when he just took his crown, even if he deserves to be hated.”

Margaery nodded. “I’ll be back for our discussion with Cersei concerning the terms to offer Robb Stark. I’m not going to leave you alone with her.” Margaery offered him a sweet and sincere smile.

“With you nearby, I can almost suffer Cersei.” They both laughed.

An hour later, Margaery was entering the orphanage in Flea Bottom. It was overcrowded just like during Joffrey’s Tourney, but Margaery didn’t see much more people than the last time. King’s Landing wasn’t worse than when she left it, even with the refugees who had come since Ned Stark died. Cersei’s decision to close the gates to the peasants truly was unjustified for the moment.

Soup, bread and toys were distributed to all the children assembled. Margaery gave a warm smile to every one of them. She placed a hand on the head, the arm or the shoulder of some. She spoke with a small girl whose father died crushed under a cart two months ago, to a boy who escaped his house because his parents beat him, and to another girl whose mother was a whore who died of an illness last year. As she talked with a boy who never knew who his parents were, Margaery caught sound of a conversation between a septa and one of her handmaidens.

“One of the men who was shot had seven children. They all ended here. Their father was a very good man. He lost his wife when she gave birth to their last child. He worked like a slave so his children could eat, and now that he’s dead they have no one to take care of them. They would probably have ended in the streets, beaten or killed, if we didn’t take them in. Why did the king do that? He was just asking for some bread to feed his starving children. He wasn’t a dangerous man.”

“What was this man’s name?” her handmaiden asked.

“Gared,” the septa replied.

Mira was silent for a moment. “I wish I had known him.”

“He came here sometimes, to see if we had anything to spare for his boys and girls. The poor man. He was starving himself to death so his sons and daughters could eat.”

“It’s tragic what happened to him.” Mira made a pause, and then she spoke again. “You know, when I was a child, there was a place where I lived. People were practicing with crossbows on targets. One day, there was a young man of seventeen. He had the same age that the king has now. One day, the practice was over and he was carrying back his crossbow to stow it. He had forgotten to take out the bolt. By accident, he activated the crossbow, and it went straight into the throat of another man nearby.”

“Dear Father.” The septa placed a hand before her mouth.

“The man had two children. The boy in question was squiring for a knight. When the knight discovered what happened, he decided to make sure that the children of this man would never lack anything.” Mira took the septa’s hand into hers. “That’s what we’re doing as well.”
The old septa nodded, a sad expression on her face. Mira gave a few more words of comfort and went back to work. When Margaery saw that her friend was done, she walked to an alcove where Mira was resting a moment and sat by her side.

“Are you alright?” Margaery asked her.

“Yes, my lady.”

“You told the septa about the accident that happened the week after you arrived at Highgarden?”

“Yes, my lady.” They shared a moment of silence. “If only we could be sure this was an accident in both cases.”

It was Margaery’s turn to place a hand on Mira’s. “I know it’s not easy, but you must remain strong.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“We’ll send someone to discuss terms with Robb Stark soon. We’ll try to stop all this madness before more people die.”

Mira looked back at her. “If you permit, my lady, Robb Stark will never accept any term. Joffrey had his father executed.” She added after a moment, “and he believes the accusations of treason are false. And all the Northerners will follow him.”

“And you, what do you think, Mira?”

Her eyes burned for short time. “I think Joffrey should have expected an uprising in the North when he decided to execute the Warden of the North.” Margaery couldn’t agree more. “And I’m afraid the beginning of his reign will be very difficult, for everyone.”

“Yes, but we’ll get through this, Mira. All together. I promise.”

Her friend’s face showed gratitude, but also an extreme sadness. Margaery knew that she was conflicted. Mira was always entirely loyal to her, but she came from the North. What she was actually going through was horrible. Margaery knew that the northern girl despised Joffrey. She despised him as well. However, Mira couldn’t voice it, and they both knew it.

A piercing scream reached their ears. Everyone in the orphanage stopped moving. Other screams were heard then. Margaery stood up, and she soon realized that the screams didn’t come from the inside. They came from the street. She walked towards the exit door. She wasn’t the only one. People hurried to see what was going on outside. Lucky enough, Margaery had her guards who made a way for her. Once she left the orphanage, she immediately saw a crowd of people gathering around a house. Suddenly, a body flew from one of the windows and crashed on the ground. Margaery ran to see what happened, her heart pounding. Her guards cleared the people to make her a way. As she was finally able to get a glimpse of the small body that fell, she saw a man hovering over, a dagger in his hand.

“NO!”

As she shouted, the blade slit the throat. When the man stood up, she saw the body lying on the street. It was a boy, no more than ten. Blood spurted from his neck, soiling his already dirty clothes. He had black hair. His body shook, and life and blood left his mouth. He lied there, lifeless. Margaery was agape before this. She slowly turned her head to look at the man who killed him. He wore a gold cloak.
Chapter End Notes

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent." This is a quote from Salvor Hardin, 1st mayor of Terminus in the "Foundation" novel by Isaac Asimov.

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery (sequel to this chapter)

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you all.
Margaery XVI

Chapter Notes

The following of the previous chapter. Tyrion and Margaery make a move.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MARGAERY XVI

“No!” A woman came out from the house where the drama took place. She looked at the boy, and fell on her knees next to him, crying hysterically. “My son. My son!” She buried her face into his chest, uncaring of the blood that covered the small body.

“Go on, cry over your bastard, you whore.” The gold cloak kicked the woman in the belly. There were other men with him wearing the same cloak, and they laughed with him at the poor woman who was sent rolling into the mud, tears streaming from her eyes. It was at this moment that Margaery recognized the man who killed the boy and mistreated his mother.

“Officer Deem.” Janos Slynt’s right hand turned to her still laughing, but when he looked at her and realized who addressed him, the smile quickly disappeared from his face, and he stood in respect. His men followed his example.

“My lady.”

The crowd around them was silent as in a crypt. Margaery turned back her attention to the dead boy and the woman crying two feet away. She slowly approached her and knelt, placing a hand on the woman’s shoulder. She slowly turned her head to look at Margaery.

“You have nothing to fear from me. I’m your friend. Tell me what happened,” Margaery said, in a very soft and low voice to make sure no one would hear her.

The woman’s eyes travelled frantically from Margaery to Allar Deem, the man who commanded the red cloaks not long ago. Margaery knew that the man was feared in the streets of the capital, and it was obvious from this woman’s reaction and the behaviour of the crowd all around that his reputation wasn’t overrated.

She seemed to take a decision, and whispered in such a weak voice that Margaery could barely hear it. “He came into my house. This man.” She made a barely noticeable movement with her head to indicate the officer of the City Watch. “He just came in with his thugs. They broke through our door and said they were looking for my sons. Edd… One of them thrusted his spear through his heart. And this man… He pushed my Robert through the window, and then…”

She burst into sobs. Margaery held her into her arms to calm her. She looked at her guards who stood close, and made a sign to two of them to approach.

“Escort this woman back into her home. Don’t forget her son.”

They complied. One took the woman’s arm while the other carried the lifeless form. They had just begun to walk to the house that Margaery was staring at Allar Deem.
“Explain yourself,” she demanded.

“I have no explanations to give. I keep the king’s peace,” he replied.

Margaery felt anger rise in her. “Really? You keep the king’s peace? I don’t remember that keeping the king’s peace involved the killing of children.”

“He’s a murderer!” someone shouted in the crowd.

Allar Deem looked behind him, where the words came from. “Who said that?” he roared. His men searched the crowd. “Bring me the man who said that!”

“I don’t think so,” she interrupted.

He slowly turned to look at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“Allar Deem, you are under arrest.” Margaery looked at her guards right behind her. They were about twenty, and Allar Deem only had half a dozen men with him. “Seize him.”

Her knights moved forward, but Allar Deem took his sword and brandished it. His men did the same. “These are my streets. You’re not going to stop me.”

“I will. You won’t keep your position for long.”

“I obeyed orders. The Commander told me to kill this boy, and I did it. If you have a problem, talk about it with him.”

Margaery looked at the man again. Then she declared with finality, “Put him under arrest, and his men as well.”

Before she was done speaking, the officer of the City Watch roared and ran towards her, but the moment after, one of her guards’ sword was through his head and blood sprayed on her. He fell to the ground, as lifeless as the boy he killed only a few seconds ago. A great clamor came from the crowd around them, and the next moment the people were attacking the gold cloaks who were there. The men were too disturbed by the death of their leader and were hacked into pieces by the people.

“Separate them,” she quickly ordered to her guards. She retreated towards the orphanage, a few of her men escorting her. The septa who ran the place was on the doorstep, and several children were watching the scene from there as well. “Get inside. Close the doors. Don’t let anyone in.”

The septa nodded quickly. Margaery assembled all her retinue who accompanied her. They had come on horses and they used them to go back to the Red Keep, her guards protecting them the best they could.

She never needed them more than today. The commotion caused by the deaths of the boy and Allar Deem had escalated into a general riot when they left the orphanage on their mounts, and her men could barely keep the smallfolk at bay. When the people saw the Tyrell standard, or when they recognized her, they seemed less eager to hurt her, but there were so many people fighting in the streets that they tumbled, rushed toward her and got stuck between the crowd and her knights. Margaery saw with her own eyes people getting killed. As soon as they were out of Flea Bottom, they rode as fast as they could to the Red Keep. The portcullis was raised for her, and as soon as she was inside with everyone else who left with her, she saw a familiar small figure running in her direction.

She unhorsed and threw herself into his arms as much as he threw himself into hers. “My dear.” He
stepped aside to look at her, worry plain in his green eyes. “Are you hurt?” Tyrion was looking at a trail of blood that Deem let on her gown.

“No, I’m fine. It’s not my blood.”

“We were about to send men to your rescue, my lady,” Vylarr told her. He had joined them in the courtyard. “I’m glad you’re right.”

“A riot started in Flea Bottom. I feared… I feared…” Her husband didn’t know what to say. She put a finger on his lips.

“It’s alright. I’m fine. I’m safe.”

He seemed to quiet down a little, but only a little.

“Come.”

He took her by the arm and brought her back to their apartments, where she took a good bath. That was close. It was the first time a riot started when she visited the people. Normally, she made sure the riots were scarcer with her charity works. This time, she started one. She buried her head into the water, and emerged. Blood, dust and mud were removed from her body. Her gown, done, would probably end in the city’s sewers.

“Don’t do that.” Her husband’s voice, shaken, came to her ears. “I’m afraid you might never come up again.”

She turned toward him. He nervously paced in the room, next to the tub. She never saw him so worried for her. It was true that she never found herself in a situation when she could have died since they were married. That was something new to her. Her life was never in danger before, but today, she had to admit it, could have been her last day.

She sighed and tried to make her smirk convincing. “If I die, it won’t be by drowning. I know how to swim. Unless you forgot that I was the one to teach you.”

A smile crept on Tyrion’s worried face. “How could I forget?” The smile disappeared to give place again to his preoccupied expression. “So, Allar Deem murdered two children in their own home, right in front of their mother.”

“Yes, and from what he told me, Janos Slynt gave him the order to kill them,” Margaery specified. Tyrion’s traits dug. She told him everything that happened back in Flea Bottom while she washed herself. “Tyrion, we cannot allow something like that.”

Her husband acquiesced. “Janos Slynt is a man corrupted to the bone, whose loyalty is to be sold to the highest bidder, but he never did something like that. It seems that his newest titles got him over his head.”

“We need to act now, Tyrion. I was there. I saw Deem kill this boy, and then mistreat his mother while she was crying over his body. And when I tried to arrest him, Deem resisted, one of my men killed him, and this started a riot. The people attacked Deem’s men. If we cannot control the City Watch or the smallfolk, chaos will rule King’s Landing.”

“It will be done by tonight.”

“Let me do it myself.”
He looked at her, some surprise on his traits. “As you wish. I’ll stay close.”

She nodded. She looked at her skin. Everything that soiled her was gone. “Can you give me a towel?” she asked him as she stood up. Tyrion stood there to watch a short moment, which was no surprise, then he gave her a towel nearby. He seized a second one to help her to dry, and once it was done, he brought her the gown she would wear for the rest of the day.

“Here are the results of Cersei’s rule,” Margaery declared. “The city is in the hands of thieves, murderers, sycophants, criminals, and schemers.”

“I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised. Cersei is many of these at the same time.”

Margaery didn’t laugh on this. She had pulled on most of her gown, and only the top was to arrange. She let Tyrion do it. He loved to dress her as much as he loved to undress her. However, her thoughts wandered elsewhere. She remembered the body without life, the blood spilled everywhere, dripping from the throat, the despair in the mother’s voice and on her face. The cruelty of the officer as he laughed at the pain he caused, made fun of a boy’s murder. And his men who did the same. This was pure cruelty. Margaery didn’t see the horrors Joffrey made, except for the bruises he ordered his kingsguards to inflict upon Sansa. Ordering men to beat the girl you were betrothed with was cruel enough, but sentencing a woman to death because she asked to bury the bones of her husband or slicing the tongue of a minstrel was another thing. They did well to keep Joffrey away when court was being held. Still, she never saw horrors first hand until now. That shook her.

Tyrion attached the laces that held her gown behind her back. She closed her eyes and let the feeling on his hands on her skin ease her agitation. She opened her eyes and saw him offering his hand. She took it and they walked out of the bathroom.

On the other side of the door, Varys was waiting for them. As soon as they entered, he bowed deeply to each of them. “My lord. My lady, I heard of what happened in Flea Bottom. To see you unharmed is a blessing, and a great joy for my heart.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is, Varys,” Tyrion replied, obviously skeptical about the eunuch’s words.

“It really is, my lord. It’s been a long time since someone in the Red Keep took care of the people and the small children. If Lady Margaery had died, it would have been a great loss for everyone in King’s Landing.”

Again, Margaery thought about the boy who was butchered right in front of her. “Lord Varys, the riots in Flea Bottom started because one of Janos Slynt’s officer, Allar Deem, murdered an innocent boy in the middle of the street. Before he died, he said that he was carrying out the orders of his commander. Did Janos Slynt give this order?” she asked.

Varys took a contrite expression. “He did, my lady, but truth be told, I’m afraid you only saw the tip of the mountain.”

“What do you mean?”

“The death you witnessed wasn’t the only one. Twenty-three children lost their lives today at the hands of men of the City Watch.” Margaery’s breathing was cut short. “Lord Slynt killed some of them himself. Among these poor children was a girl by the name of Barra. Her mother worked in one of Littlefinger’s brothel. Janos Slynt’s men refused to kill her, so he killed her himself when she was still at her mother’s breast. She was only a baby.”

Margaery thought she was horrified before, but this was nothing to what she felt now. “Barra?” Her
husband’s voice came from her right side. “You talked to me about this girl the other day. Ned Stark went to see her mother not long before he was attacked by thugs in the streets of Flea Bottom. It was the day he gave his first resignation to Robert.”

“You have a good memory, my lord. And this poor girl shared one trait with all the other children who died today.”

“Robert’s bastards,” he muttered. Tyrion paced for a while, passing his hand through his hair. “Janos Slynt is a shit, but he never did something like that before. He wouldn’t have sent his men to kill children on purpose, unless he received an order from someone.”

“I think you already suspect who gave the order, my lord.”

Tyrion exchanged a look with her. They both knew who did this. Her husband brought back his attention to Varys. “Leave us.”

The eunuch bowed, and she and Tyrion were alone in their rooms. “Cersei,” Tyrion muttered.

“We know she can do that,” Margaery said. “She did it before. We have to stop her before she has other people killed.”

“I agree. The time for caution is over.” For the first time since they arrived in King’s Landing, she and Tyrion agreed that they had to neutralize Cersei immediately.

Still, they had to be careful. Cersei still had power inside the walls of the city, but she and Tyrion knew how to take it away from her. A crown didn’t give you power, but armies did. Because of that, Margaery was forced to sit down with Tyrion and her sister-in-law for hours, discussing the terms they would send to Robb Stark. Cersei didn’t seem avid to bother Margaery this afternoon, oddly enough. Her sarcastic remarks on her and Tyrion were very limited compared to what they were used to. Something wasn’t normal in the queen’s behaviour.

When the evening came, Margaery found herself sitting alone at the dining table, waiting for her guest. Today’s images kept rolling into her mind. Some of her handmaidens who witnessed the events in Flea Bottom were so shocked that Margaery gave them her leave to rest tonight. Only those of sterner stuff would serve her, along with Ty, Tyrion’s squire. He was a very kind and obedient boy, all the opposite to the man he was named after.

The doors opened to let the boy she was thinking about inside. “Lord Janos Slynt,” he announced, and the Commander of the City Watch and Lord of Harrenhal came inside, his shining gold cloak trailing behind him. It was clean, without any sign of dust. This was certainly not the one he wore today to carry out the dirty work.

“My lady.” He bowed before Margaery. She inclined her head to acknowledge his respect, but she didn’t stand up.

“Please, Lord Janos, take a seat,” she kindly told him, hiding her hatred for the man. He did as she said and took the cup of wine before him, with the same hand that was used to take the life out of an innocent baby.

“I thank you for inviting me, Lady Lannister. It is a true honor. Your presence and that of Lord Tyrion in the capital has been a blessing in these troubled times.”

“I thank you.” Again, she hid her true feelings behind her sweet smile. She took some wine as well.

“Mm. That’s a good red. From the Arbor?”
“I didn’t know you knew your wine that well, Lord Janos,” she commented.

“That I do. Lord Tyrion isn’t with us?”

“I’m afraid he was quite busy today. He will join us later. Today’s troubles added to his already busy workload.”

“I can understand. It was difficult to stop the riots. I was sorry when I heard you were close when they started.”

“I was protected enough. More fear than harm came out of it, at least for me. I’m afraid we can’t say the same for the dozens of people who died, not to mention those who were injured.”

Janos Slynt nodded. “Not the part of my work that I like the most, but it has to be done. The City Watch must maintain the king’s peace.”

“Yes, that’s your duty. To keep the peace. I want to thank your men for the work they did today, ending these riots. I know it must not have been easy. And I’m sorry for your men who gave their lives.”

“They knew the risks.” The Lord Commander reported back his attention to the plate of food before him and took some chicken. That was a man who didn’t care about his men.

“Still, it must be hard for the families of these twenty-six men.”

“You are well informed, my lady.”

“Someone once said that information is power. It must be difficult for you as well, to have lost the officer Deem.”

“Indeed. My best man. He always got the job done.” _No matter what the order was, it seemed. No wonder you chose him as your second._

“Since we are at it, I heard there were troubles before the riots began. There’s even word running that the riots began after men of the City Watch were seen killing children, and that something similar happened in one of Littlefinger’s brothels.”

“Mm. Nasty business. Had to be done,” Slynt said shortly. He didn’t want to talk about it further.

“I suppose. You said the City Watch must keep the peace.”

“I did, my lady, and that’s what me and my men did today.”

“Still, I fail to understand how peace can depend on killing children, or babies.”

“Orders are orders.” He stated it as a matter of fact. There was no hint of regret in his voice. He did as he was told, and he had no remorse over it. Margaery understood why Cersei liked him. He was a pet that would do everything she told him, no matter what it was. He would kill her own children if she asked him to.

“Orders are orders,” Margaery repeated. She stared at Slynt. “Especially when they come from the woman who gave you your titles and your lands. As you said, you owe it to Cersei.”

“The queen didn’t give me these orders.”

“That surprises me. Who else would want to kill King Robert’s bastards? I know Cersei. She’s not
the kind of woman to look at her husband fornicating with other women without doing anything.”

“You know the queen better than I do, I suppose.”

“I’m afraid so. And I know that once she considers someone useless, she gets rid of him.” She stared straight at him. Janos Slynt poured himself some more wine and diverted his gaze. “Tell me, Lord Janos, who are you loyal to? Your king, or his mother?”

Janos Slynt smirked. “Don’t try to play that game with me, my lady. I have friends at court, and I serve the king and the queen faithfully. No one can touch me.”

Margaery smiled. What an idiot this man was. “Maybe not. But tell me, you were there when Ned Stark claimed that Joffrey wasn’t the king, and you were standing right next to him. May I know why? It seems odd coming from a man who professes such loyalty to the king.”

“Eddard Stark was a traitor,” he declared. “He tried to buy my loyalty. I brought him to my king so he could be judged for treason, and he received the punishment he deserved.”

Margaery cocked her head. “Ned Stark was guilty of many things, but I believe for myself that his greatest crime was foolishness.” She shook her head while smiling and chuckling very lightly. “He believed he could buy you with gold. He should have known that Cersei would offer you more than this. It takes a fool to believe you will accept gold when you are being offered a lordship along with lands and one of the biggest castles in Westeros.”

Slynt’s face had gone red. He stood up. “I’m not going to stay here, hearing my honor being questioned…”

“Oh yes, you will.” Tyrion had arrived. He came from outside, from the balcony. He had a lot of work indeed while Margaery spoke with Janos Slynt. He was listening to their conversation and waiting to enter the room. “However, you’re not going to hear your honor being questioned.” He slowly walked past the commander and stood next to her. “Its existence is being denied.”

“If you think I’ll stand here and take this from an imp and his whore…”

“Whore? You should have stopped at imp. And yes, you’ll stay here and take this from the imp and his wife. If you want insults from a whore, then go and see my sister. I’m sure she has many insults of choice for you.”

Slynt smirked evilly. “We shall see what the queen has to say about it.”

Janos Slynt walked away. When he came to open the door, it opened, and about fifteen men poured inside, gold cloaks, red cloaks, green cloaks, and one white cloak. Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Jocelyn Bywater blocked the passage to Janos Slynt while the others took place all around the room and the commander.

“Lord Janos,” Ser Barristan said as a greeting.

“I’m afraid you will stay a little while longer, Lord Janos,” Margaery told him, standing up like everyone else in this room. “These men will stop you from leaving.”

“These men are under my command! I command you to bring me to the king!” he shouted to the gold cloaks. None moved.

“Don’t you recognize them, Lord Slynt? This man’s name is Zevron.” She pointed one of the gold cloaks. “He was with you in Littlefinger’s brothel. He refused to kill the baby girl, and you seized his
dagger and did it yourself. And this man is named Siran. Your man Allar, who you trusted so much, killed his nephew today, and raped his sister.” Fear began to show on the commander’s face. “You should know your men better.”

Lord Janos turned to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. “Ser, I order you to bring me to the king.”

“I serve the king, not you,” the knight replied, disgust plain in his voice. He turned to the other knight by his side. “This is Ser Jacelyn Bywater, former captain of the Mud Gate. He is the new Commander of the City Watch.”

Janos Slynt stared at the captain, then turned to Tyrion and Margaery. “You can’t be serious! This man is rigid, he has no place in…”

Janos Slynt shouted a cry when Ser Jocelyn kicked his leg, sending him on his knees. Then he pulled his gold cloak from the former commander and tossed it on the floor. “You are a disgrace to the City Watch, Slynt.” He trampled on the cloak with his feet as he spoke.

“You can’t do this. My friend at court will not allow it. The queen herself has granted…”

“The Queen Regent,” Tyrion cut. “And you’re a fool to believe she is your friend.”

“We shall hear what Joffrey has to say about this.”

“Joffrey spends his days shooting at caged animals. He doesn’t care about ruling, and even less about you, Lord Slynt,” Margaery pointed out. “Anyway, you’re not going to leave this room. Not before you sign something.”

From behind the room, Mira came with a long scroll that she laid on the table. She shot a spiteful look at Janos Slynt, then went back into the shadows. Margaery remained next to the table, the paper next to her. She looked to Janos Slynt with even eyes. Slowly, the dismissed Lord Commander of the City Watch stood on his feet.

“What is it?” he asked, uncertain.

“An official declaration by which you give up all claims on Harrenhal, its attendant lands and titles, for you and all your progeny,” she explained.

The look of shock and fury on the man’s face was priceless. “You think I’m going to give it up? The queen gave it to me.”

“Joffrey gave it to you,” she specified, “and you’re going to give it back.”

“Never! I will not have it. Did you hear me, whore? I will not have it!”

She saw from the corner of her eye her husband make a sign to one of his men who approached Slynt and sent his fist flying right into his belly. Janos Slynt fell on his knees once again, his breathing cut short. Tyrion approached him and stood right in front of this man. Tyrion might be a dwarf, but right now his shadow was longer than that of any other man in this room, and he stood taller than Janos Slynt was in this instant. When the man on his knees looked up at him, all self-assurance and pride was gone. Margaery knew that he was showing his merciless face right now, the face no one wanted to see. Everyone understood that it was in their interest to not mess with the Warden of the West when they met this gaze.

“The next time you use that name for my wife, will be the last time you ever spoke.”
He slowly walked away, his threat lingering in the air. Janos Slynt didn’t dare to say a word.

“You have a wife, haven’t you, Lord Janos? And four children, two who serve as squires, another one who’s a page, and a daughter, if I’m not mistaking,” Tyrion said as he walked back to the table. “It would be a shame if something regrettable was to happen to them.” Tyrion had his threatening face when he turned to stare at the former commander.

“My friends will not allow it.” Slynt didn’t seem convinced by his own words.

“Which friends? Look around you. Where are your friends? You no longer lead the City Watch. The only reason Cersei kept you near her was because she could use you to her own interests. What do you have to offer her now? Tomorrow, you will be thrown into the streets along with your wife and children. A herald will declare before the people assembled that you were behind the slaughtering of children today, and the repression that killed even more people in Flea Bottom. At best, the people will cut you to pieces, your wife and your daughter will end in one of Littlefinger’s brothels, and your sons as beggars and orphans living in the streets. At worst, the six of you will be cut to pieces by the crowd. In both scenarios, you will be cut to pieces.”

Panic was plain on Janos Slynt’s face. For the first time tonight, he begged. “No. Please, don’t do that, my lord. I beg you. I… I’ll do everything you want.”

Margaery stepped into the conversation. “All we ask from you is that you sign this document, Lord Slynt, and we promise you that your family will be safe. The Lannisters always pay their debts.”

The man’s eyes went from her to her husband, then back to her. Finally, he stood up and rushed to the table. He seized the quill and signed at the bottom of the paper. “Here. It’s done. I did as I was told.”

Tyrion took the paper and looked at it. He rolled it and spoke. “It’s probably the best decision you took in your whole life. Your wife will receive a monthly allocation. We will transfer her with your daughter in a castle where she will live peacefully for the rest of her life. As for your sons, they will keep their positions here, with the possibility to earn a knighthood eventually. Maybe they’ll even manage to get lands someday.”

“I thank you, my lord.” Slynt bowed, his voice filled with relief.

“As for you, you leave tonight. There’s a ship bound for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. You’re taking it.”

The former Lord Slynt was stunned. “What?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be in pleasant company. Most of your lieutenants from the City Watch are already on it. They’ll make the journey with you to Eastwatch. From there I’m afraid it’s rather a long walk to Castle Black. I hope you enjoy the Wall. I found it surprisingly beautiful, in a brutal, horribly uncomfortable sort of way. You’ll give my regards to the Lord Commander Thorne.”

“You believe I’m going to freeze my ass to the Wall like this, because you say so?”

Tyrion brandished the scroll. “It’s obvious you didn’t read this document before you signed it. We forgot to tell you, but you just signed a document where you acknowledged that you ordered the murder of several children, and killed some of them yourself. You declare that to atone for your crimes, you decided to give up all your lands and titles and to take the black. You also declared that you hoped you would serve the Realm and the king better as a sworn brother of the Night’s Watch than you did as Lord Commander of the City Watch. It’s really well written. A great confession. All you asked the king was to protect your family in his goodness.”
Janos Slynt didn’t say a thing for a long moment, his mouth open. Then his expression took a furious tone. “You fooled me!”

“We told you to sign this. We never told you to not read it. You would know what you were signing if you only took the time to look at what was written.” Tyrion had a smug smile all the time he spoke.

“You think that I’m going to accept this?” Janos Slynt didn’t have much imagination when it came to talk.

“Consider yourself lucky you had to deal with me, and not my father. He would have abandoned your family at best, and probably he would have killed them.”

Slynt turned to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. “Bring me to the king. I order you to bring me to him.”

Ser Barristan didn’t say a word. His eyes had no sympathy for the man who was giving him orders as if he had any real authority on the knight. Margaery stepped into the discussion.

“Consider yourself lucky that we are sending you to the Wall, Slynt. People were executed for less than you did.”

“I was obeying orders!”

“And if Cersei ordered you to kill your own family, would you obey?”

“The queen would never give such an order.”

“Then that proves you don’t know Cersei at all.”

“I have powerful friends here. They will never allow this!”

“We shall see. Ser Jacelyn, escort Janos Slynt to his ship,” Tyrion ordered.

“Men,” the knight in question said. The gold cloaks immediately grabbed their former commander by the arms and brought him out of the room.

“I have friends at court. Powerful friends! The king himself made me a lord!” Such were the words Janos Slynt said as he was pulled out of the Tower of the Hand. Margaery’s and Tyrion’s guards followed them. Ser Jacelyn and Ser Barristan were the only ones to remain behind with them.

“Good riddance,” the new Commander of the City Watch said.

“Make sure that Slynt doesn’t get the chance to escape,” Tyrion told him. “And I hope to not see babies die by the hands of gold cloaks in the future.”

“They won’t. If they do, justice will be made.” Ser Jacelyn bowed his head. Before he left, Margaery asked him something.

“Ser Jacelyn, I would like you to find the families of the children who were killed today. I want to visit them tomorrow, to offer my condolences.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

The commander left this time, after making another bow.
“Ser Jacelyn Bywater is an honorable man,” Ser Barristan said. “He’ll make a good commander of the gold cloaks.”

“Much better than Slynt,” Tyrion added, which Ser Barristan didn’t contradict. “You will make a fine replacement for him on the small council.”

“I will do my duty, my lord.” He hesitated to say what followed. “If I may, I had come to believe that honor didn’t exist anymore in this city. But I see that I was wrong. My lord, my lady.”

She and Tyrion were all alone again. Tyrion sighed. “Maybe we could sup now.”

Margaery agreed. She believed that she might have found back some appetite after they exiled Janos Slynt and his lieutenants, but she found out that she wasn’t hungry at all. Still, she ate. Her husband also seemed to force himself to eat. In the end, she left her fork and her knife on her plate and turned to him.

“Tyrion, what are we really doing here?”

Her husband seemed to think about it before he replied. “I don’t know.”

“We’re sending assassins like Janos Slynt to the Wall while the woman who gave them the order holds court and receives favors from the ladies of the entire Realm.”

Tyrion looked down. “Cersei doesn’t have for long now. With Janos Slynt gone, she has no harms with weapons at her service. All she has left are people fighting with ledgers and quills. She won’t remain here for long. But we must be careful with her. She won’t forget what we did today. We tried to keep her unaware, or at least uncertain of our intentions so far, but now she’s going to have a very good idea of what they are. She will see us as her main enemies now, if not the only ones.”

“We will become her targets,” Margaery summarized.

“Yes. She’s not going to ignore us anymore. Everything we’re going to do will be suspect in her eyes.”

Margaery took a sip of her wine. “Then I suppose we must expect the worst.”

“We know what she’s capable of.” Tyrion said it on a very dark tone.

“We shouldn’t be here. Cersei doesn’t deserve our help. She placed herself in that position. She tried to kill you. She should leave, and live the rest of her days in some isolated castle, far from everyone. Better, across the Narrow Sea.”

“And she will, soon enough.”

It was Margaery’s turn to sigh. “I wish we didn’t have to clean up the mess your sister and her son did. We try to help them, and in exchange all they do is cause catastrophes. They should thank us, especially after everything they did. Instead they see enemies in us.”

“For Cersei, everyone who isn’t Jaime or her children is an enemy.”

“Even her own blood.” Margaery didn’t ask a question. She stated a fact.

“Blood doesn’t mean much to Cersei, unless it serves her interests.” Tyrion pushed back his plate. “I’m afraid I won’t get much more inside tonight.”

“You should go to sleep. Take some rest, for once. Tomorrow will not be an easy day.”
“Not an easy day? I would say it will probably be the worst since we arrived.” Her husband stood up and walked to their bedchamber. He turned when he realized that Margaery was heading in the opposite direction. “You’re not coming to sleep?”

“I have something to do first.” She walked back to him, knelt and laid a kiss on his lips. “I’ll be back soon.” She brushed his jaw with her hand and left their apartments.

Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell, Lady of Casterly Rock and Lady of the Westerlands, traveled through the Red Keep with four guards to accompany her. She headed straight towards her destination. There was someone she had to see before she went to sleep. This couldn’t wait for the morning. When she arrived before the apartment, Ser Mandon Moore was standing in front of the door.

“I have come to see the queen,” she announced.

“The queen doesn’t wish to be disturbed,” he replied.

“Tell her that the life of her son is in danger. She will want to see me.”

“Wait here.”

Ser Mandon walked into the queen’s personal rooms. A few moments later, longer than Margaery expected given the message she gave, he came back.

“The queen will receive you. Your men must stay outside.”

“It wasn’t my intent to bring them with me. I don’t fear Cersei. We are between Lannisters, after all.”

She walked in without another word. Cersei was waiting for her, a nightgown wrapped around her shoulders. She obviously had no other clothes underneath. Margaery immediately noticed her disheveled hair, and what looked like remains of sweat on her forehead. The bed behind her looked like a battlefield, but what truly caught her eye was the sword laying against it. A Lannister sword.

“You say my son is in danger. Spit it out!” Cersei brought back her attention.

“Yes, Joffrey is in danger. Why? Well, let’s begin with the fact that many believe he is a bastard born of incest. The Starks and the Tullys want his head, and the Arryns as well too. One of his uncles is claiming to be king. The Martells are probably rejoicing at the idea of seeing him die after what happened to the princess Elia and her children in the last war. And now that he chose to use the smallfolk as target practice and that your thugs in the City Watch murdered babies, the people of King’s Landing despise him. All in all, I would say that more than half the people in the Seven Kingdoms want his head, which is a very dangerous situation for him.”

Cersei stared at her with an icy glare. She sneered. “Is it Tyrion who’s sending you?”

“No, I came here of my own free will.”

“And you’re going to leave at my will. Now.”

*Why? Did I interrupt something?* “I just wanted you to know that Janos Slynt is gone.”

Cersei frowned. “Gone?”

“He decided to take the black. He left a message, saying that he gave up his rights over Harrenhal. He claims that he regrets what he did today.” She walked to a nearby window and looked outside in
the dark. “I thought you’d like to know it.”

A moment of silence went. “What have you done?”

“Nothing, safe for making him realize his mistakes. I’m sure he regrets killing all these children now. He will have a lot of time to muse about it on his way to the Wall, and even more when he arrives. He will have a whole life to think about the choices he made.”

“Lord Janos Slynt was Commander of the City Watch. You had no right to exile him.”

“I believe that since the king is not ruling, then he won’t have anything to say about his Hand’s decision.”

“Tyrion is Hand by my grace. I am Queen Regent.”

Margaery turned to face Cersei. “Well, in this case, listen to me, Queen Regent. You’re losing the people.”


“You should. You will find it very difficult to rule over millions who want you dead. And you just gave them the rallying cry. *The Queen Regent slaughters babies.*” Cersei was silent, and for a rare time, she looked down. “You don’t even have the decency to deny it.”

Margaery hated this woman. She despised everything about Cersei. Her arrogance, her cruelty, her stupidity, her ambition without limits, her selfishness, even her love for Joffrey. For the first time, Margaery thought that she stood in the presence of the woman version of Tywin Lannister, which made her hate her sister-in-law even more.

“Ordering thugs to murder children, trying to start a rebellion against your brother in the Westerlands, even trying to kill your brother. I wonder what you wouldn’t be ready to do. Killing your husband?”

Cersei’s reaction would be imperceptible to most people, but it wasn’t for Margaery’s trained eyes. She truly killed her husband, the king.

“Wouldn’t you be ready to do anything for your children, if you had some?” Cersei asked her.

“So that’s your excuse? You did this for Joffrey?”

“We must do what needs to be done. This is what ruling is, lying on a bed of weeds, ripping them out by the root, one by one, before they strangle you in your sleep.”

Margaery laughed out loud at this. “Now I understand why we are at war. You know nothing about ruling.”

“And what would you know? You spend your time smiling, visiting the poor and getting fucked by my brother.”

“I spent the last three years ruling the Westerlands alongside Tyrion. We take our decisions together. I participate to the government of an entire kingdom. Tell me, when did Robert seek your advice on matters of state? Did he ever let you take decisions for Westeros?” Cersei didn’t answer. Margaery smiled cruelly at her. “That’s what I thought. You were only there to sit by his side in tournaments and to give him children. But unlike you and Robert, Tyrion loves me, and he trusts me. We ruled the Westerlands together for years, and Casterly Rock prospered and was at peace. You took the power and managed to throw the Seven Kingdoms into a civil war within days. Judging by the facts,
I would say I know more about ruling than a queen who cannot control her own son.”

“Joffrey is the king. My son is the king.”

Margaery wasn’t impressed. “Judging by his first decisions, you failed to educate him appropriately. And since you devoted all your attention to him and ignored your other children, I would say that you failed as a mother and as a queen.”

“You don’t know what it is. You have no children!”

Margaery returned the angry glare Cersei was throwing her. “I would rather have no child than to have Joffrey as a son. If I were his mother, I would be ashamed of him, instead of parading all day, boasting that I’m the queen.” She approached Cersei until they were only a few feet away. “Ser Jacelyn Bywater will lead the City Watch now. If I ever find that you’re trying anything against me or Tyrion, or against anyone close to us, I will destroy you.”

Cersei smirked. “You think you have so much power?” The queen towered her. “I am the queen.”

Margaery returned the smile. “A crown doesn’t give you power, Cersei. You should have learned that a long time ago. Information, however…” Margaery turned her back to her sister-in-law and took a few steps away, before staring at her again. “When everyone in the Seven Kingdoms learns that you had two twin babies murdered at Casterly Rock because they were fathered by Robert upon a servant, I don’t believe there will be a safe place left for you on this continent.”

Cersei’s smile faded. She didn’t expect Margaery to know that. Tyrion had discovered it about two years ago. He led investigations after his sister tried to kill him, and discovered this particular crime Cersei committed. They had witnesses, testimonies, and documents proving that Cersei ordered the death of two babies that the king had with a servant at the Rock. If it was revealed, everyone would immediately make the connection with today’s events and know that Cersei had children assassinated on several occasions.

“Stay away from my husband, or I’ll kill you,” Margaery warned. She would do it, without hesitation, and without remorse.

She proceeded to walk to the door in order to leave, but Cersei started to talk again. “I know why my brother loves you. I can see he is. You wouldn’t be the first whore he married. Do you know he married one before, and that when he got tired of her, he got rid of her?”

Margaery faced her. “Tyrion and I have no secrets for each other. I already know the story, Cersei. He told me everything. And seeing how your father treated his own son, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that your education of Joffrey was so lacking. It’s a good thing that you never truly took care of Tommen and Myrcella. They are children that parents would be proud of, but you had no hand in who they became.”

Cersei sneered. “At least I had children. I wonder what everyone thinks of a Lady of the Rock who is unable to give a son to her husband.”

Margaery stared at Cersei. “At least I have something you will never have.”

“And what is it?”

“Love.”

And on that, Margaery left. She walked back to the Tower of the Hand, her guards following her, trying to keep up with her quick pace. She hoped that Cersei didn’t see it. She tried to hide it the best
she could, but Cersei had hit on the right target when she said Margaery couldn’t give Tyrion a child. It was the only thing that weighed on her in her marriage.

It wasn’t only political. Margaery knew she had to give an heir to Casterly Rock, if only to make sure Cersei wouldn’t get her hands on it after Tyrion’s death. She also wanted her children to rule the Westerlands one day. However, that wasn’t why it galled her so much to not have been able to deliver a child so far. She just wanted children with Tyrion. She wanted to start a family. After three years living with him, three years of happiness where she was blessed with everything she could ask from a marriage, that was the only thing she couldn’t get yet. Children. Cersei attacked the right spot. It was her only sensible area. She loved Tyrion, she was happy with him and with their life, she had a family and friends who sincerely loved her as well, she was respected and loved by the people and the noble men all alike, and she held more power than she thought she could ever have, but she couldn’t get children, no matter how hard she and her husband tried. She knew there were rumors starting to spread that she was barren. They were few, and seldom spoken, but they existed. That was no surprise, since three years after the wedding, their marriage was still childless.

She came back into the apartments of the Hand. Tyrion was already in the bed, reading some official documents. He looked up at her as soon as she entered. His eyebrows deepened.

“Is there something wrong?” he asked.

“No.” She began to undress, removing her many jewels before she proceeded to remove her dress.

“Are you sure?”

She didn’t answer. She kept her back turned on him as she got rid of her clothes, until there was nothing left and she was standing naked like the day she was born. She sneaked into the bed and rested her head against his arm.

“I just want to sleep.”

Her husband brought his arm around her shoulders to caress her right arm. “As you wish, my queen.”

A smile crept to her face as she heard his voice with her eyes closed. It always comforted her. She heard him blow the only candle that was lit to allow him to read. His nose was buried into her hair and she felt his warm breathing run along her neck.

They remained like that for a very long time. She enjoyed the feeling of being close to him, and her mind calmed down, until he whispered in her ear.

“You’re a wonderful woman, you know.”

“Am I?” In other circumstances, she would have asked this on a playful tone, but right now she didn’t.

“Yes, you are. I couldn’t imagine being married to another woman.”

“Do you truly believe it?”

He stopped rubbing her arm with his right hand and looked at her. In the dark, she could see the worry in his eyes. “There is something wrong.”

It wasn’t a question. She sat straight into the bed. “I visited Cersei.”
She felt her husband tense behind her. “Did she threaten you?”

“No, nothing of the sort. We exchanged harsh words, but there were no threats. It’s just…”

He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “What happened?”

She looked down to the covers. “There’s one thing she told me, and she was right. Despite all her flaws, Cersei has two sons and a daughter. What do we have?”

“We have each other.”

She looked at him. “Is that enough?”

He took her hand. “A few years ago, I thought I would never marry, let alone have children. Since you arrived, my life has been everything I ever wanted it to be. I haven’t regretted marrying you a single moment. And if I was given the choice today, if someone asked me if I would marry you, and that he brought me proof that we cannot have children together, I would marry you all the same.”

She chuckled lightly. “You would?”

“I would, without any second thought.” His eyes showed no amusement. He was serious.

“You must be stupid, then. No man would marry a woman if he knew he couldn’t have children with her.” Not that she complained about Tyrion’s willingness to marry her whatever the odds, but a lord who was ready to agree to a childless marriage would be considered a fool by almost everybody.

He cupped her cheek. “Or perhaps I’m in love with most fantastic woman in the world.” Tears were coming to her eyes. “I don’t want a wife who would give me children but feel nothing for me. It’s you that I want.”

He gave her a long and sweet kiss that she returned. Little by little, their kiss deepened. Their tongues met. She let her husband guide her on her back. The night was wonderful, sweet, and Margaery didn’t think about anything worrying her. It was only just before she fell asleep that she made a short prayer to the Mother. In that instant, she felt that she would be a mother soon, just like her own mother three years after her wedding.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Bronn isn’t here, but Tyrion never met him at the Crossroads, so I brought Jacelyn Bywater from the books. We can see that Margaery is not perfect. She was wrong on one thing about Cersei in this chapter.

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery (again)
Chapter Notes

And a third Margaery chapter. Don't worry, she's not becoming the sole POV of this story, but I thought that seeing events taking place in King's Landing from her perspective rather than Tyrion's would be more interesting, since Tyrion is the only POV in King's Landing during ACOK.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XVII

She looked over the city from the balcony of their private apartments. Two days after the riots in Flea Bottom, the dust was still settling down. Patrols were constant in the streets, and peace was kept. Margaery had gone to visit the families of the victims yesterday, and she made a short visit to the orphanage where she was when the troubles began this morning. People were on the edge, afraid that another tragedy might happen, or that the gold cloaks might commit other atrocities. The situation would have been unbearable had there been a famine in the city. Margaery reassured everyone she met that the criminals who made these crimes had been dealt with, and the same message was being carried by heralds everywhere in the city. Janos Slynt and all his known associates were expelled from the city Watch and sent to the Wall, but would it be enough? The City Watch was corrupted, and Ser Jacelyn Bywater would need time to cleanse it. Still, they got rid of the origin of the plague, and with Slynt and his colleagues gone, Cersei wasn’t in position to cause problems like before.

She wore one of her gowns in the fashion of the Reach, made of fine green silk, that formed a triangle just above her breasts. The green silk left her arms bare. She had to appear with the colors and fineries from her father’s family today. Most of the time, she alternated between clothes and colors befitting a lady from Highgarden and from Casterly Rock, and she often wore pieces from both kingdoms to display her allegiances. Today, everything on her spoke of her Tyrell upbringing, safe for one, the ring at her hand, the ring that Tyrion gave her on their wedding day.

Sera’s head appeared through the opening of the door. “Lady Margaery, Lord Baelish is here to see you.”

“Bring him in,” she told her handmaiden. She went to sit to a nearby table. A chair had been positioned strategically face to hers in prevision of this conversation. Petyr Baelish, the Master of Coin, came inside, a smile on his lips that didn’t reach his eyes. Margaery had understood a while ago that the feelings this man displayed on his face rarely reflected those of his eyes.

“Lady Lannister.” He made the appropriate bow, still smiling.

“Lord Baelish. Thank you for coming,” she replied dryly. She gestured for him to sit, and he did.

“I must admit that I was intrigued to receive your word. I didn’t think you would wish for another conversation between us after the last we had.”

He didn’t need to remind her. She remembered his words very clearly. *It is horrible to lose a child, but I don’t believe it is really better to have none.* “Believe me, Lord Baelish, I didn’t make you
come because I wanted to. I summoned you because I had to.”

His smile grew wider. “Everyone needs the Master of Coin, though no one loves him.”

“It’s not the Master of Coin I need right now. It is Petyr Baelish that I need, and his connections and relations.”

A spark of interest, and even avidity, burst into his eyes. “Oh, that is interesting indeed.”

“My lord husband asked me to see you. He has an important mission for you, a mission he deems vital for the Realm.”

“And what would be this mission?”

“He needs you to convince Lysa Arryn to marry her son to Princess Myrcella. Lady Arryn is not very fond of the Lannisters, but I heard she is fond of you. There are even rumors that she got you your first position at Gulltown.”

“Lysa and I have known each other for quite some time. I grew up at Riverrun as a ward, and she trusts me. It is true that she played some role in my first nomination.” He made a pause, as if he was thinking about it. “Yes, I could sing this song to Lysa, if I cared to.”

“But you will not,” Margaery cut him short before he could continue. He faked surprise.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, my lady.”

“This is what my husband wants, but what I want and what my husband wants, to the opposite of what I say to most of the people, are not the same.” She noticed another spark in his eyes, this time of excitement. “I want you to accept so he allows you to travel to the Vale, but once there, you will make no marriage proposal.”

Littlefinger crossed his fingers. “And what am I supposed to do then?”

Margaery leaned forward. “Intercede in my favor and House Tyrell’s to the Lady of the Vale. Lysa Arryn is the sister of Lady Catelyn Stark, and the mother-in-law of Robb Stark. I need you to convince her to talk for me to her son-in-law. And Tyrion mustn’t know.”

“And why would you need this? More important, why would your husband need to be unaware of that?”

Margaery took her time to answer. “We both know about the rumors spreading about the king. Tell me, Lord Baelish, do you truly think no one will believe it?”

“I think that Robb Stark, and probably the Tullys and Renly, will believe Ned Stark’s word over Joffrey’s.”

“I’ve been married for over three years now, Lord Baelish. You remember this discussion we had during Joffrey’s name day?”

“I do, my lady.”

“I love my husband, Lord Baelish, as strange as it may seem, considering he is a dwarf. However, I’m not ready to follow his family to the grave, and to bring my family with me in their downfall. And after what happened a few days ago, with Cersei who ordered the death of so many children… I don’t want me and my family to be associated with this, and I don’t want us to fall with House
“Lannister if Stannis wins.”

“So, you’re looking for a last resort solution in case things go wrong?” he suggested.

“I want to make sure that my family survives no matter how the war ends,” she corrected. “Stannis will never hear me unless me and my whole family join his cause, and this is not an option. The Starks believe I took part in Ned Stark’s demise. They won’t listen to me. Lysa, on the other hand, if I offer her something in return, and if you talk sense into her, she might speak for me to Robb Stark. He’s leading most of the rebels’ forces as we speak, and his word will have great weigh if Stannis is victorious.”

“And what will you offer her, my lady?”

“The heads of the people who murdered Lord Arryn.”

She saw a flash of something in his eyes. It wasn’t excitement, or interest, but something she couldn’t remember seeing into the eyes of the Master of Coin before. For one moment, Margaery thought that Littlefinger was afraid. It only lasted a moment. He returned very quickly to his usual self.

“Do you know who did this?” he asked, looking more interested than anything else again.

Margaery shot him an enigmatic smile, but she didn’t reply. She knew how to keep secrets and to make people understand that it would need a lot for her to reveal something. Littlefinger seemed to realize that she would say nothing, so he finally gave an answer to her request.

“That might be enough for Lysa, though she will certainly want to know the identity of the assassins.”

“I am sure you can convince her to wait,” Margaery said dismissively.

“I could, but why would I? Why should I take such a long and uncertain path when instead I could tell all of it to Lord Tyrion?”

“Try, Lord Baelish, he will not believe you. You know Lord Tyrion, you said it yourself. He was one of your best customers. Tell him anything I just told you, and I will deny it. Who do you think he’s going to believe? You, a brothelkeeper? Or the woman he loves?”

“You seem quite certain of your husband’s feelings?”

“I now Tyrion better than anyone.”

“You cover well your angles, my lady. Still, why would I do that? Why would I risk everything, my position and my life, for you?”

“What about Harrenhal?”

“Harrenhal?” She didn’t show her satisfaction, but she noticed the glimmer of ambition in the man’s eyes.

“A few chosen words whispered into my husband’s ear and it is yours. Joffrey stripped the Whents from Harrenhal to grant it to Janos Slynt, and Janos Slynt gave up any claim on it. The castle and its lands are vacant. We can give it to whoever we want since the Riverlands are in rebellion. The question is, will you take it?”

“Harrenhal is cursed,” Littlefinger pointed out.
“I never took you for a superstitious man. You can tear it down and rebuild it if you want. You have the means for it.” She stared right into his eyes, defiantly. “You will not get Harrenhal without my help. Stannis will never grant you the castle, no matter what you do. The best you can hope if he wins is to remain Master of Coin, and since you betrayed Ned Stark, I’m not sure he will even grant you this favor. The Starks will never help you either if they learn of your involvement in Ned Stark’s demise. You could ask Cersei or Joffrey, but the king is not interested in ruling and Cersei’s power is dwindling. They won’t be able to do anything without Tyrion’s consent and mine, and unless you give me a reason to, I will do nothing to promote your ascension, Lord Baelish. In fact, I will do everything to stop it. Tyrion doesn’t like you. He despises people who betray Hands of the King. He mistrusts them. I am your only choice. This is not an opportunity that will see again soon.”

He looked uncertain, and didn’t speak. “So, it is settled then. You will leave for the Vale, convince Lysa to speak on my behalf to the Starks. As for the proposal of marriage, convince her to accept.”

“Didn’t you want me to…”

“I want you to convince her to accept the betrothal, but nothing more. Betrothals can be cancelled. Just make her accept it in private, but don’t let her announce it in the Vale. Let the Iron Throne be the only one to make it public. As long as Lysa doesn’t acknowledge it publicly, she can easily withdraw. Tyrion will grant you Harrenhal this way, and we will both get what we want.”

“Well, it’s feasible. I will talk to Lysa, don’t worry, and I will make her see my point. Do you have need of me for anything else?”

“No. You may leave.” As Littlefinger proceeded like he was instructed, Margaery stopped him. “Oh, Lord Baelish. Lord Tyrion and the queen must know nothing of our discussion. Is that clear?”

“It is clear, my lady.”

He left for good. Margaery sighed and smiled at the same once the door was closed. She hoped that she played her role well. She wondered what Baelish would do next. Who would he speak to? She was eager to see it. Perhaps Cersei would come enraged to see her, or perhaps Tyrion would jokingly talk to her about certain revelations the Master of Coin made to him. Or perhaps Cersei would go to Tyrion and tell him about a few revelations Baelish made to her. They would know soon enough.

Margaery had something else to do now. Tyrion left her a letter to transmit, a letter of the utmost importance. She took it on his desk and left their apartments. She climbed down the many stairs of the Tower of the Hand, walked through a good part of the Red Keep, and climbed up the many stairs leading to the Grand Maester’s chambers, right beneath the rookery. She wondered how Pycelle managed to use all these stairs. He had to go down and up at least half a dozen times every day. She was surprised that the old man was still capable of it. He barely seemed able to walk.

She found the Grand Maester preparing some mixture at his desk. He didn’t acknowledge her presence when she entered. She stood right in front of him, but he wasn’t aware, or willingly ignored her presence.

“Grand Maester.”

He almost jumped out of surprise, but didn’t topple the solution he was working on. “Oh, my lady. Please, forgive me. With my age, it becomes quite difficult to focus on something and be aware of what’s happening around at the same time. What can I do for you, my lady?”

She handled him the letter she hid in the fold of her dress. “Lord Tyrion wants you to send this
message to Sunspear immediately.”

Pycele took the letter with his shaking hands, but before Margaery or he could say anything, Ser Lancel Lannister burst into the room. “Grand Maester, is it ready?”

Pycele looked very surprised, and uneasy. “Oh, yes, of course. It will be ready soon. Please wait outside, ser.”

“It seems ready enough for me.” The new knight brazenly seized the flask on the desk without asking permission.

“Ser, I am discussing important matters with Lady Margaery,” the Grand Maester protested.

“I’m on official queen’s business. Lady Margaery can wait, I’m sure.”

He looked at her as if he was towering her, which wasn’t the case. Lancel Lannister wasn’t taller than she was. “Dear Lancel, it’s a pleasure to see you. Tyrion and I didn’t have the opportunity to see you often since you were knighted.”

“I’m very busy.”

“Yes, I’m sure your new duties as a knight are quite demanding, after serving the king’s wine for years.”

He felt insulted, and that was visible on his face. Tyrion had a very bad influence on her. Margaery didn’t need to look at the flask to suspect what was in it. She had observed the herbs that lied on Pycele’s desk as she waited for him to react to her presence, and she knew these herbs. It wasn’t rare that they were used in Highgarden.

“Perhaps you could dine with us tonight, Lancel,” she suggested, keeping her gentle and sweet behaviour.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m a knight now.”

He left without bowing. It seemed the knighthood had gotten to his head. Perhaps he had some bad influence as well. Margaery looked back to Pycele.

“I’m truly sorry, my lady.”

“That’s nothing. I’ll deal with him myself.”

“Ser Lancel is at the personal service of the queen. I would be careful if I were you, my lady.”

“Since we’re talking about Cersei, I must ask you something Pycele. In fact, it is the Hand of the King who’s asking it. The destiny of the Realm may depend on your decision.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“No one must know about the content of this letter.”

“Of course. I am bound to secrecy, my lady.”

“Not even the queen.” His expression grew far more serious than before. “Our king’s reign could be in danger if Cersei learned of what is in this letter. There’s too much at stake. Can we trust you on that, Pycele?”
“Oh, yes, you can. I shall be silent as the grave.”

“Thank you. We appreciate your loyalty and your service, Grand Maester.”

“I shall always be loyal to the Realm, my lady, and to the king’s family as a matter of consequence.”

She nodded slightly to show she got the message, and she left. She made a detour by the gardens to give enough time to her husband. When she came back to their chambers, Lord Varys was leaving.

“Oh, Varys, remember…” Tyrion began.

“The queen mustn’t know. My lord, my lady.” He bowed to each of them and left. When they were alone, Tyrion looked at her.

“Done?” he asked.

“Done. What about you?”

“Done as well.”

They only had to wait now. “What news from the North?”

“It seems the Tullys didn’t move for now. The Starks are marching south, as we expected. The Tullys are probably waiting for them to attack the Crownlands. Stafford’s army at the Golden Tooth probably forces them to keep their forces on their lands.”

“Let’s hope my father’s armies can arrive in time.”

“Yes, the time. That’s what matters. Let’s hope we get our answer soon, and then we can send the emissary in the North. This may slow down Robb Stark a bit.”

Cersei refused to send an ambassador to Robb Stark after Margaery and Tyrion exiled Janos Slynt. She refused their terms, no matter what they were, which was no surprise since for Cersei the only acceptable terms were that Robb Stark and his allies bent the knee unconditionally. The concept that she or Joffrey could do something wrong seemed foreign to her.

The truth was they needed to neutralize Cersei’s power and influence more than ever. She had no military power left. The City Watch and the red cloaks were firmly into hers and Tyrion’s hands, but Cersei still had political support, and that was what they needed to destroy right now. And Margaery had an idea to help them in their goal.

“Tyrion, can you think of any reason why Cersei would drink Moon Tea?”

Tyrion stared back at her. “Moon Tea?”

“Pycelle was preparing something for her. Your cousin Lancel came to take it just when I gave him your letter. He said it was for the queen.”

“Are you sure this was Moon Tea?”

“I’m sure. I recognized the herbs he used to make it. Lomys used to make some back in Highgarden.”

“Really?” He seemed interested all of a sudden. She smiled at him.

“Don’t worry. He never made some for me. Except once, but I had asked him some for a friend.”
Tyrion relaxed. He believed her without question. “So, my sister is drinking Moon Tea, and it was Lancel who came to take it from Pycelle.” He smirked at her.

“You think that’s him?”

“You saw a Lannister sword on her bed. It seems Stannis wasn’t entirely wrong. My sister is sleeping with a Lannister, but not the one he thought.”

“Lancel.” Margaery looked outside. “First, he kills Robert using strongwine, then he shares the bed of the queen. I pity Kevan,” she said on a low tone. “We should send him away.”

“Lancel could be useful to us,” her husband observed. “And if everything goes accordingly, Cersei won’t remain in the capital for long.”

“The sooner she leaves the better.” She sighed. “Tyrion, I’ve been thinking about Sansa lately.”

“Yes, me too.” They both sat close to each other. “How is she?”

“Not much better.” Margaery visited Sansa every day. “She’s still mourning.”

Tyrion looked down. “I envy her sometimes. I didn’t really have a father to mourn when he died.”

“I think she would rather have her father alive than have the joy of mourning him,” she retorted sharply.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

“Cersei always changes her handmaidens, she is barely allowed out of her rooms one hour every day, and Joffrey has the kingsguards beating her continuously.”

“Poor child.” She knew that Tyrion meant what he said.

“We shouldn’t let Joffrey do this. She’s only a child, you said it. His behaviour with her is cruel and unacceptable.”

“I know, but what do you want me to do? Shackle our king? It’s one thing keeping him away from politics, but it’s another to keep him away from the girl he’s supposed to marry.”

“Tyrion, I don’t believe we should let Joffrey and Sansa get married. Anyway, the North is at war with us.”

“No, this arrangement is no longer useful, unless we use it to make peace with Robb Stark.”

“I don’t think he will want it when he learns about the mistreatment his sister endured under Joffrey.”

“It would be better then if he never learned about it.” Margaery had to agree with her husband on that. Telling the truth would only enrage Robb Stark further. “Still, it might be better to keep the place next to Joffrey empty for some time. And Sansa wouldn’t make the queen we need.”

“What do you suggest?” she asked.

“For now, nothing. I’m still thinking about it. There are other options of marriage for Joffrey, and if he was to have no sons, then there’s still Tommen left.”

“I think Sansa would rather marry Tommen than Joffrey.”
“Who could blame her?”

“What about Loras?”

“Your brother?”

“You know another Loras?” she asked, making him sound stupid, but he didn’t care about it. “With the recent developments, marrying him to Sansa would be a good alternative to our nephew. And it would compensate the fact that Myrcella was taken away from him.”

“We don’t know yet if they will accept.”

“If I didn’t know you better, I would think that you’re trying to stop my brother from ever marrying.”

“I don’t think he would need me for that. My brother-in-law doesn’t seem eager to marry.”

“No,” she conceded, “but he will marry one day or another, and Sansa would make a good bride for him.”

Tyrion pulled a face. “I suppose that a husband preferring the company to women is better than one who orders his men to beat you.”

“You said it, Robb Stark will never let us marry Sansa to Joffrey. And I doubt he will want to marry her to anyone from House Lannister. My brother is probably our best hope if we want to bring back the Starks into the fold.”

Her husband nodded after a moment. “I agree. To be honest, I thought of marrying her to Tommen instead, but the Starks will never want Sansa to marry someone they suspect of being born from incest. Your brother is probably our best option. And from what you told me, the girl always wanted to marry a knight in shining armor. Who better than the Knight of Flowers?”

Margaery smiled, though there was a certain bitterness to it. “I warned her about Joffrey at Winterfell, and she wouldn’t listen.”

“She is only a child.”

Yes, she was. Sansa was only a child, but childhood was over for her. She would marry as soon as she bled, which could happen anytime. Margaery couldn’t forget how shattered she was at her arrival in King’s Landing. She would be happier with Loras, and as the future Lady of Highgarden. Sansa could find friends in Highgarden, and Margaery’s mother could take care of her. Perhaps Margaery could even get the little sister she always wanted. However, she wouldn’t let Loras make her suffer. Her brother was a good man, but he had a tendency to ignore whatever wasn’t interesting to him, and the young maids who eyed him with envy at every tourney were part of it. She would also need to warn Sansa about Loras, eventually. She hoped that this time, the young girl would listen.

“Since we’re talking about weddings, it may be too early for that, but who do you think Tommen should marry?”

“I don’t know,” Tyrion replied. “But the truth is, as long as Joffrey isn’t married, we cannot arrange a marriage for Tommen. And if we are to set Sansa aside for your brother, I don’t know who could marry Joffrey. Options are limited amongst the most highborn families. It would be better to remain open to ideas, but let’s not make a hasty decision.” Margaery nodded. “By the way, do you know if our friend at the Golden Tooth has any idea of marriage yet?”

“Not that I heard. It seems to me that Alysanne is like my brother. She’s not very eager to marry.”
“I wonder…”

Before he could say anything more, Tyrion was interrupted by Ty who opened the door. “My lord, the queen is summoning the small council.”

“Really? At this hour?”

“My lord, she summoned the other members of the council, but not you, nor Lady Margaery.”

They exchanged a surprised and worried look. “If Cersei is assembling the small council without us…” she began.

“… then nothing good can come out of it,” Tyrion finished.

They didn’t need a single more word. They stood and hurried to the small council chambers. On their way, Tyrion picked five red cloaks to escort them. When they arrived, the doors were closed and guarded by two kingsguards, Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Boros Blount, probably the ones she despised the most. Sansa told her they hit her harder than the others.

“Sers, if you would allow us to enter,” Tyrion told them.

“The queen said the council was not to be disturbed,” Ser Meryn said.

“I do believe we have a right, as members of the small council, to take part in its reunions.”

“The queen said the council was not to be disturbed,” the knight repeated.

Margaery saw her husband smile with these eyes he had when it was time to use a secret weapon. “Tell me, Ser Meryn, did you stand guard for the Princess Myrcella lately?”

“Why would it interest you?”

“Because I’m concerned with having a man like you turning around her, especially since I heard about your activities at night in brothels, with other girls about the same age than the princess. I’d hate for my sister to hear about it. I wonder what she would do if she heard that you touched the princess while you were alone with her.”

The knight looked with rage to her husband, and without warning, he drew his sword and held it right in front of Tyrion’s face. Margaery’s blood froze. Did Tyrion go too far? The other swords were unsheathed around her, but no one dared to move.

“Be careful, Imp,” Ser Meryn warned.

“I would be careful if I were you, Ser Meryn. If Cersei hears about what you do in Littlefinger’s brothels, and that someone suggests that you might do the same to her daughter, there isn’t a man alive who could devise a more painful death for you and your cock.”

Tyrion made a step forward, but Ser Meryn’s sword didn’t move. He made another step, and the sword didn’t move either. Her husband stared at the knight, only a few centimeters between his nose and the sword. “Let us pass, Ser Meryn.”

“You make another step, and your head goes through my sword, Imp.”

Threats didn’t work on this man. Margaery noticed how Tyrion’s subtly looked around him. Two more red cloaks had joined them when they realized what was happening. They were seven against two.
“I suppose I can make a step backward,” her husband said.

Tyrion shot her a quick glance, warning her of what might happen soon. She stepped back as well, until their guards stood between them and the two kingsguards. They all had their swords unsheathed.

Without warning, Tyrion yelled. “SER MERYN TRANT IS RAPEING GIRLS OF TEN! HIS NEXT VICTIM IS PRINCESS MYRCELLA!”

Ser Meryn Trant launched an attack immediately, and as quickly as he moved, three swords were upon him. One stopped his attack that was meant to kill Tyrion, and the other two took life away from him. Ser Boros Blount tried to intervene, but ended with a sword in the leg and the arm. The one that hit his arm tore it off. Margaery stepped away to avoid the spray of blood that came out of it. Within a few seconds, a kingsguard was dead and the other one lost an arm, and although Margaery was not well versed in injuries, she didn’t think he had much time to live.

The doors opened to let Cersei appear. Ser Barristan was next to her. The Lord Commander looked at his two sworn brothers in utter surprise and horror while Cersei looked as surprised as she was angry.

“What the hell happened here?” she asked.

“It appears Ser Meryn Trant doesn’t appreciate that we reveal certain things about him,” Tyrion answered.

“Grand Maester, we have an injured man!” Ser Barristan yelled. He took off his white cloak and wrapped it around Ser Boros’s missing arm, but it did little to slow down the river of blood. The cloak was all red in an instant. Pycelle clumsily approached.

“Oh!” He stepped back in disgust.

“Pycelle, you have to help him. Stop the bleeding!” Ser Barristan shouted. He was the only one caring about what happened to the kingsguard.

“Bring Ser Boros to the Grand Maester’s chambers. Pycelle, a kingsguard’s life lies in your hands,” Tyrion said. Just like Margaery thought, Ser Barristan Selmy was the only one to care about Ser Boros’s fate.

The red cloaks took away the wailing knight and the body. They were followed by Pycelle who somehow managed to keep pace with them.

“What happened here?” Cersei asked again.

“I told you. I revealed something about Ser Meryn. He didn’t appreciate it, so he decided to kill me. My men defended me, and Ser Boros decided to take his sworn brother’s side. Here’s the result.” He indicated the large puddle of blood between them.

“You killed two of Joffrey’s kingsguards!”

“Seeing how they fared against simple guards, I’d say it’s not a great loss. You could replace them with men who actually can defend the king.”

“Ser Meryn and Ser Boros attacked us,” Margaery explained. “I can confirm it. Ask any of the men who were present. They will tell you the same. They tried to murder the Hand of the King and his uncle.”
“You think I’ll fall for that trap! You murdered them so Joffrey would be defenseless!” Cersei accused them.

Tyrion made a step forward. His foot was close to the puddle of blood. “You should actually thank me! Ser Meryn Trant is a child’s beater! He goes to brothels on a regular basis to beat and rape little girls. How long would you think it would be before he did the same to your daughter?”

Immediately, the expression on her face changed. She was worried. She looked back at Ser Barristan. “Is that true?”

The knight seemed lost. “Your Grace, I have no idea what Lord Tyrion is talking about.”

“It’s normal. I only learned about it yesterday, after I questioned a few of my men who visited brothels and heard the little girls crying,” Tyrion revealed.

“Yesterday? And you allowed that monster to walk around my daughter without doing anything?”

Tyrion made another step. A part of the blood was already dipped into the blood, but now both were in. He stared straight at his sister. “You really think I would allow him to hurt Myrcella? Perhaps you haven’t realized it yet, Cersei, but I love your children, as much as Jaime do. I would never allow someone to arm them. As soon as I learned, I made sure there was a red cloak watching over Myrcella at any time. I was planning to talk about it with you today, but you decided to convoke a meeting of the small council without me and Margaery. That’s a poor way to thank me for watching over your children. If it wasn’t for me, this blood might have been your daughter’s after Ser Meryn was done with her.”

Cersei was speechless. Ser Barristan stepped back into the conversation. “Your Grace, my lord, I don’t know what to say. I had no idea that Ser Meryn was… I’m truly sorry. I take the blame for everything that could have happened.”

Cersei didn’t listen. She stared at the puddle of blood. Tyrion was still standing at the center of it. Margaery noticed Varys and Littlefinger who stood in retreat behind the queen and the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Varys had a sorry expression, even worried, but all that Baelish showed was interest, again.

“So, now that we’re done with this domestic problem, perhaps you could tell what you were talking about before our interruption, and why you felt the need to exclude us from the discussion of the small council, big sister.” Tyrion said, still angry.

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan said, “Lord Tyrion deserves to know what’s going on, and Lady Lannister even more so.”

Margaery could see that Cersei was irritated by the fact he called her Lady Lannister. Cersei didn’t accept the fact that she was the Lady of Casterly Rock. Cersei cast one last glance at the blood on the floor. She threw her hands in the air. “Alright, get in.” She walked back to the table. Varys and Littlefinger swiftly took their seat. Tyrion and Margaery joined them at their usual places. Tyrion’s boots left traces of blood everywhere.

“We received a raven from Highgarden. Lord Tyrell replied to our dear Margaery’s message,” the Queen Regent spat.

“You read it?” Margaery asked.

“I did.”
“This raven was destined to me,” Margaery stated.

“The safety of the king and the interests of the Realm are more important than your privacy. This message tells us that Lord Tyrell won’t send us a single man.”

This shocked Margaery. “That’s nonsense. My father would never do this.”

“Your brother is a traitor,” Cersei declared. “Renly proclaimed himself king at Storm’s End, just like Stannis did. Guess who is among its staunchest supporters.”

Her heart stopped to beat. No, that couldn’t be. “Can I see the message?”

Cersei threw it at her. Margaery grabbed it and unrolled the raven’s scroll.

My sweet little daughter,

I regret to tell you that I won’t be able to help you. Lord Renly Baratheon made public his claim to the Iron Throne. Your brother Loras is at Storm’s End and decided to acknowledge him as his king. Loras asked us for men to help Renly. I refused, but I cannot provide you any man. I cannot fight against you or against Loras. You are my children, and I cannot bring my arms against either of you.

I agree with your decision, and so does your mother and your grandmother. We must stand by the Lannisters and Joffrey, but as long as Loras supports Renly, there’s nothing I can do for you on the military plan. Ask me anything else: crops, workers, money, but I can’t fight Loras.

We will try to reason him. Be careful, my little daughter.

Your father.

Her heart sank as she read the message. This was her father’s seal at the bottom of it. The scroll was authentic. She recognized Lomys’s writing on the paper.

“That’s impossible,” she said aloud.

“Well, it seems House Tyrell is not as loyal as we thought,” Cersei commented.

“Be careful, Cersei,” Tyrion said menacingly. He had read the message from where he sat. “House Tyrell didn’t turn on us. Lord Tyrell is still ready to provide everything we need for this war.”

“Everything but soldiers.”

“Ser Loras is his son. If Tommen was to take arms against Joffrey, which side would you choose?”

Cersei didn’t answer. Margaery kept staring at the letter. How could Loras do this? How could he do this to her? She was his sister, and he decided to pledge fealty to another king, a king who would fight against Tyrion and against her. He decided to fight her. How could he do this?

“That doesn’t make sense,” she declared. “Loras would never do something like that.”

“He did, my lady. It grieves me to say it, but I’m afraid your brother is indeed a traitor,” Lord Varys said in a soft voice.

“The heir to Highgarden fighting against us. That’s not good,” Littlefinger commented.

“What do you have to say for your house, Margaery? What do you have to say to legitimate their
betrayal?” Cersei asked.

“She has nothing to say, because the Tyrells didn’t betray us,” Tyrion clearly stated.

“Oh, come on, little brother. Even you cannot defend her. The Tyrells turned their back on us…”

“They did not. Loras Tyrell did. House Tyrell did not.”

“I’m afraid that since Ser Loras is the heir to Highgarden, my lord, Lord Mace and the others are, against their wishes, at least indirectly in rebellion against the Crown,” Varys said.

Tyrion shot a dark look at the Master of Whisperers after he spoke. He returned his attention to Cersei. “Let me be clear, Cersei. If you’re accusing Margaery, then you’re accusing me. And if you’re accusing me, then you’re accusing all House Lannister. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Do you consider yourself as the whole House Lannister?” she asked him in derision.

“Father did. You never complained about it,” Tyrion shot back. “Loras Tyrell decided to support Renly Baratheon. Mace Tyrell, and Margaery Lannister did not. If you want to accuse someone, then accuse the right person, and not the members of his family. If we were held responsible for the crimes of our siblings, we would all hang.”

“Loras must have lost his mind. There’s no way he would do such a thing,” Margaery said. She sighed. “I must talk to him.”

“Talk to him, my lady?” Ser Barristan asked.

“Yes. Face to face. I need a good discussion with him.” She looked back at the message. “I must go to Storm’s End.”

Silence fell around the table.

“Are you planning to turn on us as well?” Cersei asked.

“I’m the only one who can bring my brother back to our side. You want my father’s troops? I’m your only hope to get them.”

“I don’t think you should go,” Tyrion said. “The Stormlands rebelled against us. What if they capture you, or kill you?”

“Renly will not do this. I know him. That’s not his style. If I come with a peace banner for negotiations, he will receive me with all the honors and let me go when I wish.”

“My lady, we cannot know for sure. Laws are silent in times of war. You said your brother couldn’t turn against Joffrey, and yet he did.”

“I have no choice. This is a risk I must take. Without my father’s support, we will be surrounded by three different armies on three sides. I must do it, or else Joffrey might not be sitting on the Iron Throne when the year is over.”

No one said anything. She could feel her husband’s disapproval. She wasn’t used to have him oppose her in public. Normally, they would discuss something they didn’t agree in private and present a united front before everyone, but she wouldn’t back away. She looked at Cersei, waiting for opposition from her. It was something completely different that came out.

“Very well. We will eagerly await your return,” she said. Margaery knew that something was amiss.
“I’ll have on of the kingsguards escorting you to Lord Renly, to show him who’s the real king and which king you serve.”

“Shouldn’t the kingsguards remain here to protect the king, especially now that one is dead and another lost his arm?” Tyrion wondered.

“We must show Renly who we really are. Ser Mandon Moore will accompany her.”

Ser Mandon Moore. Now she knew why Cersei agreed to her departure.

“Ser Mandon’s presence would be more useful near the king. I’ll have my own guards to escort me,” Margaery said.

“I insist. The fear and respect Ser Mandon commands will give you more protection.” Cersei didn’t leave place to debate. Margaery had to accept the fact she would travel with a kingsguard all the way to Storm’s End.

Some time later, she and Tyrion were together in their apartments. Her husband was clearly agitated and he paced the room like he never did before.

“You cannot go to Storm’s End.”

“Only I can reason my brother,” she said.

“I don’t want you to end up as Renly’s prisoner, or worse. He proclaimed himself king. We are now at war with him.”

“I know Renly, Tyrion. I know how he thinks. He sees himself as an honorable man, a gentleman, and he loves to see himself that way. He will never put irons on someone who comes for a parley. And he and Loras are very close. My brother would never tolerate it if he did anything to me. Only that is enough for me.”

“Maybe, but his men might not be of the same mind. What if some them see the Lady of Casterly Rock, a member of Joffrey’s small council, and think they can gain some gratitude from Renly by killing you? And parleys are not that safe. The first King Daeron was killed by Dornish during a parley.”

“Renly is not Dornish, and he is a friend of my family. Look, Tyrion, we are at war. We all must take risks. Going to Storm’s End is not much safer than staying here. We are about to be surrounded by Robb Stark, Stannis and Renly. I could have died in the riots only a few days ago. I must go to Storm’s End, or else we will never win this war, unless you have some trick that you’re hiding to me that could destroy Stannis’s fleet and Robb Stark’s army within ten seconds.”

Her husband kept pacing. He was in interior debate with himself. Tyrion was clever enough to realize that what she said was true, but she also knew that he cared about her more than anyone else. “Just promise me to be careful. Especially with Ser Mandon Moore around you. Jaime told me that he was the most dangerous of the kingsguards. We can never know what he will do.”

“Don’t worry, I will be cautious.” She knelt to plant a long kiss on his mouth. “Now, if you’ll excuse, I have a journey to the Stormlands to prepare.”

First, Margaery saw her handmaidens. She instructed them to prepare what she needed. She would only bring the strict minimum. It wasn’t a pleasure journey. Speed and lightness were the keys to arrive as soon as possible to Storm’s End. When she told them that only her guard would come with her, Sera begged to let one of them accompany her, and Mira emitted some reserves, but Margaery
didn’t flinch. She gave them the order to obey Tyrion in everything while she would be away.

She then gave the necessary orders to the men who would accompany her. Last, she went to see a person she absolutely needed to talk to before her departure. Ser Arys Oakheart stood guard before her door.

“I wish to speak with the Lady Sansa,” Margaery said.

“I’ll announce you.” He opened the door and she heard him speak to the Stark girl. “Lady Sansa, Lady Lannister would like to speak with you.” Sansa must have answered for the kingsguard turned back to Margaery after a moment. “You may go in, my lady.”

“Thank you, Ser Arys.”

The kingsguard smiled while he bowed to her as Margaery walked in. Sansa was waiting for her inside, standing tall. The girl was already fourteen and almost reached Margaery’s height. Although only five years separated them, Margaery felt odd at the thought that the girl would be taller than her very soon. She bowed as soon as Margaery was inside.

“Lady Margaery.”

Margaery sighed. “Old habits are hard to break. You don’t need to call me that way here, Sansa. We’re in private.” She came to sit near Sansa and the girl did like her. Margaery took a look at her face. There were bruises, and new ones.

“How did this?” she asked.

“Ser Boros. It’s my fault. Joffrey was talking about Ser Janos, and I said that he got what he deserved by being exiled, for what he did to my father.”

“I can hardly disagree with you.” After all, it was her and Tyrion who sent Janos Slynt to the Wall. “Joffrey ordered him to do this?” Sansa nodded. “He shouldn’t have. He’s still refusing to let you see Pycelle?”

“He says it’s helping me to remember, to behave like a lady.”

“Well, Joffrey should learn to behave like a king. But I have some good news for you, Sansa. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn might no longer be able to hit you.”

“Why? If Joffrey gives them an order, they must comply, and they are happy to comply.”

“Even Joffrey cannot command to the dead.” The young Sansa frowned. Margaery smiled as she explained. “Ser Meryn made an attempt of murder on my husband today, and he was helped by Ser Boros. Our men stopped them. Ser Meryn is dead, and Ser Boros lost an arm. He was alive the last time I saw him, but I doubt he has long to live. And even if he does, it will be without an arm.”

“He will still have the other one.”

Margaery pitied the girl. The Sansa who was excited to marry the future king had turned into a mournful lady who recited courtesies on a hollow tone whenever she was talked to. She opened to Margaery sometimes, but not much.

“Ser Arys is guarding you right now. Did he mistreat you?”

“No. He’s always kind with me. When Joffrey tells him to beat me, he asks if it is necessary. And he
tries to not hurt me too much. Would it be possible that Ser Barristan guards me? When Joffrey ordered him to strike me yesterday, he refused.”

“I’m not choosing who guards you Sansa, you know it.” It was Cersei who took these decisions. She made sure to replace Sansa’s maids every week, so that they wouldn’t form any friendship with her. Cersei controlled everything about Sansa’s life in the Red Keep, and she and Joffrey chose themselves who watched her. Margaery wished they could do something for Sansa, but she and Tyrion had to move carefully, and Sansa wasn’t deemed a higher priority than the City Watch or the small council. Once they had both in hand, they could probably do something for her. They couldn’t stop Joffrey from seeing her. The only way to stop all this beating would be to have Joffrey stop visiting her. An idea came to her mind.

“Sansa, there might be a way to protect you from Joffrey.” The blue eyes looked at her with hope. “There’s one person that Joffrey fears, and it’s Tyrion. If we moved you in the Tower of the Hand, he will hesitate to approach you.”

“The Tower of the Hand?”

“You would still have a kingsguard Cersei or Joffrey chooses to watch you, but we have our own guards at the entrance of the Tower, and Tyrion is working there. Joffrey knows about this. The mere sight of Tyrion’s men on the way to you would refrain him. He might even turn his attention to something else than beating you.”

“Thank you, Margaery, but I am loyal to Joffrey. He is the king. If he decided that I must be punished, then it must be because I deserve this.”

“You don’t mean it.” Sansa’s eyes told her so. “You don’t deserve what Joffrey does to you, Sansa. He only hurts you because he likes it.”

“He is the king. He can do whatever he wants,” Sansa almost whispered.

“It’s true, Joffrey is the king, but even a king must face the consequences of his actions, sooner or later. Joffrey doesn’t know it yet, but someday, someone will make him pay for what he did to you. In fact, he’s already paying for what he did.” Half of the Seven Kingdoms were in open rebellion against him.

Margaery leaned forward to speak more closely to Sansa. “You must remain strong, Sansa. Don’t let Joffrey win. It won’t last forever.”

“I am to marry him.”

“You’re only betrothed.” Margaery couldn’t say more.

“Do you have news from my family?” Sansa asked. She always asked about them when Margaery visited her.

“Only that your brother Robb is marching against us. We’re trying to figure out a peaceful solution, but I won’t lie to you. There will be battles, most likely. I hope no one we care about will die.”

“If Robb bent the knee, do you think Joffrey would send me back?”

“It depends. Maybe, but we cannot be sure of anything.” Margaery wished she could talk to Sansa about her project to marry her to Loras, but she couldn’t reveal it to her yet. She couldn’t reveal it to anybody. “Sansa, you know that I’m not your enemy, don’t you?”
“You warned me about Joffrey. I should have listened.”

“Joffrey is my nephew. I have no choice but to defend him, but that doesn’t mean I approve his decisions or his actions. And I’m really trying to find a way to end this war without one of our families being destroyed. You have my word. I’ll have no rest until the situation is solved.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s the last time you’ll see me for a while.”

Sansa looked both surprise and alarmed. “Why?”

“I must leave King’s Landing. An important matter that must be solved. I won’t be here for some time, probably weeks.”

“What matter?”

“I must see my brother, Loras. You must have met him before. I know he came your father’s tourney.”

“Yes. He gave me a rose.”

Margaery smiled. To the opposite of Sansa, whose cheeks were colored pink, she knew very well why her brother gave a rose to a lady before each tilt in a tourney. “I’ll tell him that you remember the rose he gave you.” Sansa was happy of that. “You’re sure you don’t want to move to the Tower of the Hand? You would be safer there.”

“No, thank you.” Margaery regretted that decision.

“Why?”

Sansa hesitated before she spoke. “This is… this is where I lived when… When my father was alive, he lived there. And this is where his men were slain.”

Margaery nodded. “I understand. Be careful, Sansa.”

She left Sansa after saying that they would see each other again. The rest of the day was spent in verifying the preparations for tomorrow’s departure and attending minor political matters. Margaery sent other ravens in the Reach, telling her father she would arrange things with Loras, but also asking for more crops. She made sure her handmaidens would maintain the charity works and keep visiting orphanages, septs and poorhouses for her. Then she dined with Tyrion. He didn’t go back to work after eating, and instead they spent the whole night together.

She rested her head on his chest while his hand caressed her back. She would miss it, and it was one more reason to deal with Loras and Renly swiftly. She wished she could keep her thoughts about her brother away for the night, but it kept coming back to her no matter how hard she tried to not dwell on it. Unable to keep them for herself, she voiced them.

“I don’t understand why Loras did this.” Tyrion said nothing, but he kept caressing her arm reassuringly. “Loras is not the brightest man in Westeros, but even he knows that by declaring for Renly, he’s going into war against me. That doesn’t make sense.”

Tyrion’s hand stopped to move. “Perhaps he had to choose between you and Renly.”

“No, that doesn’t sound like Loras. He would never join Renly in a war when I’m in the way.”
“I don’t know, but we all know what are your brother’s feelings for Renly Baratheon.”

“Yes, but still. The Loras I know would never do such a thing.” The last time they met though, there was something Loras told her. *You have changed, sister.* He told her right after she said that she loved Tyrion. And then Loras had gone riding to the tourney. It was true, Margaery had changed, but Loras couldn’t have changed that much. They were brother and sister, and they loved each other as brother and sister. They were no Tyrion and Cersei. Loras would never do anything against her.

“I don’t know Loras very well, and I don’t pretend to love him, but… if I had to choose between the woman I love and my family…”

“Yes?” she asked, seeing he didn’t finish his sentence.

He sighed. “If it came to that, I don’t think I could choose House Lannister over you. Your brother and I may be more alike than we thought.”

Chapter End Notes

So, as you can see, things are not going so well for the Lannisters, and they’re not the only family in Westeros with family problems.

Please review

Next chapter : Catelyn
Chapter Notes

This chapter is where many characters make their first appearance in this story. I hope you like their interactions with Catelyn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CATELYN IV

Dragonstone stood tall, a huge black rock in the middle of the sea. Six hundred years ago, it was a volcanic island with only a few villages, and a place where pirates settled and from where they could ambush any ship that came to pass this way. All changed when the Valyrians chose to take possession of the island, and of many more in the Narrow Sea. The Valyrians built a huge castle, shaped it to be fearsome, built the towers so they looked like dragons and placed hundreds of gargoyles upon the walls. Some said they used magic, and as she approached in the boat that brought her to Stannis Baratheon, Catelyn had to acknowledge that whether the Valyrians were wonderful masons, or they did have magical powers.

Dragonstone had been the westernmost outpost of the Valyrian Freehold for two centuries. Catelyn ignored why the Valyrians chose to conquer these islands. Aegon succeeded to conquer the Seven Kingdoms with three dragons, and the Valyrians had many more. She may have understood the decision to take Dragonstone if it was meant to serve as a bridgehead for a future conquest of Westeros, but why did the Valyrians wait for three hundred years? For three centuries after they took possession of the island, the Doom of Valyria came, and the Valyrians and all their civilization were gone in one of the greatest disasters in human history. The cities that were part of the Freehold freed themselves, and all trace of the Valyrians disappeared forever. Except here, on Dragonstone.

Twelve years before the Doom of Valyria, one man, one very specific man, moved all his family and riches to Dragonstone. His name was Aenar Targaryen. His house was the only one to survive the Doom, and for a hundred years, the Targaryens were the Lords of Dragonstone, until his great-great-great-grandson, Aegon, conquered the Seven Kingdoms with his two sisters.

After the Conquest, Dragonstone remained a part of the Targaryen domain, along with the new Crownlands. While the king ruled the Seven Kingdoms from the Iron Throne in King’s Landing, his heir would be the Lord of Dragonstone. The heir to the Iron Throne wouldn’t always live at Dragonstone. The castle and the island weren’t the most hospitable places in the world, and it wasn’t rare that the heir would spend most of his time in King’s Landing, preparing himself to become king, and sometimes plotting to become the king, or at Summerhall before it was destroyed. Still, the heir to the Iron Throne was granted the title of Lord of Dragonstone.

When the Mad King fell under the sword of the Kingslayer, Robert maintained the tradition and named his brother Stannis Baratheon, at the time his heir, Lord of Dragonstone. He never cared to name Joffrey Lord of Dragonstone after his birth. Perhaps he thought he needed someone capable to rule the island and fight pirates, or perhaps he didn’t want to hurt his brother’s feelings. Or perhaps Robert already suspected that Joffrey wasn’t his son.

That wouldn’t surprise Catelyn. The Lannisters might well have killed both Robert and Ned. It wasn’t difficult to dissimulate a murder into a hunting accident. Ned was dead, Arya and Sansa were
kept prisoners in the capital, and her son Robb was marching to war. She had told Ned not to ride south, but he didn’t listen. He never listened when honor called him. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why she had come to love him, like she had loved Brandon before, but honor had been his doom, as much as magic, sorts and ambition had been the doom of the people who built the castle she was about to enter.

They reached the beach, and Ser Jacelyn Waterfall, a knight in service of House Manderly who was among the four oarsmen in the boat, helped her out of it. A small group of men were waiting for her. Catelyn was expecting them to hold the banner of House Baratheon, a black stag upon a yellow field, but instead she saw a red heart, fire running around its shape, upon the yellow field. She approached carefully, her escort remaining at her side. As she neared the group, she noticed the black head of a stag in the heart, with a crown around the neck. Catelyn found this banner quite odd. A stout man with thick arms, bandy legs, and prominent ears, a double chin and a broad nose, welcomed her.

“Lady Catelyn Stark, I am Ser Axell Florent, castellan of Dragonstone. His Grace sent me to welcome you.”

“I thank you, Ser Axell. May the Seven bless you.”

What he said next took her completely unaware. “We do not follow false gods here, my lady. I suggest you never mention them again while you’re here, or anywhere else.”

Catelyn maintained her composure at this insult towards the gods that her mother taught her to worship and that she taught to her own daughters and sons. “I came to see the king. Could you lead me to him?”

“The king is very busy. He will receive you when he says he wants. In the meantime, my men will show you to your chambers.”

The castellan of Dragonstone turned his back on her. Catelyn hid her shock at his hostile behaviour and followed his men. They slowly climbed the stairs leading to the castle. Catelyn shot looks from the corner of the eye to the statues they met on their way. They looked even more terrifying when you were close than from afar, and as they kept approaching the castle, it turned more impressive and terrifying. Magic or not, the Targaryens outdid themselves.

That reminded her of the first time she saw Winterfell. She was eighteen, and never visited the North before. Despite being betrothed to two Starks, she never went to see them at Winterfell. Her betrothal and her wedding took place at Riverrun, and she spent the war in the castle where she grew up. When it was over, her husband came back to his home by the sea, leaving King’s Landing for White Harbor, then riding to Winterfell the rest of the way. Catelyn took a slower path, through the Neck, and she departed later than Ned because of the son she was carrying. She left as soon as Robb was born with a small escort provided by her lord father.

When she arrived at Winterfell, she was afraid, but determined. She didn’t have the chance to know Ned enough back then, but she would do her duty. She found Winterfell impressive, built to stand a siege rather than to raise a family, but though the castle was stark and austere, she didn’t feel threatened by it. That was where she would have lived anyway had she married Brandon. It was something else that scared her when she arrived. It was what she found inside the castle that caused her to fear, and not the castle itself like it was the case for Dragonstone.

Ned had been very kind. He was there to welcome her and took their son into his arms. She even saw a tear of joy run on his cheek. At this moment, Catelyn had been sure that everything would be perfect. It was an hour later, when she was settled in her own rooms, that she learned about the boy
that would haunt her during the rest of her life. Her husband had a son during the war, and he brought him back with him. Jon Snow was already settled with his wetnurse when she just arrived. Discovering that her husband called the boy after the man he considered like a second father didn’t make her feel better.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Ned told her. “I know what I’ve done is wrong, and I’m ashamed of it, but it is done. The boy has my blood, and I must take care of him.”

“I understand, and I don’t deny him the right to live,” she replied with a quivering voice. “But is it necessary that he lives here?”

“He is under my responsibility. I must make sure that nothing happens to him.”

“I know, but if he lives here, people will know that he is your son. Wouldn’t it be better to entrust him to a nice family and make sure he lives well with them, instead of giving reasons to your bannermen to speak behind your back?” she had tried.

“Everyone in Winterfell already knows that he is my son, and I won’t hide the truth only so that other people can look at me like a better man than I am.”

“But…”

“I’m sorry, my lady. I know you don’t like it, but Jon is going to live with us, and he will stay at Winterfell until he becomes a man and follows his own path into the world. That’s my decision.”

That was the one thing she could never have from her husband. She could never have the boy sent away. Now he was a man, and he rode to war next to Robb. Her son was still a boy only a few months ago, and now he led an army to battle. She was afraid that he may die, afraid that he may not be ready. If Robb died in this war, who would the Lords of the North follow then? Her son Bran, a sweet boy of ten, crippled, far away at Winterfell? Or the bastard, who now had the chance to prove his worth on the battlefield and who looked more like Ned than any of her children? For a short moment, Catelyn wished the bastard would die in the war.

They arrived to her chambers. There was a comfortable bed, a Myrish glass, a chamber pot, a window, and everything she needed.

“We will assign you a maid, my lady,” one of the men who accompanied her said. “If you have need of anything, just ask her.”

“Thank you, good ser,” she said.

She was left alone and decided to rest in her bed. She wasn’t sure for how long she drowsed, but after what only looked like a few minutes, someone banged at her door. Ser Axell Florent entered after she gave him leave, and he announced that Queen Selyse demanded to speak with her. Catelyn was relieved. Talking with the queen first could be good for her upcoming discussions with Stannis.

Ser Axell stopped before a door and went in. A moment later, he came out.

“The queen is ready to receive you.”

She walked in. Selyse Florent sat on a chair near the fireplace. Catelyn had never met her. The queen gauged her the instant she entered. She didn’t smile, and she didn’t welcome her. She displayed no sign that she enjoyed her presence.

“Lady Stark. Sit.”
That was all Catelyn received. She did as she was instructed. After all, this woman was the queen, and although Catelyn expected a warmer welcome, she could forgive her, considering the current situation. It couldn’t be easy to find yourself in the midst of a war at the moment when you expected it the less, a war where victory wasn’t sure, and when you just discovered that your nephews and nieces were in fact born of an incest between the wife of your brother-in-law and her brother. Catelyn didn’t want to imagine how she would feel if she discovered tomorrow that she was the queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Selyse looked at her thoroughly once she was seated. Catelyn wasn’t comfortable as she felt she was being examined under every side. “I didn’t expect you, Lady Stark. I thought your son would come himself and swear fealty to our king.”

“My son is leading our men through the Neck. He is preparing an attack on King’s Landing.”

“Does he intend to take the city before Stannis does?”

Catelyn was shocked by the blunt question. “My son is waging war against Joffrey.”

“That doesn’t answer the question. Does Robb Stark intend to take the city without the king?”

“He only wishes to help Stannis to take the Iron Throne.”

“Then in this case, I hope he will not attack the city without his Grace. Stannis is the king. He is the one who must take the Iron Throne, not your son.”

Catelyn couldn’t believe it. The queen just insinuated that Robb was trying to seize the Iron Throne for himself. “My son is fighting for Stannis. He is loyal to him.”

“Then why didn’t he come here to pledge fealty?”

“My son is busy…”

“Busy? Is he busy with more important matters than acknowledging the rightful king? Does he consider that our king is not more important than anything else? He didn’t even tell the king that he would swear fealty to him.”

“Robb is fighting for Stannis.”

“Is he? Or does he only pretend to stab him in the back at the first occasion?”

That was way worse than everything Catelyn expected. She refrained herself from insulting the queen. She showed her no respect since she arrived, offered no sympathy for her husband’s death, and now she accused her son of treason? Her son was risking his life as they spoke for Stannis. Before Catelyn could think of something to reply, like saying the queen had no right to accuse her when she had no son going into battle, a melodious voice came from behind.

“It doesn’t matter for now, your Grace.” Catelyn turned to look at its owner. There was another fire in this room, one she didn’t notice, and standing next to it was a tall woman with red hair and a very pale skin. Catelyn gave her about forty years. She had a heart-shaped face, a smooth skin, and wore a red gown that left visible a portion of her breasts.

She was staring at the fire when Catelyn took a look at her, but she turned her eyes towards her as soon as Catelyn’s eyes settled on her. She calmly returned the stare and walked until she was next to the queen.
“The Starks will be useful. As long as they don’t betray the king, there is no reason to doubt them.” The woman kept staring at Catelyn.

“Of course, my lady.” Catelyn found it odd for the queen to accept the advice of this woman so quickly. From her accent, Catelyn suspected she came from the other continent. “I only hope for you that your son will show a complete and utter loyalty to our king.”

“He will,” Catelyn assured her.

“Still, even if we could forgive Robb Stark for not showing up to pledge fealty, why should we forgive your father, Lord Tully?”

“My father is very sick. He’s been taken to bed a long time ago. He doesn’t leave it anymore.”

“What about your brother, Ser Edmure? Does he have the same excuse?” Catelyn perceived the sound of a struggle from the other side of the door. “I suppose we can’t trust him either. How can we trust people who follow false gods?”

Catelyn was about to shout *False gods!* when the door opened. A man with a round head with grizzled beard and side whiskers walked in, his expression grave.

“What are you doing here?” the queen asked with hostility.

“The king sent me, your Grace,” the man replied with a sharp voice. Catelyn witnessed how this closed the queen’s mouth. The other woman showed no reaction. “Lady Stark, the king is granting you an audience. He wishes to speak with you at once.”

Catelyn would have signed in relief, but she kept it for herself. As inappropriate the behaviour of the queen was, she was still the queen. “Your Grace.” Catelyn took her leave with a courtesy and followed the servant.

As soon as they were far from the queen’s apartments, the man spoke. “I hope the queen wasn’t too harsh on you.”

“She was very kind to welcome me,” she replied neutrally.

The servant scoffed. “The queen seldom does something out of kindness. And she seldom behaves kindly. Did she talk of religion matters with you?”

“She brought up the topic.”

“I suggest you avoid the matter as much as possible, m’lady. The queen is prone to judge those who don’t share her faith.”

“I follow the Seven,” she replied.

“All the more reason. The queen follows the Lord of Light.”

Catelyn frowned. “The Lord of Light?”

“A religion that is very popular in Essos. I met some of her kind in the past. The queen decided to embrace this faith not long ago. She had a Red Priestess from Asshai come to Dragonstone. That’s the woman you saw with her.”

The Red Priests. Catelyn heard about them. There was one in King’s Landing, Moros or Boros of Myr. Ned told her he participated to the siege of Pyke, and that he could wield a flaming sword,
though Ned himself told her it was only a trick, and that he had to change his sword regularly. This Moros was sent to convert Robert Baratheon to this foreign religion, or so some people said. Catelyn didn’t expect that Stannis’ wife would turn to a god from another land. It explained this declaration about false gods she made right before Catelyn was called to the king.

“I’m sure her Grace had her reasons to embrace a new faith.”

The servant grumbled. “I’m sure of that, but I wish that half of Dragonstone hadn’t joined her and now saw the king as the Lord’s Chosen One. Even my son and my wife embraced this new faith.”

“What about you?”

“I’ve never been a godly man, m’lady, but I recognize that the Red Woman has powers.”

“The Red Woman?”

“The Red Priestess. That’s how I call her, and how many people here call her. Many don’t trust her. I advise you to avoid her as well. She is dangerous. People like Ser Axell Florent follow her orders as much as they follow the king’s orders if not more. That’s why the king didn’t grant you an audience as soon as you arrived. Ser Axell didn’t tell him that you were here.”

“The king was unaware of my coming?”

“He knew you were coming, but not when. He just learned that you were here from someone else, and he sent me to fetch you as soon as he heard about it.”

Catelyn was surprised. The castellan of Dragonstone didn’t inform the king of her arrival. This meant that Stannis was probably better disposed towards her than she thought. On the other side, she didn’t like the fact that Stannis’s household shared their loyalty to him with someone else.

They penetrated a room with a carved table. Catelyn recognized it immediately for the Chamber of the Painted Table. It was in this place that Aegon organized the conquest of the Seven Kingdoms three hundred years ago. The map he had carved showed every stronghold, every city of Westeros, at the exception of King’s Landing, which wasn’t built when the table was made.

Stannis Baratheon stood where the capital of the Seven Kingdoms should have been, observing the large map. Catelyn had the distinct impression that he was looking at every little detail of the kingdoms. He didn’t grant a look at them when they entered, but that didn’t stop him from realizing someone was present.

“Thank you, Ser Davos. You can leave us.”

Catelyn stared with open eyes at the knight as he bowed and left the room. She thought he was a servant, but no, he was a knight. Everything about him, his clothes, the way he spoke and held himself, told her he was lowborn, merely a messenger, a servant the king sent to bring her here. She would have to apologize to him.

“Lady Stark.” Stannis Baratheon now looked up from the map.

“Your Grace.” She made a courtesy.

“I should have granted you an audience sooner. I suppose Ser Davos already explained to you what happened.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”
“I already admonished Ser Axell about it. If he wasn’t my wife’s uncle, I would have sent him back to Brightwater a long time ago. But my wife insists that he stays, and I would rather have him as castellan than a general or an advisor.”

“I’m sure he did what he thought was right. He told me you were busy.”

“Yes, I was busy, and I’m always busy. If he had some common sense, he would know that receiving you was more important than anything else I was doing.”

He wasn’t different from the last time they met. Stannis Baratheon had always gone straight to the point, was more prone to action than discussion, and he spoke bluntly to everyone, even his brother the king. Catelyn remembered Ned telling her that when Lord Renly was given Storm’s End, Stannis said that Renly was good at dressing himself in fine clothes, and at being comely, but nothing more.

“Lady Stark, please accept my condolences for your husband’s death.” He said it bluntly, but less harsh than when he spoke about his uncle-in-law.

“Thank you, your Grace.”

“He was an honorable man, and brave. We fought together at Pyke. We defeated Balon Greyjoy and brought an end to his rebellion. We could have put an end to the Iron Islands’ constant threat had Robert not spared Balon when he was in chains and at his mercy. I regret his death.”

“Me too, your Grace.”

“But your husband was a fool.” He said it in an almost cool voice. “He shouldn’t have accepted to be Hand of the King. It should have been me. And he shouldn’t have tried to arrest Joffrey. He had no chance to succeed.” The king seized a long piece of parchment on the table and gave it to her.

“That’s the letter he sent to me. Robert was likely still alive when it was written.”

To Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone,

I made a disturbing discovery recently. I found out that the queen’s children, the princes Joffrey and Tommen, and the princess Myrcella, are all born from an incest between the queen and her brother, Ser Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer. You deserve to know that you are now the lawful heir to the Iron Throne, my lord.

You must know that I will try to stop a war from happening. I have reasons to believe that the Lannisters themselves are not aware of this. I wrote to Lady Margaery Lannister so she could intercede about it with her husband. I’m going to offer Cersei Lannister to leave the capital with as many men as she can and with her children and her brother, and I will try to convince the king to let them escape and live in exile in the Free Cities. I think that if we can ensure that nothing will happen to them, Casterly Rock will accept their exile. Ser Jaime could also join the Night’s Watch and the queen become a septa or a Silent Sister, and the same could be done for her children.

I think it is possible to prevent a war, but in case things don’t go as planned, you should know about all this. I ask you to help me and to come back to King’s Landing to make sure that war is avoided at all costs. I need your help.

Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North

“Ned Stark should have left the capital immediately and raised his banners, instead of attempting for a peaceful solution. There are no peaceful solutions with the Lannisters. They are used to getting what they want. My brother knelt before them more than they did. And now a monster born from incest is sitting on the Iron Throne, occupying the place that is mine by right.”
Catelyn read the message more than once. These were the last words her husband ever wrote.

“I wish your husband was more clever, my lady. He died for me.”

“He knew the Iron Throne belongs to you,” she replied, her throat tight because of the emotion.

“I hope your son thinks the same.”

“He does.” Catelyn tried to recompose herself, still holding her husband’s last words in her hands. “He’s ready to support your claim to the Iron Throne.”

“I’m glad to hear it, though not very surprised. I expected Eddard Stark to raise his children so they would have the same honor he had.”

“I’m sorry he couldn’t come himself, but…”

“You son is leading an army. He would a poor commander if he considered licking his king’s boots more important than fighting for him. Your father, Lord Tully, also declared for me, I suppose.” She nodded. “However, I heard no word from your sister, Lady Arryn, and no army was raised in the Vale.”

Catelyn looked at the painted table. Just like Stannis said, there were no armies to be seen in the Vale, and no army with the eagle sigil over the continent. “We had no news from her either,” she told the king.

“And I had no news from Dorne either. Not that it surprises me. The Martells hate us for what happened to their princess, even though it was Tywin Lannister’s fault. Everyone knows it, but no one dares to talk about it. I could say I expected a better support from House Arryn, but that would be a lie.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jon Arryn was always an honorable man. He would have supported me if the Lannisters didn’t kill him, but I’m not surprised that his wife turns her back on me.”

“Lysa would never do that.”

“Really? When was the last time you saw your sister, Lady Stark?”

“Five years ago.”

“Since the last time you saw her, your sister has gone mad.”

Catelyn couldn’t reply to this. It was the second time that someone told her that Lysa was mad, and now it wasn’t a bastard who told her that, but the king.

“Her husband wanted to foster his son and heir to me, but she would hear nothing of it. Robin Arryn was a sickly child, and I would have done my best to make him a man. But no, your sister cried, screamed, and said that no one would get her child away from her. She didn’t allow anyone to approach him. I pity Jon Arryn for being married to this woman. He didn’t deserve it, but he did his duty, like we all do. Too bad Lady Arryn doesn’t feel the need to fulfill her obligations like her husband did. And if her son is left into her care, I doubt the Vale will have a Lord of the Eyrie worthy of the name before long.”

Catelyn was shocked by what she heard. She didn’t expect this at all from her sister. Was it possible
that the bastard was right about Lysa after all?

“Your Grace, I cannot explain my sister’s actions, but I want you to realize that she was widowed very recently, and she’s now alone to raise the future Lord of the Vale.”

“If you ask me, Lady Stark, she wasn’t very sad at her husband’s death. She didn’t even go to see him while he was sick. She was almost dragged to the funerals. Robert had more love for Jon Arryn than his wife ever had.” Stannis Baratheon turned to look at the painted table. “Your son is heading south along the Kingsroad, while Lord Tully’s armies remain at Riverrun. In the meantime, the Lannisters have an army stationed at the Golden Tooth while another one is progressing north along the Kingsroad. They’re probably entering the Riverlands as we speak. What are you planning to do?”

Catelyn realized he was asking her what were her son and her father’s plans for the war. “When I left, my son was planning to lead his armies south to King’s Landing. He plans to unite his forces with my father’s men, defeat the Lannisters on the Kingsroad, then march on the capital and take the city before the Tyrells can arrive with reinforcements.”

Stannis looked thoughtful for a moment. “A bold plan.”

“We were hoping that you could join us and attack by the sea while we attacked by land.”

“A bold plan, like I said, but this is not the one we will follow. I will write to Robb Stark and Hoster Tully and tell them to keep the Lannisters busy in the Riverlands.”

“Your Grace?”

“They are not to attack King’s Landing. All they must do is to keep the Lannister forces far from it. I will take the city myself, once I have dealt with my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“It seems you’re not aware of the latest news, my lady. Renly raised his banners against me. He proclaimed himself king.”

That was a blow to Catelyn. “That can’t be.”

“It can, because he did it. I will sail to Storm’s End and take back my bannermen. Once it is done, I will take King’s Landing.”

“Your Grace, the Tyrells will have time to send reinforcements to the capital before you can attack it.”

“They won’t. Ser Loras Tyrell chose Renly as his king.”

Another surprised. “Ser Loras?”

“The heir to Highgarden. Because of that, Mace Tyrell made no move so far. He doesn’t want to fight one of his children, and he doesn’t want to fight for his rightful king. Some lords of the Reach will side with Renly, but not all of them. The Lannisters are alone to defend Joffrey.”

“That means we can take the city.”

“First, I will take back Storm’s End. My brother is trying to take what is mine, and I will not suffer.”

The king’s eyes were hard, unflinching. “Your Grace, may I ask what you’re planning to do?”
“Justice, my lady. If Renly proclaims himself king, then he is my enemy, and he is guilty of treason. I think you know very well what is the punishment for treason. Your husband experienced it firsthand.”

Fear caught her. He was going to kill Renly, his own brother. “Your Grace…”

“That is my decision, my lady. I will send instructions to Lord Stark and Lord Tully as to what they have to do, and I will come to their help once the Stormlands and the Iron Throne are mine. I’m leaving with my fleet for Storm’s End tomorrow. You are free to stay here or to leave. If you stay, I will make sure you are treated as an honored guest.”

No, she couldn’t allow this. She couldn’t allow Stannis and Renly to fight each other. They needed them to free Sansa and Arya. “Could I come with you?” she asked.

“This will be a battlefield, my lady. This is no place for you.”

“My son sent me to be his ambassador before you.”

“I know, but you’ve done what was expected from you, Lady Stark. I can give Robb Stark my instructions by raven.”

“I could help you with Renly.”

“Really?” He didn’t seem convinced.

“Are you going to kill your brother?” she bluntly asked. He took some time before he answered.

“I hope it won’t come to that, but if he leaves me no choice, I will.”

“Let me come. Let me show him that the North and the Riverlands stand by your side. That could convince him to abandon his foolish project of being king.”

He looked straight at her for a moment, then nodded. “All right. You may come. I’ll have arrangements made so you can travel with us.”

“Thank you, your Grace.”

She took her leave. Things had gone better than with the queen, though not as well as she hoped. They would have to wait before they could free Sansa and Arya. And if they were to keep the Lannisters occupied, then it meant they would have to let them inside the Riverlands, where they would plunder and destroy her father’s lands.

Ser Davos was waiting for her outside. “M’lady, may I escort you back to your chambers?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you, ser.”

“I hope things went well with his Grace,” he stated as they walked.

“He was very courteous, given the circumstances.”

The knight nodded. “I’m sorry for your lord husband, m’lady. I should have told you that when we first met.”

“Thank you, good ser. I must apologize as well. I thought you were a servant when I saw you.”
Ser Davos chuckled. “That doesn’t surprise me. Many people do. I don’t have the manners of a knight. I was born in Flea Bottom. I lived below the Street of Flour. My house was flooded every month. Most people here keep seeing me like an up-jumped smuggler.”

“Smuggler?”

“Aye, my lady. I’m not proud of it, but I was a smuggler for twenty years.”

“Are you the man who saved Stannis during the siege of Storm’s End?” she asked, her curiosity awakened.

“Aye, m’lady. My small shipment of onions and dried fish saved Stannis and his army while the Tyrells besieged them, and he rewarded me with a knighthood, and a small keep along with a forest where to hunt for my family.”

“It was very kind of him.”

“He owed me his life. The Lannisters are no the only ones to pay their debts. Stannis does as well. And he makes sure the others pay their debts as well. For him, when someone says he will do something, he expects that he does it, whether it be him or the tanner of Flea Bottom.”

A Lannister always pays his debts. The words sent a chill down her spine. “Ser Davos, you probably know the king is sailing for Storm’s End tomorrow.”

“I know it, my lady. A sad thing. It’s difficult to see your own brother turn on you.”

“Do you think… that the king will kill Lord Renly?”

Ser Davos puffed some air. He seemed tired. “I hope he will not.”

“I’m afraid he might.”

“You’re not the only one, my lady. I fear it too.”

“He cannot kill his own brother.”

“Never say that in his presence, m’lady. Stannis is the king. He can do whatever he wants, and that’s not an opinion, it’s a fact.”

“But Renly is his brother.”

“He is, but he also proclaimed himself king, m’lady, when the Iron Throne rightfully belongs to his brother. That makes him a traitor. Stannis will be in his right to execute Lord Renly. Don’t take me wrong, my lady, he won’t take any joy from it. Renly and Stannis don’t like each other very much, but they’re still brothers, and family means a lot for the king. But he will do what is necessary to take his rightful place on the Iron Throne.”

“And if Lord Renly decided to bend the knee when he meets his brother?” she asked.

“I would like if it happened, my lady. I hope he will.”

“Stannis will spare him then. Shouldn’t he?”

The knight sighed. “I hope he will, my lady, but Stannis is the king. That is his decision to take, and although we might not agree with him, it’s not to us to decide in his stead.”
Ser Davos seemed sad as he talked. Catelyn saw that there was no point in continuing this conversation. This man was loyal to Stannis, and so was Ned. “You said you have a family, Ser Davos?”

“Aye. My son, Matthos, is here, with me. My wife Marya remained at our home in the Stormlands.”

“I hope she’s not in danger.”

“I doubt it. That’s not Lord Renly’s style to harm women, and anyway, who will give any attention to the Onion Knight? If Renly wanted to reach Stannis, he would attack the Florents, or another powerful family who sided with him. My house almost has nothing. We don’t even have men to raise on my lands. She is no threat for anybody.”

“She must worry about you and your son all the same.”

“Aye, she does.” He looked at her. “You’re worried about your children as well?”

“Yes. My son is leading an army to war, and yet I have the impression that yesterday he was still that little baby I held in my arms.”

The knight slowly nodded. “I’m sure everything will be all right, my lady. Stannis will take back the Iron Throne, and he will make sure that justice is given for your husband’s death, and that your daughters are free. You’ll see them again.”

“Onion Knight.”

The voice of a child came from behind, and Catelyn turned to see a little girl running in their direction. She was younger than Arya, no more than eight. The left side of her face was disfigured, with grey plates covering the cheek, the temple and a part of the forehead. She was holding something that looked like a small boat in her hands.

“Oh, princess. How are you today?” Ser Davos asked after he bowed.

“You can call me Shireen, you know. You called me that way before. And you never bowed before me.”

The man between two ages chuckled. “True, but now you are a princess, and your father the king wants everyone to show you the respect you deserve.”

“You can call me Shireen. We are friends. I won’t tell Father.”

“All right. If you say so, princess. Oh, sorry.” She made a face as if she was angry at him, but it was obvious that it wasn’t the case. “Shireen, this is Lady Catelyn Stark. Lady Stark, this is the Princess Shireen of House Baratheon.”

The girl smiled at her, and Catelyn returned it. “You are Lord Eddard Stark’s wife? I read about how he won the Battle of the Bells during the war, and how he led the siege of Pyke.” Her expression became less joyful when Catelyn’s face turned darker. “I’m sorry, my lady.”

Catelyn forced herself to smile. “It’s alright, princess.”

The princess turned her eyes to Ser Davos. “I heard you’re going to Storm’s End.”

“I see news travel fast, princess. Sorry, Shireen,” the knight added at the end before her scowl.

“Can I come?”
“I’m afraid a battlefield is no place for a princess. But I will bring you a present when I come back.”

“You promise?”

“I do. Your father wouldn’t like it that I don’t respect a promise made to his daughter.”

“We’ll see each other soon, then. Thank you for the ship, again. My lady.”

She left, all smile. She reminded Catelyn of Arya at the same age.

“A very sweet child,” Davos said with a smile as they moved again.

“Yes, she is. On her cheek, was it…”?

“Greyscale, aye, my lady. She was infected when she was still a baby, Lord Stannis, back then, just had her. He had his first son before, dead after a few days. A Dornish trader came, and offered a wooden doll, with a dress in the colors of House Baratheon. But it was infected. Shireen pressed it on her cheek, and the disease started. Everyone said she would die. They all told Lord Stannis to send her to the ruins of Valyria before the sickness spread to the castle. Even I would have advised him to do so, if he had asked me. But the king refused. He told all his men, all his bannermen, all his advisors, even the queen to go to hell. He called in every maester on this side of the world. Every healer. Every apothecary. They stopped the disease and saved her life. He said she didn’t belong across the world with the bloody Stone Men. He said she was the Lady Shireen of House Baratheon, and that she was his daughter.”

They had arrived. Ser Davos bowed and was about to leave when Catelyn stopped him. “Ser Davos. Stannis must not kill his brother, or he will never forgive himself.”

“I know, my lady.”

“If he listens to you, if he gives any value to your words, then try to talk him out of it.”

The knight pursed his lips. “I am but a man, my lady. I doubt a king will listen to the Onion Knight. Especially this king. When Stannis takes a decision, he doesn’t change his mind. If you believe in gods more than I do, then the only advice I can give you is to pray.”

Catelyn was alone. She thought about everything Ser Davos Seaworth just told her about the new king. His wife herself told him to send their daughter away. She was ready to let her daughter, her only child, die. Catelyn didn’t know what she would have done in their stead. If one of her babies had been infected with greyscale, if it threatened the lives of her other children, would she be ready to endanger all of them in the hope to save one? As she entered her room, she wondered if the king, despite his hardness, loved his daughter more than she loved her own children.

When she closed the door behind her, she discovered with great surprise that the Red Woman, like Ser Davos called her, was standing before the fireplace, her back turned on her.

“What are you doing here?” Catelyn asked, not without anger to see a stranger intrude her space.

“Looking into the flames. They tell me much,” she replied, as if Catelyn asked her a question about the weather.

“I ask you to leave this room immediately.”

“I will leave, Lady Stark, but before there are certain things I must tell you.”
“We have nothing to talk about.”

“We do.” The Red Priestess looked at her for the first time. “I’m sorry for your husband. He gave his life for the king. It was very brave. The people who killed him will die, don’t worry.”

“That won’t bring him back.”

“No, indeed. But you might find some solace in knowing that doing so, your husband may have participated to events that will save millions of lives.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s a war coming.”

“We already are at war.”

“This war means nothing. There is another war that will happen, and Stannis must rule the Seven Kingdoms when it comes to us, if Westeros is to survive. Your son would be better to know where his true loyalties lie.”

Catelyn stared at the woman. “My son is loyal to Stannis.”

“For now. Be careful, Lady Stark. I don’t know what your family’s role in the great war yet to come will be, but I can feel it will be important, for this war will lie in the north. Far in the north.”

The Red Woman walked past her to the door. Before she opened it, she said, “You have great challenges ahead you. You will lose two children in this war. I’m sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

Tyrion deals with the political situation in King’s Landing, alone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION XII

According to Littlefinger’s report, the price of bread increased of twenty per cent, the price of a chicken by fifty per cent, and the price of fishes by thirty per cent. Since the war started, the City Watch counted a little more than twenty thousand refugees who came to King’s Landing. That represented an increase of the population by about five per cent.

The numbers could be worse. If Lord Tyrell had closed the Rose Road and the Riverlands were devastated by their armies, the prices could have doubled or tripled, maybe more, and the number of refugees might have been five times higher. However, that wasn’t the case. Despite the fact he wouldn’t engage his forces by their side, Mace Tyrell kept the Rose Road open and sent more food stocks since the Riverlands were no longer available as a source to fill the capital’s granaries. Tyrion also opened the Kingswood for people to hunt in it, and he had several small boats built so more people could fish into Blackwater Bay. However, all these measures couldn’t entirely compensate the loss of food imports from the Riverlands due to the Tully rebellion, and the additional loss from the Crownlands caused by a partial desertion of lands by the peasants.

Cersei wanted to close the gates to the peasants who fled the war, but Tyrion had a better idea. He made a decree, that Joffrey signed without question because the matter bored him, stating that every peasant who would abandon his field would be deprived of any ownership he had on it. As a complement, the decree stipulated that citizens of King’s Landing could apply to occupy the abandoned fields. As a result, the loss of food production was lessened and the inflow of refugees was partially compensated by an outflow of the city’s inhabitants who went to cultivate the land. The population of King’s Landing wasn’t afraid of the coming war or aware of its dangers like the peasants, and the experience of recent increases in prices was an incentive to leave the capital for lands where you could grow your own crops.

Ser Jacelyn Bywater said the troubles in the capital had diminished, though not entirely. They had to carefully watch the newcomers, who were a constant threat for new riots. With the increases of prices, refugees without homes, Margaery’s departure and the recent atrocities ordered by Cersei with Robert’s bastards, they had all the ingredients for a civil uprising. However, these elements were weak for now, and they managed to control it. The city was at peace, they managed to control factors that could lead to riots if they couldn’t neutralize them.

He wished that Margaery was there. It was three days since she left, and he already missed her. She was better with the crowd and the people than he was. Tyrion had no illusion. He was a dwarf. When he travelled through the streets of Lannisport and the roads of the Westerlands with his wife, it was Margaery the people cheered for, and whatever love they felt for him was only due to the love the people bore to his lady wife. The people loved the ladies who fed them and smiled at them, the handsome knights and great warriors, and the sweet children of their lords and kings. They loved Margaery, the Roberts Baratheons and the Tommens and Myrcellas of this world, but not the Imp
who spent his days reading. He could hope for respect, but not for love. That left him with a bitter
taste. Still, respect was better than hatred or disgust. He could live with it, as long as he had
Margaery’s love. That was enough for him.

Tyrion read another report about the crown’s finances. The debts were now approaching six and a
half million golden dragons. Tyrion wished he could reduce spending from the Crown, but it was
difficult to control expenses in times of war. So instead he had to increase the debts his nephew
owned to Casterly Rock. He also wrote to his father-in-law, asking him to borrow more money from
Highgarden. The way they were going, he feared he might have to do like his father at the beginning
of Aerys’s reign, and to repay the crown’s debts with the gold of the Rock. He didn’t rejoice at the
idea of paying for Robert’s follies and Joffrey’s cruelty.

According to a report from Varys, the Red Priestess from Asshai who was on Dragonstone with
Stannis Baratheon was indeed more than an advisor. One of his little birds confirmed they shared the
same bed at least once. It seemed that Tyrion didn’t have to use rumors after all. He only had to use
the truth to destroy Stannis Baratheon and weaken his supports. Varys also warned that the Florents
declared for Renly Baratheon, and that a few houses in the Reach were thinking about doing the
same. However, most remained neutral so far. Tyrion expected other houses to follow the Florents.
They were too powerful for their defection to not be followed by anybody. You finally got what you
wanted, Cersei. The Florents rebelled against the Tyrells. The only problem is that they rebelled
against you son as well.

Just when he was thinking about that, the door of his office opened and his dear sister walked in like
a fury. Tyrion supposed Ty couldn’t keep her outside, and he couldn’t blame him for that.

“You monster. Myrcella is my only daughter. Do you really think I’ll let you sell her like a common
whore?”

Why would you think so? No one is paying us for her. In fact, it would be quite the opposite, since it
is commonly the bride’s family who pays something to the groom’s family.

Tyrion nonetheless noticed that his sister’s voice wasn’t only filled with anger, but also with despair.
He knew how Cersei loved her children, so he tried to remain civil in front of her assault.

“Myrcella’s a princess. Some would say she was born for this.”

“I will not let you ship her off to Dorne as I was shipped off to Robert Baratheon.” Tyrion allowed a
very thin smile to come to his lips. The snake had come out of the bushes, and it seemed it was a
very old snake.

“Dorne is the safest place for her.”

“Are you mad? The Martells loathe us.”

“That’s why we need to seduce them. We’re going to need their support in the war your son started,
even more so now that the Reach is uncertain.”

“She’ll be a hostage.”

“A guest,” Tyrion corrected.

“You won’t get away with this. You think you are safe with your titles and your armies? Ned Stark
had titles and an army too.” Yes, but he didn’t know you as well as I do. He didn’t expect you to stab
him in the back. I do. I know you will try.
“Do you have a better idea to gain allies, sister? Even Father knew that the Lannisters needed allies.”

“Look where is now.”

“And your son will end at the same place if he doesn’t make any compromise. And his sister, his brother, and his mother as well.”

“You would have us make compromises with our enemies?”

“The Martells are no enemies. They never did anything against us. And Doran Martell has all the reasons in the world to accept my offer.”

“Yes, because it will give him the possibility to avenge his sister. He will take Myrcella’s life in payment for Elia’s life.”

“Martell is too honorable to murder a little girl, particularly one as sweet and innocent as Myrcella. As long as he keeps her, he can expect we will respect our part of the bargain. The terms I offered him are too rich to refuse. I also offered him his sister’s killer, a council seat, some castles in the southern region of Storm’s End…”

“Too much. You’ve offered too much, and without my authority or consent.”

“Then go to Joffrey and ask him to cancel the deal. The Martells will be so offended that they are likely to rally Renly. But I don’t expect Joffrey to listen to you. He never listens to anybody, and we both know he doesn’t care for Myrcella. The only person Joffrey cares about is Joffrey.”

Cersei looked taken aback. “I care about Myrcella. I am Joffrey’s regent, not you, and I say that Myrcella will not be shipped off to this Dornish.”

“Trystane Martell is only two years older than her, and I hear he is a very decent man, and quite handsome. I think Myrcella will like him.”

“You’re really an utter fool. Myrcella will not go. I will not allow it.”

Cersei was staring at him with all the hatred of the world. Tyrion was tired of it. He was trying to protect his niece, just like she did, but unlike Cersei, he knew the safest place for Myrcella wasn’t behind her mother’s skirts. Tyrion slowly stood up and walked to the door. When he arrived near the handle, he turned to his sister, and spoke on a tone that left no place to discussion.

“It’s done, Cersei. Myrcella is leaving.”

“No.”

“You cannot stop it.”

“No!” She slammed the flagon of wine that was on his desk on the floor. She began to cry. Tyrion tried to seize his chance and to make her understand.

“Just how safe do you think Myrcella is if this city falls? Do you want to see her raped, butchered like the Targaryen children? Make no mistake. They’ll mount her pretty little head on a spike right beside yours.”

“Get out! Get out!”

She snatched another flagon of wine and threw it at him. Tyrion managed to duck, but it was close. “Guards!” The doors opened and two of Tyrion’s men came in. “See the queen to her chambers. She
needs rest.”

Surprisingly, Cersei didn’t resist the two guards who escorted her outside. As she left, Tyrion decided to tell her one last thing. “For once, Cersei, think about Myrcella’s interest, not yours.”

The doors closed. Tyrion sighed and went back to his desk. Perhaps he had been too hard on Cersei. Myrcella was her daughter, after all. He knew there were risks, but Doran Martell was known to be a man who thought before he did anything. He had much more interest to keep Myrcella alive as a guest to House Martell than to kill her, especially with all the promises Tyrion made. Only the head of Ser Gregor Clegane should be enough. Why kill an innocent child when you could have the man who raped and murdered your sister after he butchered your nephew and niece?

Tyrion didn’t know all the details of what happened on this fateful day, but it was known to be a certainty that Clegane killed Elia Martell and her children. Did he do this on his father’s orders? Tyrion couldn’t be sure, but he knew what his lord father had been capable of. He had no difficulty picturing him ordering Clegane to kill the princess and her children. He didn’t hesitate when it came to the Reynes and the Tarbecks, or to Tysha, and he was ready to let his king die at Duskendale. However, what gain could his father obtain by killing Elia and her children? Of course, Rhaenys and Aegon were threats for any child Cersei might have with Robert. Tyrion was quite sure that his father already thought at this moment of marrying Cersei to the new king. He plotted this for a very long time and wanted Rhaegar to marry Cersei when he was Hand of the King. However, why would he order Clegane to kill the children when Robert Baratheon was very likely to do it himself? As for Elia, what gain could he obtain from her death? Looking at this, Tyrion couldn’t understand why his father would give such an order. The children were condemned anyway. Why kill them when someone else would do it anyway? And why kill a woman who was no threat once her husband the heir and her children were dead? They could have sent her back to Sunspear alive, and she would have remained there for the rest of her life, grieving and mourning, but alive. If Tyrion had been there, he would have ordered his men to bring the princess Elia to him, alive, so they could claim they kept her safe during the battle. They would have the gratitude of her brother, and Robert all the blame for killing her children. Doran Martell would understand the Lannisters couldn’t by themselves stop Rhaenys’s and Aegon’s death. The moment it was decided the Targaryens would no longer rule, their fate was decided. Gregor Clegane’s actions made them take the blame for the death of three innocent people. Robert was the one who wanted to be king. Let him pay the price for it. Instead, Robert was the great and honorable warrior who fought for his lost love, and the Lannisters were the monsters who killed women and children. This affair had been all to their disadvantage. Whether Tyrion’s father wasn’t as clever as Tyrion thought, or Gregor Clegane acted without orders. Well, it was time for the Mountain to pay the price, and the fact that he was among those who Cersei tried to turn against Tyrion was only one more reason to deal with him. As soon as Tyrion had Prince Doran’s answer, he would make sure Ser Gregor Clegane was dead the next time he saw him.

Tyrion called Ty and told him to bring him Vylarr with three of his best men. The commander of the red cloaks arrived with the said three men a few minutes later.

“What are your orders, my lord?” Vylarr asked.

“We have work to do. Follow me.”

They did. It was already night. They wandered through the Red Keep until they arrived to a chamber beneath the rookery. “We arrest the man in this room. Is that understood?” he said to his men.

They nodded. Tyrion showed them the door with his hand, and they wasted no time. They obeyed him, not Cersei, and certainly not her allies.

The door burst open under the actions of Vylarr’s men, to reveal the Grand Maester in bed with a
pretty young woman. Unlike the old man, she wore no clothes. This was no surprise. Everyone knew the Grand Maester didn’t respect his vows.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked. No one answered him, but the red cloaks seized him and brought him out of his bed. “No, please, please.”

“Leave the girl alone,” Tyrion ordered his men. She had gone out of the bed as soon as the soldiers entered. “You disappoint me, Grand Maester.”

“I am your loyal servant,” he protested, bowing.

“So loyal that you told the queen about my plans to send Myrcella to Dorne.”

“No! Never! It’s a falsehood. I swear it. Ah, Varys. It was Varys the Spider.” He wasn’t very good at the game of thrones. Tyrion started to play with one of the instruments that Pycelle left on a table near him.

“I doubt it. I told Varys that I was planning to offer Balon Greyjoy a marriage between his daughter, Asha Greyjoy, and Joffrey. Lady Margaery told Littlefinger that I planned to wed Myrcella to Robin Arryn. There were only three people who knew we were offering the princess to the Dornish, and since we know for sure that my wife and I told nothing to the queen, we must conclude that she was informed by the only person left, you.”

Pycelle was stuttering more than ever. “The eunuch has spies everywhere.”

“How long have you been spying and working for my sister?”

“All I did, I did for House Lannister. Always. I’ve always been your servant, since the days of the Mad King.”

“And I suppose you thought you were doing what was best for House Lannister when you sent these ravens to the Greyjoys, the Leffords, the Florents, the Westerlings and many other families to overthrow me.”

“I never did such a thing!”

Tyrion turned to his men. “His beard. Cut it.”

“What?” Before Pycelle could do anything, one of the red cloaks took his dagger and cut Pycelle’s beard clean. The old man whimpered. For once, he had a taste of suffering.

“No more lies, Pycelle.” Tyrion stood up. Pycelle was looking at every raven that left the Red Keep. If he didn’t advise Cersei for the attempt of rebellion, then at least he knew, and he did nothing to warn Tyrion. “How many Hands have you betrayed? Eddard Stark? Jon Arryn? Not to mention a king? Jaime was there. You were the one to advise the king to open the doors to my father. You said he could trust the Lannisters.”

“I did it for House Lannister. And Lord Arryn, he knew. He knew the truth about the queen. And, well, he planned to act, to tell King Robert.”

“So you poisoned him?”

“No, never!” From the look of surprise, Tyrion could be sure that Pycelle didn’t murder Jon Arryn. Indeed, Tyrion didn’t picture Pycelle as an assassin. He was a coward, a sycophant who loved his position at court, who enjoyed living among the powerful, but he didn’t have the guts to kill
“But you let him die, made sure he succumbed, just like you made sure my sister could start a rebellion against me and my wife’s family!” Tyrion’s voice raised. This man disgusted him. He may not be a murderer, but he was no better than Littlefinger or Varys or Cersei.

“Lannister, I always served Lannister…”

“No, Pycelle, you serve Cersei, and Cersei is a Baratheon. My wife is more a Lannister than she will ever be. You betrayed me, you betrayed my house, and you betrayed your king. Throw him in one of the black cells. Get every information you can from him, by every mean necessary.”

“No! No, no, no, no… Please! You can’t do this to me! Don’t! No, no…”

Tyrion heard the Grand Maester protesting and pleading all the way, but he had turned to the girl on the floor. She was terrorized, and who could blame her. He gave her a silver stag, then a golden dragon for her trouble, then he left the room. At least she would gain something from this terror.

When he was out, Vylarr and another red cloak were waiting for him. “Vylarr, find a man you trust to bring back the girl out of the Red Keep. Make sure it’s someone who will treat her nicely. Then find Varys, Baelish and Ser Barristan and bring them to the Tower of the Hand, with discretion.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tyrion headed back to his chambers, where he gathered a few documents he would need for his upcoming meeting. He went to a room he had designed for holding small meetings. There was a long table there, with one seat at an end and a line of five seats by its left. Tyrion placed the papers at the end of the table and waited.

“Intimate.” Tyrion almost jumped at the voice behind him. Varys was already here. “Lovely table.” The eunuch went to the closest chair on the side and sat. He sighed. “Better chairs than the old small council chamber. Conveniently close to your quarters. I like it.”

In another world, Tyrion might have said the same thing than Varys. He sat at the end of the table, on the chair that was destined to him. “I suppose you’ve been aware of the existence of this room for a while,” he said to the Master of Whisperers.

“It is my duty to know everything, my lord Hand.”

Tyrion had prepared this room for the right time and kept it a secret. No one was to suspect anything, especially not Cersei. The time had come now.

“You arrived quite quickly, Lord Varys.”

“There were certain things I wanted to discuss with you before we began. May I?” he asked, pointing the flagon of wine on the table. Tyrion poured some for both of them. “It seems the Grand Maester has found his way into a black cell.” Tyrion drank, doing as if nothing was amiss. Varys, on his side, had a little smile, and Tyrion thought the eunuch was impressed. He didn’t seem to blame Tyrion for lying to him. “Well played, my lord Hand. But should I be worried? Janos Slynt, Pycelle, the small council grows smaller every day.”

“The council has a reputation for serving past hands poorly. I don’t mean to follow Ned Stark to the grave.”

“You impress me, my lord, I won’t deny it. I was surprised by how you handled things at Casterly
Rock, but now that you are here, I think I start to better understand your success in the Westerlands. It is only a pity that Ser Loras decided to side with Renly. I wonder how he could choose to fight his own sister. I understand someone might want to kill his king for the sake of his family, but betraying his own blood for a pretender…”

“Be careful, Varys.”

“I only regret that the Tyrells are not as loyal as you hoped.”

“Don’t talk against the Tyrells. My wife is one of them, and an attack against the Tyrells is an attack against my wife. The Reach will send us the men we need soon.” He hoped to close the matter with this.

“You do love her, don’t you?” the eunuch asked. “Lady Margaery?”

“I do.” There was no reason for it to be a secret to anybody.

“And she loves you.” Tyrion had the distinct impression that Varys was making a statement more than he was asking a question. “You are very lucky, my lord. It is hard to be in love, today. I hope that serving the Realm will not ruin this love you have for each other.”

“So, that’s why you came here? I didn’t know advising people on love affairs was among your specialties.”

“Oh no, it wasn’t for this. You managed to establish your personal power over this city, my lord, and very quickly. Power is such a curious thing. Are you fond of riddles?”

“Why, am I about to hear one?”

“Three great men sit in a room. A king, a priest and a rich man. Between them stands a common sellsword. Each great man bids the sellsword kill the other two. Who lives, who dies?”

“Depends on the sellsword.”

“Does it? He has neither crown nor gold nor favor with the gods.”

In this situation, it mattered little. “He has a sword, the power of life and death.”

“But if it’s swordsmen who rule, why do we pretend kings hold all the power? When Ned Stark lost his head, who was truly responsible? Joffrey? The executioner? Or something else?”

That was a question way too hard to answer, and Tyrion wasn’t sure if there was a good answer. “I’ve decided I don’t like riddles.”

Varys had laid down his cup. He took it back. “Power resides where men believe it resides. It’s a trick, a shadow on the wall.” Tyrion nodded, understanding the eunuch’s reasoning. “And a very small man can cast a very large shadow.”

Tyrion couldn’t hold back a smile as he drank again. It was at this moment that Petyr Baelish and Barristan Selmy came in and saw Tyrion drinking with the Master of Whisperers.

Tyrion invited them. “Ser Barristan, Lord Baelish. Take place.”

The knight looked a little confused at the sight of this place, but Littlefinger quickly walked to the chair right at Varys’s left. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard gathered his spirits and sat as well in the middle of the table.
“Very well, everyone is present,” Tyrion declared. “I’m sorry to summon you this late, but there are matters of importance to discuss and this reunion of the small council couldn’t wait.”

“I see you changed the decoration, my lord, as the king did when he took his place on the throne,” Littlefinger pointed.

“Where are the queen and Pycelle?” Ser Barristan asked.

“The Grand Maester won’t join us for quite some time. He disobeyed a direct order I gave him, and his disobedience put in danger the whole Realm. He’ll stay into a cell for some time. As for my dear sister, I’m afraid she is not in a good condition to attend such a meeting. Recent news disturbed her greatly, and I think it is better that we let her rest. We’ll handle the matters of the Realm for her.”

No one questioned this. Varys bowed his head, saying they would pray for the queen to feel better very soon. Littlefinger was listening and looking with interest, and Ser Barristan seemed to be worried. Tyrion wondered how he could worry about Cersei after all the horrible things she did. Or perhaps the old knight was only uncertain about what to think of all this.

“Now, to the matters at hand. First, I wish to inform the council that I am planning to wed Princess Myrcella. I sent a raven to Sunspear a few days ago, and I expect an answer very soon. When it will come, the princess will leave the capital to be betrothed to Trystane Martell, heir to Prince Doran.”

“Trystane Martell?” Baelish asked, obviously annoyed.

“Are you sure that the Martells will accept, my lord?” Varys asked. “Their relations with the Crown has not been the best recently.”

“Considering that the betrothal will come with a few castles in the Stormlands and the head of the man who murdered Elia Martell and her children, I don’t believe Doran Martell will spit on the offer,” Tyrion explained.

“A wise decision, my lord,” Varys praised.

“I agree. The assassin of Princess Elia should have been executed a long time ago,” Ser Barristan said.

“Thank you for your support, my lords,” Tyrion continued. “The alliance with Dorne will reinforce our positions and add pressure on Renly Baratheon. Once the Reach brings its army on our side, it will be difficult for anyone to defeat the king. However, we will still have two pretenders threatening Joffrey’s rule.”

“Maybe three, my lord,” Varys said. Tyrion looked at him intently. “I haven’t received any news from my agents in the Iron Islands for quite some time. All the ships who go there do not return. I suspect Balon Greyjoy to be preparing something.”

“You think he could rebel again?”

“That wouldn’t surprise me.”

“His son is a ward of the Starks,” Ser Barristan said.

“Maybe, but I doubt the Starks will stop Balon Greyjoy from raiding their enemies. I will deal with this situation in the Westerlands and reinforce our coasts. Anyway, the Ironborn are merely raiders, not invaders. They will not be a serious threat to Joffrey,” Tyrion declared. He hoped his plan to bring the Greyjoys on their side would work. After all, it wasn’t every day that the Lord of the Iron
Islands was offered the opportunity to make his daughter the queen of all Westeros. “Stannis, Renly, Robb Stark, these are the enemies we must deal with. And that’s why I will send terms to Robb Stark.”


“Yes.” Tyrion gave them a copy of the terms he would offer to the Starks and, as a consequence, to the Tullys as well.

“These are quite generous terms, my lord, but I doubt Robb Stark will accept them,” Varys said.

“The Starks follow their temper and their honor more than their brain. They will never consent to this,” Littlefinger said.

“I think it is worth offering this. Lord Stark deserves it,” Ser Barristan said. He didn’t say his opinions on the odds that the terms could be accepted, but he approved, which was something. This meant the proposition was seen as an honorable one, and honor was very important to the Starks, as the Master of Coin just said.

“I know very well…”

Tyrion didn’t have time to finish his sentence, for Cersei burst into the room without warning. Tyrion’s men couldn’t hold her off. They remained on the doorstep as she walked in. If she was furious two hours ago, now it was way worse.

“You! Not only you dare to send my daughter away, but you put Pycelle into the dungeons!” She shouted. She took in the place. “What is this?”

“This is the new small council chamber, dear sister,” Tyrion replied.

“You move the small council meetings into the Tower of the Hand? You have no right to do this!”

“Why? I don’t remember that there was any law saying the small council meetings had to take place in one specific place.”

“You think you can take such decisions without telling me? I am Queen Regent.”

Tyrion rolled her eyes. She said it so often that soon, no one would believe she was Queen Regent. “Cersei, I understand that you are angry because of Myrcella’s departure…”

“She is my daughter! She is going to stay with me! She won’t leave! I will not let you and the Martells kill her!”

Tyrion kept his calm. His sister’s presence might prove useful in the end. “Why not ask the small council about it? Varys, do you disapprove the idea of sending Myrcella to Dorne?”

“I do have reserve, my lord, but I think this should provide us with a useful alliance.” He turned towards Cersei. “I understand your worries, your Grace, but my little birds in Dorne tell me that Trystane Martell is a kind boy, patient and caring like his father. And Doran Martell is not the kind to murder children, far from it. One of the reasons why he refused to continue his war against Robert the last time was that he was horrified by all the children who became orphans after their fathers died in the war. I hardly see him daring to hurt a little girl as sweet as the princess.”

Tyrion turned to the man at Varys’s left. “Lord Baelish, do you think there would be a better suitor for Myrcella? Do you think there would be a marriage that would bring more to the Crown than this
Baelish seemed to be at a loss of words for a moment. “Well, my lord, there are certainly other suitors for the princess, but I suppose we should leave the queen with a say in this matter. Deciding of who her daughter will marry without talking about it with her would seem… unsuitable.”

Littlefinger played well. He was much better at it than Pycelle. Tyrion looked at Cersei. “So, sister, do you have a better match in mind for Myrcella?”

Rage was still plain on Cersei’s face, but she didn’t answer. She just didn’t want her daughter to marry, for it meant she would go away. Before the absence of any sort of reply, Tyrion turned his attention to the last member of the small council who didn’t voice his opinion. “Ser Barristan?”

“Your Grace, I understand you might be afraid, but if Lord Varys tells the truth and Prince Trystane is like his father, then I doubt we have anything to fear for the princess. Lord Arryn met the prince a long time ago, and he said he was an honorable man. Prince Doran will make sure she is protected in Dorne. And I could send one of my kingsguards with her to ensure her safety. Ser Arys Oakheart will certainly make a good sworn shield for the princess.”

“Small good Ser Arys will do her if Doran Martell decides that my daughter’s death would wash out his sister’s,” Cersei said.

“We already had this discussion, sister, and you just heard the opinion of the small council. They agree with me, and you have no alternative to propose for Myrcella. She is leaving.”

“NO! I WILL NOT ALLOW IT!” Ser Barristan stood up before this new outburst.

“If you care about your daughter, then you will allow it,” Tyrion replied.

“NO!”

She seized a flagon of wine with the intent to smash one for the third time tonight, but Ser Barristan seized her arm and stopped her from throwing it at Tyrion. The flagon fell on the floor and wine splashed everywhere. And like previously today, Tyrion’s guards intervened.

“See her to her chambers. Give her some essence of nightshade to help her sleep.”

“You will pay for it! YOU WILL PAY FOR IT!”

Cersei didn’t stop shouting, yelling and cursing as she was brought outside, by force this time. Ser Barristan seemed bothered by everything that happened, Varys had a sad expression, and Littlefinger seemed a little surprised.

“Please forgive me, my lords. I’m afraid my sister is overreacting. I hope you understand now why I didn’t invite her to this meeting.”

“We do understand, my lord,” Varys assured.

“Very well, concerning the terms I am about to offer Lord Stark, I know he might refuse them, but we lose nothing by trying. With the Tullys, he commands most of the rebel forces. Taking him away from Stannis would make things much easier for us.”

“Robb Stark will refuse to bend the knee as long as Joffrey lives. For him, this war will be over when and only when Joffrey’s head is on a spike,” Baelish said.
“More likely when he will behead Joffrey himself. I heard the Northerners prefer to execute their enemies themselves. It’s the Old Way. But I might have my own way to make Robb Stark look at my terms in a better way.”

“And what is this way, my lord?” Baelish asked.

“Just watch me and you’ll see. That’s all. I apologize again for summoning you all so late. You may leave.”

Varys bowed and left, and Ser Barristan did the same. Littlefinger, however, lingered behind. Tyrion stood up and went to a desk that was just farther inside the room. The small council chamber was right next to the place where he worked, or at least near to one of the places where he worked. As the eunuch and the knight left, Baelish stopped on the doorstep and turned to look at him. Tyrion, in the meantime, had seized a blank piece of parchment and took a quill with ink. He began to write a letter for the Lord of the Iron Islands. They would see if the prospect to have a crowned daughter mattered less to this man than his son’s life. Tyrion didn’t enjoy the idea of making an alliance with the Iron Islands, but he couldn’t hold a girl responsible for her father’s and uncles’ crimes. And since she was from the Iron Islands, she may face Joffrey’s anger better than Sansa Stark. He saw her today again, with new marks of slaps on her cheeks. He had to take care of this matter. Not that it would get better with the new additions to the kingsguard. After Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Bros Blount died, they were immediately replaced. Before Ser Barristan could suggest any name, Joffrey named his dog, Sandor Clegane, and Lancel Lannister. Tyrion suspected it was Cersei who suggested the latter.

“I don’t appreciate being made a fool of.” Littlefinger said. “If Myrcella marries the Martell boy, she can’t very well marry Robin Arryn, can she?”

Tyrion kept writing, using a technique his father often used when he was still alive. “No, afraid not. Sorry about that.”

“When I’m asked a service, I expect it to be serious, not a joke.”

“It wasn’t a joke. It was a test, and you went through it. Though not entirely. You failed to tell me about my wife’s hidden plan. Her plan that consisted of protecting her family’s interest in the case the Lannisters should fall, of discussing with the Starks through Lysa Arryn, and to falsely accept the betrothal between Myrcella and Robin Arryn. Did you really think I didn’t know about this?”

“Well, it seems I didn’t need to tell you in this case.”

“For your information, Harrenhal is off the table now.” Tyrion stared straight at the Master of Coin, taking the most serious gaze he could find. “Now, remember this, Lord Baelish. If you ever try again to turn my wife and I against each other, or if you think you can do it, know that it will be the last thing you’ve ever done in this life. I will never betray my wife, and she will never betray me.”

Baelish held his stare, and Tyrion saw anger in his eyes. He just deprived him from Harrenhal. He would never give it to him. He couldn’t trust Littlefinger. The Master of Coin walked out and Tyrion dedicated the rest of his time before he went to bed writing the letter to Balon Greyjoy.

When he went to bed, Tyrion couldn’t find a way to sleep. The bed seemed far too large, and it wasn’t because of its size. He ended up spending the whole night reading various reports and official documents. He also drank. Margaery would scold him when she came back. He only hoped they would make up for the lost time before she did it, or maybe she would scold him while they made it up.
In the morning, he summoned a young woman and explained to her his plan to make peace. They needed a long discussion, but at the end he managed to convince her and she accepted the mission she was given. He then summoned one of his men and gave him a very specific mission that he immediately accepted. They left this very day. Tyrion watched them ride away along the Kingsroad with a large guard, thinking they were their best chance, though he hoped the first mission would succeed, for the second might bring quite a lot of problems.

During the two days that followed, Tyrion ruled the Red Keep without opposition. Cersei was confined in her chambers, whether she willingly isolated herself from the rest of the world or she was sick, he didn’t know. Still, it felt right that he didn’t have to worry about his big sister for some time. Of course, he knew that she could be even more dangerous when she would come out. Cersei Lannister wasn’t the type to let the others rule in her stead without fighting.

She didn’t close herself to the world for long. The night after the second day without Cersei, someone came to visit him. The kingsguard entered, followed by Vylarr who remained on the doorstep. Tyrion ordered one of his men to always be present when he was with a visitor. Ty was with Tyrion in the room, pouring his wine.

“Your visits are too few, cousin. By the way, congratulations on your recent appointment on the Kingsguard,” Tyrion said when he saw him. Lancel looked at Vylarr, obviously uncomfortable. It was as if he was afraid of the captain of the red cloaks.

“Her Grace, the Queen Regent, commands you to release Grand Maester Pycelle. Here’s your warrant.” He handed Tyrion a rolled parchment.

“So it is. Will you take a cup with me? I find that mulled wine helps me sleep.” Tyrion seized the parchment and threw it on his desk.

“I am here at her Grace’s behest, not to drink with you, Imp.”

Lancel made to leave, but Tyrion talked before he could. “If my sister was so concerned for Pycelle, I would have thought she’d come herself. Instead she sends you. What am I to make of that?”

“I don’t care what you make of it, so long as you release your prisoner immediately.”

“And you’ve received these instructions directly from Cersei?” Tyrion didn’t need an answer. He only had to look at how Lancel addressed him to see that his words were Cersei’s, and his behaviour as well.

“As I said several times.”

“And you’ve waited this long to deliver the information?” Tyrion started to unroll the paper, not really caring what was inside. It was his cousin right in front of him, the very image of the arrogance of House Lannister but without the wits, who interested him.

“When the Queen Regent gives me a command, I carry it out without delay.”

Tyrion rolled back the parchment. His cousin didn’t know that he was digging his own grave. “Cersei must have great trust in you, summoning you to her chambers for a matter as important as Pycelle during the hour of the wolf.” Tyrion smiled wickedly at his cousin, and the expression on his face betrayed what he already knew. “Of course, I understand that in her current state, she probably sleeps during the day and stays awaken all night.”

“The Queen Regent has a great many responsibilities. She often works from dusk till dawn.”
“She must be very glad to have you helping her. Tell me, you really carry out without delay any order she gives you?”

“I do.”

“Then how is it that I am still alive?” Lancel’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, did I say something you didn’t expect? Vylarr, don’t you think Ser Lancel placed his hand far too often on his sword’s pommel while we talked and looked at you too often?”

“Ser?” Vylarr approached the kingsguard, a warning look on his face. Lancel was panicking.

“Vylarr, take Ser Lancel’s sword, and his knife as well.” Vylarr did as he was told. “Now leave us. You too, Ty.”

“My lord, are you sure this is wise?” Vylarr asked.

“Don’t worry. Lancel cannot kill me without a sword. If you hear one of us talking too loudly, come in immediately.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Vylarr and Ty left. Tyrion approached Lancel and smelled the air around him. “Ah, lavender oil. She always loved lavender oil, even as a girl.”

“I don’t see what you’re talking about,” Lancel said very quickly. “I am a knight!”

“An anointed knight, yes. Strange that you were anointed after Robert died. I didn’t think pouring wine could get you a knighthood. Tell me, did Cersei have you knighted before or after she took you into her bed?” Lancel was more panicked than ever. “What? Nothing to say? No more warnings for me, ser?”

“You will withdraw these filthy accusations!” Tyrion ignored this weak outburst.

“Have you ever given any thought to what King Joffrey will have to say when he finds out you’ve been bedding his mother?”

His cousin sat down. He was admitting his defeat. He might try to display arrogance, but he wasn’t as strong willed as Cersei, and unlike her he knew he wasn’t invulnerable, or at least now he realized it. “It’s not my fault!” he said.

“Did she take you against your will? Can you not defend yourself, knight?”

“Your own father, Lord Tywin, when I was named the king’s squire, he told me to obey her in everything.”

“Did he tell you to fuck her, too?”

“I only meant I did as I was bid.”

“Like when Cersei ordered you to kill me at this very moment, after a night or two of passionate lovemaking? Like when she ordered you to drunk the king so he would die in the hunt? You must have hated every moment of it, I’m sure of that,” Tyrion ironized. “Is that what you’ll have me believe? A high place in court, a knighthood, my sister’s legs spreading open for you at night. Oh, yes, it must have been terrible. Not as terrible as the guilt you must have felt when you murdered your king or when you plotted to kill your lord and cousin. I could have you executed on the spot.
However, I don’t like executions. I think I’ll let someone else take care of that. Wait here. His Grace will want to hear this.”

“Mercy! Mercy, my lord! I beg you.” His cousin was on his knees. Tyrion had some difficulties to believe that he was Kevan’s son.

“Save it for Joffrey. He loves a good grovel.” When Tyrion arrived at the door, it opened and Vylarr entered. He saw Lancel on his knees and his brow arched in curiosity. “It’s all right, Vylarr. You may leave us alone.”

He left, and Tyrion saw relief on Lancel’s face. “My lord, I swear, it was your sister’s bidding. It’s true, she ordered me to kill you, but I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to kill the king either. She only ordered me to drunk him. She even paid me for that. I didn’t know she was planning to kill him. She said she felt lonely and ordered me to share her bed. She felt lonely because the king didn’t grant her any attention, and she said he slapped her and beat her. I’ll leave the city at once, I swear. You’ll never hear of me again, I promise,” he whispered.

“No, I think not,” Tyrion replied in a similar voice.

“My lord?”

He knew he won. “You heard me. My father told you to obey my sister. I give you the same order. Obey her. Stay close to her side. Keep her trust. Please her whenever she requires. No one ever needs to know anything you did… as long as you keep faith with me. I want to know what Cersei is doing, where she goes, who she sees, what they talk of, everything. And you will tell me.”

“Yes, my lord, I will,” Lancel answered, his voice trembling. “I swear it, as you command.”

Tyrion clapped his hands. “Oh, rise, rise. Let us drink to our understanding. Oh, you don’t have a cup. Oh, well. Smile, cousin. My sister is a beautiful woman. And it’s all for the good of the Realm. Go back and tell her that I beg her forgiveness, that I want no more conflict between us and that henceforth I shall do nothing without her consent.”

Lancel stood up, still shaking. “But her demands.”

“Oh, I’ll give her Pycelle.” Anyway, the maester gave him all the information he was seeking. It wasn’t difficult to get it. They only had to threaten to torture him, and he told them everything. He would keep no scar from his captivity.

“You will?”

“Yes, I’ll release him in the morning. Cersei can keep him as a pet if she wants, but I will not have him on the council. I could swear that I had not harmed a single hair of his head, but that would not, strictly speaking, be true. You may leave.”

When Lancel was gone, Vylarr came to see him. “Is there a problem, my lord?” he asked.

“No, only a simple misunderstanding. It seems the lad had no intention of killing me after all. But someone else did.”

“The queen?”

“Let me handle that, Vylarr. And never make suppositions like that again. That could put you in danger,” Tyrion warned him, not wishing for his captain of the guards to die because the wrong person heard it.
“I understand, my lord.”

When Tyrion was alone again in his office, he couldn’t help but feel a little guilty about using Kevan’s son to spy Cersei. Why did Lancel need to be his family? If he hadn’t been, he could use the affair he had with Cersei as a distraction to bring people’s attention away from the incest. Only, Tyrion felt he couldn’t do that to Kevan. He would send Cersei away as soon as possible and ask Ser Barristan to help Lancel become a worthy knight, if it was possible. For Kevan’s sake, Tyrion had to try. Kevan helped him so much since he became Lord of Casterly Rock that Tyrion had a duty to try to help his son, if not for their family ties then because he had a debt towards his father.

Tyrion poured himself a cup of wine to celebrate Cersei’s declining power. He was closer than ever to send her away. Hopefully, his sister would leave the capital forever before Margaery came back. He hoped her discussion with Renly and her brother would go well.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of material taken directly from the show or the books. Events are similar, but we can expect Tyrion to make similar choices given the circumstances. Of course, he can also show more clearly that he is the one ruling the place, since Cersei doesn't have any support from Tywin in this fanfiction, and Tyrion acts in such a way that Cersei's reaction will give the impression that she is unable to rule and facilitate her demise. I also thought that making Tyrion use symbolical actions like his father to display his authority helps to see how he remains very much like his father from some perspectives.

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery
Margaery XVIII

Chapter Notes

Margaery in the Stormlands.

MARGAERY XVIII

They followed the Kingsroad through the Kingswood. Yesterday, they came upon a patrol that was scouting the areas, saying they served King Renly Baratheon. Margaery had wanted to sigh in exasperation when she heard it, but she didn’t. Instead, she showed her peace banner and told them she was there to speak with Renly. When she told them who she was, they accepted to escort her immediately to Renly’s camp.

She saw the standards from far away, into a clearing. That was where Renly established his camp. She had to suffer the captain of the patrol regaling her with tales about Renly and the forces that followed him, of how he always was a good man for his bannermen, very generous and benign. Margaery already knew everything there was to know about Renly Baratheon and more. She was the sister of Loras Tyrell, after all. There was no need for further explanation. She was relieved to reach Renly’s camp. She needed a good discussion with him and with Loras too. The captain who spoke to her all the time said her brother was riding alongside Renly.

They came upon the limits of the camp where a sentinel stopped them. “Who goes there?” He eyed her men. Margaery had come with a mix of guards from Highgarden and Casterly Rock, and there was also Ser Mandon Moore, so the sentinel was suspicious about them. He may not even have noticed her among her thirty men.

“This is Lady Margaery Tyrell,” the captain of the patrol said.

The sentinel looked very surprised. He seemed to finally realize that she was here. “Please forgive me, my lady. You are welcome. King Renly will be happy to hear you are there.” I don’t think he will be happy for long when he hears what I have to say. “We will escort you to his pavilion.”

“Would it be possible for me to see my brother, before?” she asked.

The sentinel seemed bothered. “I’m sorry, my lady, but Ser Loras is participating to the tourney as we speak. I’m sure he will come to speak with you once this is all over.”

“A tourney?”

“Yes, my lady. Lord Renly is hosting a tourney, and your brother is among the favourites.”

A tourney? They were at war, and her brother and Renly had time to organize a tourney? “I suppose Renly Baratheon is not in his pavilion right now?”

“No, my lady. He is presiding the tourney. We’ll make sure he knows that you arrived, and he will welcome you as soon as possible.”

Why didn’t it surprise her? A war was going on, and of course Renly would be presiding a tourney
and Loras fighting in it, probably while the enemy was closing on them. “Lead me to my brother and your king.”

“But, my lady…”

“They will want to see me, so show me where they are.”

Margaery was intractable, so they finally led her to the tourney’s grounds. On their way, she saw that the camp was much larger than what had to be expected from an army of this size. The man who guided her in the last day was very talkative and told her that Renly mustered a host of twenty thousand men. Spaces between tents and alleys were larger than in an usual camp. Margaery suspected that Renly prioritized comfort over speed and efficiency. The camp also looked half empty.

They arrived at the tourney’s ground. Judging from the large crowd, she suspected this was the reason the camp looked empty, and not the fact it was larger.

“We’ll have to wait, my lady. We are right in the middle of a duel,” the captain told her.

“I think not. Baras, make a way for us,” she ordered the captain of her guards.

Before Renly’s captain could do anything, Baras and his men walked through the crowd, pushing people aside, and Margaery followed suit, surrounded by her men in red and green. The crowd of knights and common soldiers was tossed away as they made their way to the field.

Renly Baratheon sat on an elevated bench. Two warriors were there, about to engage into battle. They stopped when she walked in with her men, and Renly looked at her men first as well before he saw her. Then his expression softened.

“Lord Renly, it’s been far too long,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear her.

Renly was wearing a crown that reminded the shape of a stag’s horns. He smiled at her.

“Margaery!” It didn’t come from Renly, but rather from one of the knights who were about to fight. Loras removed his helmet and approached, about to embrace her, but she stopped him with a hand on his breastplate.

“Be careful, Loras. You’re covered with mud,” she said, chuckling a little. She was glad to see her brother again, but the happiness she displayed wasn’t entirely genuine. She would have preferred for their reunion to take place in better circumstances.

“Sorry, sister.” He took his distance, laughing in the process, then turned to Renly. “I told you she would come.”

Renly stood up. “My lords, good sers, I present you Margaery of House Tyrell, daughter of Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, and sister to Ser Loras Tyrell, his son and heir. Together, Storm’s End and Highgarden will put an end to the tyranny of Joffrey the bastard, and make sure the Lannisters answer for their crimes. I swear it by the Old Gods and the New.”

As cheers raised from everywhere, one of Margaery’s men, an officer from Casterly Rock, stepped forward and roared. “You’re talking to the Lady of Casterly Rock, so mind your tongue, you son of a bitch!”

There were swords that were drawn from both sides. Margaery quickly placed a hand on the knight’s arm. “Please, good sers, there’s no need to come to that.”
Her men put back their swords into their scabbards, and Renly told his own to do the same with a nod after Margaery stared straight into his eyes. Truth be told, she was angry after Renly for what he just said as well, but it was useless to start a battle here.

She looked at Renly. “Lord Renly, may I know why you’re wearing a crown? If my memory is right, only kings can wear crowns.”

“My lady, you stand before Renly of the House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynar, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm,” a knight close to him said.

Margaery mimicked an incredulous expression. “Really? The last time I checked, when a king dies, his eldest son succeeds him. And unless I’m wrong, you are not Robert Baratheon’s eldest son, my lord.”

Renly smiled again. “My lady, please forgive me. I suppose you travelled tirelessly to come here. You may not know about it, but Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella…”

Margaery raised a hand to stop him. “Yes, I know. They are the children from an incest between the queen and Ser Jaime Lannister.” She said it as if it was a story she heard again and again. “I read Lord Stannis’s letter, in which he also claimed the Iron Throne for himself. Do you truly believe what your brother is saying, Lord Renly? Everyone knows he and Robert never liked each other. Before we can think about it, I’m sure he will start saying to everyone that King Robert put you into his bed.”

Margaery heard some people laugh behind her, and she knew they were not only her men. Renly’s expression turned harder, though he managed to maintain his serenity. Margaery allowed time for his men to laugh but didn’t leave him time to talk before her. “We have important matters to discuss, Lord Renly. I am here as an envoy of Joffrey Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynar, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, my nephew, and yours.”

She made sure her stare showed how serious she was, and that she wouldn’t back up. Renly was cornered. He was just humiliated in front of his men and she made it clear that she wasn’t here to support him.

“Ser Loras, escort Lady Margaery to my pavilion. She must be very tired. I will join you soon, my lady,” Renly said.

“Thank you, Lord Renly.”

They left, her small army of guards following her steps as she progressed with her brother through the camp to Renly’s pavilion. They didn’t say a word on their way. Margaery was angry at Loras. He sided with this man, a man who just said he would make the Lannisters pay for their crimes. Either Renly was stupid, or he wasn’t as nice as she thought he was. In the first case he forgot that she was Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell now, and in the second he knew he was accusing her.

Renly’s personal tent was vast, larger than hers and Tyrion’s while they travelled. There was a large bowl of fruits in the middle of his desk, tapestries hung all around, and large furs and carpets on the ground, made of the finest fabrics. It looked more like a tent a king would use to visit his lands and lords than for war.

“Can you tell me what you’re doing?” Loras asked as soon as they were alone inside the pavilion. “You just had half of Westeros laughing to Renly in public.”
"And before that, Renly told all these people that he was going to kill every Lannister in the world," she shot back.

Loras was looking at her with a face that showed utter disbelief. "I don’t understand." That was obvious. "I thought you came here to help us, to join us, and instead you say that Joffrey is the king and that you’re here to represent him."

"To join you? Loras, do you realize that when you declared for Renly, you declared war against me?"

"No, I didn’t."

"You did. I am a Lannister. I am the Lady of Casterly Rock and of the Westerlands. The Lannisters support Joffrey. By declaring for another king, you declared war against me."

Loras had his mouth wide open. Margaery was truly about to believe her grandmother when she said that Loras was a fool. "I never did that. Everything I did was for our family, for us."

"Can you tell how fighting against your own sister serves the family’s interests?"

"I never intended to fight you. Renly and I talked about it. When we received Stannis’s raven, we agreed that he should be king. People want him to be king. They don’t want Joffrey or Stannis. They want him. And you could be his queen."

There was a moment during which nothing was said. "Me? His queen?"

"Yes, you could finally be queen of Westeros."

Margaery burst into laughs. "Loras, Grandmother was right, you are a fool. I’m already married. Have you forgotten? You were there for the wedding."

Loras’s face took a darker expression. "Yes, I remember. But it’s not a problem. Once we’ve dealt with the Lannisters, you’ll be free to marry whoever you want."

"Loras, marriages cannot be annulled, unless they were not consummated, and I can tell you that mine is consummated in more ways than you can think of."

"Margaery, we don’t need an annulment. Everyone hates the Lannisters. Once they’re all dead, it won’t matter anymore."

She wasn’t sure if she heard well. Her heart was pounding in her head. "Can you repeat what you just said?" she asked, grinding her teeth.

"When Renly takes King’s Landing, he will execute the Lannisters as traitors. The Imp is serving an usurper, when he’s gone…"

He didn’t see the slap coming. She slapped him without thinking, the harder she could, and after she could think about it, she didn’t regret her action the slightest.

"How dare you? Tyrion is my husband, and you talk about killing as if he was a common thief!"

"I don’t understand." Loras was massaging his cheek. It was reddened like an apple. He looked at her, unable to get why she did this. He really was a fool. "You always wanted to be queen, Margaery. I thought you’d be happy."

"Happy? Happy that you and the man you fuck are planning to kill my husband and all his family?"
Happy that my own brother turns on me?"

“You always wanted to be queen, ever since you were a child.”

“I’m no longer a child, Loras. I have more power right now than any other woman in the Seven Kingdoms. I don’t need a crown.”

“I did this for our family.”

“Our family? Have you forgotten our alliance with Casterly Rock? That’s what gives us our power and our influence, more than any crown or title. You endangered House Tyrell with your actions. I can’t believe you want to murder your brother-in-law.”

“I don’t get it. He’s only a dwarf. Why do you want so much to stay married to him? By marrying Renly, you could be queen. You should rejoice at the idea. You would finally get rid of the Imp.”

Margaery slapped him again, and this time she thought about it before she did the deed. Both her brother’s cheeks were red now. “Tyrion is thrice the man your Renly will ever be. And I love him.”

Loras looked at her as if he never saw her before. He remained silent for a long moment, while Margaery stared at him. She had never been that furious in her life, and especially never like that with Loras.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same question. You chose Renly over me, over your family.”

“Am I? Isn’t it you who’s choosing the Imp over House Tyrell?”

“Tyrion did more for the Tyrells in three years than Renly since you became his squire. I am married with Tyrion. That makes him my family as much as you are. You are his brother-in-law, and you betrayed him and me. And for what? For Renly Baratheon?”

“You’re choosing the Imp over us!” he accused.

She sighed. “He is my husband. Renly is not yours. And in case you don’t know already, Father agrees with me. He thinks we should side with the Lannisters.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Maybe you should ask him, instead of assuming he will follow you. You assume too much from your family, Loras. Go and bring me your lover. We have a lot of things to discuss.”

She turned her heels and stared at the back of the tent, not granting a single more glare to her brother. She heard him walking out and she was alone.

How could Loras be so stupid? House Tyrell was a powerful house, and their control over their bannermen was strong, but it rested upon special relationships with them and series of alliances through marriage and other bonds. For three hundred years, her family focused on maintaining their bannermen loyal to them. All the Tyrells were married to powerful lords of the Reach or in their family. Her marriage with Tyrion was the first to tie House Tyrell with one of the seven families who ruled Westeros. And they benefitted from this. Their position had never been stronger, neither was their influence. Together, the Houses Lannister and Tyrell could demand anything they wanted to whatever king sat on the Iron Throne. Loras was putting into danger everything they built in the last years. He was splitting House Tyrell in two, dividing them when they needed unity the most. Their
bannermen would use this situation to their advantage. They would see that House Tyrell was weakened. An alliance with Renly presented too many risks.

More than that, Margaery felt betrayed. Loras turned on her. He assumed things from her. She thought she knew him well, and he thought he knew her well. It seemed they were wrong. They had taken different ways after she left for Casterly Rock. She became the most powerful lady in the Seven Kingdoms, surpassing the queen’s power, getting involved in politics more than ever before, while Loras spent his time fighting into tourneys and sharing Renly’s bed. He never took seriously his future duties as Lord of Highgarden. He still believed they had to make her queen. Her brother had remained a child all these years, while she matured and acknowledged the fact that a crown wasn’t in their reach, and that they didn’t need it. Loras was endangering their whole family by following his dream to see the man he loved on the Iron Throne, and his sister next to him.

Margaery tried to imagine herself married to Renly. Years ago, the prospect might have been tempting, but now, after three years with Tyrion, three years during which they ruled together the Westerlands if not the Seven Kingdoms, three years when they became partners who needed each other, she couldn’t imagine her life without him. She couldn’t imagine herself living without the man she loved. That was her life, and she wouldn’t trade it for anything. Loras didn’t seem to understand that.

She waited a long time, trying to calm herself. She would need another good discussion with her brother, one where they would speak calmly of what happened. In that very moment, Loras was a foolish, stupid, proud and arrogant boy, but she knew she could bring him back to reason. She brought their father’s raven where he said he supported her. He would see that she told him the truth. Hopefully, she could convince Renly to stop all this madness before. If Renly accepted to abandon his claim on the Iron Throne, Loras would be much easier to convince. How could her brother act so stupidly? Her grandmother seemed right. Intelligence wasn’t granted to Tyrell men.

Renly Baratheon finally came after a time that looked far too long for her. She didn’t make the effort to look pleased to see him. He and Loras probably talked. She doubted he gave him all the details, but between that and their short conversation when she arrived, she suspected that Renly would know she didn’t come here simply to visit a friend.

Still, the Lord of Storm’s End smiled warmly when he saw her. “Lady Margaery. Please forgive me for making you wait. I’m all yours now.” Loras and a very tall woman dressed like a knight came with him. The woman remained by the entrance of the tent while Loras took position on the side. Renly walked behind his desk.

“You took a lot of time,” she observed.

“Yes, I’m sorry again, my lady. There was only one final duel left to the tourney and I didn’t want to deprive my men from this pleasure.”

Margaery looked at her brother. He was all covered with mud, much more than before. “You lost, Loras, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Yes.” He replied on a very acid tone. Her brother was always better at winning than losing.

Renly spoke next. “Lady Margaery, may I present you Lady Brienne of Tarth, my new kingsguard.”

Margaery looked at the tall woman. She had short blond hair and blue eyes. She was much taller than Loras, and taller than most men Margaery saw in her life. Gregor Clegane was one of the few to surpass her height. She stood straight like a true knight, and actually behaved more like a knight than her brother right now.
“Lady Brienne,” she said, to welcome her.

“My lady.”

“Our first interview didn’t go very well,” Renly resumed. “But I hope we can round the edges now that we are in a more private setting. May I offer you some wine, my lady?”

“Yes, please.” He invited her to sit as well, and she accepted graciously. Renly Baratheon was always good at talking and pleasing people. That didn’t mean he would make a good king.

“My lady, I won’t hide you my intentions. I plan to march on King’s Landing and to take the city from the boy who occupies the Iron Throne as we speak. He has no right on this throne.”

“And you neither,” she retorted. “You have two nephews and a brother who come before you in the line of succession.”

“Joffrey and Tommen are not my nephews, my lady. Of course, the Lannisters told you the opposite, but that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Should I be surprised that you don’t seem sad to discover that these children are not of the same blood than you? And should I find it strange that you don’t seem to regret your brother’s death at all?”

Renly took a more contrite expression. “I never truly loved Robert, but I didn’t hate him either, except on a few occasions. I regret his death. But he is dead now, and all that matters is what we do now that he is dead.”

“And you chose to claim the Iron Throne, despite the rights three members of your family have before you?”

“You think I decided to be king because I wanted it? It’s not about that. This isn’t about the bloody line of succession. It’s about what’s best for the Seven Kingdoms, and what’s best for its people. Joffrey is a spoiled and arrogant boy nursed by his mother, a product of incest, just like Tommen. They’re both too young to rule. As for Stannis, he inspires no love or loyalty. He’s a good soldier, I’ll give him that, but so was Robert. We saw what a good soldier made for a king. It will be the same with Stannis. Joffrey and Stannis are no kings. I am.”

“You think yourself to be a better king than Joffrey or Stannis?”

“Because I am.”

He believed himself. Margaery could see it. She wasn’t sure, however. Renly was Master of Laws, but from what she gathered in King’s Landing, he didn’t do much in that position. His talents were resumed to dress nicely and behave well in public. She saw many men in her life who could make better kings than Renly, and most of them were not Baratheons.

“If we follow your reasoning, then everyone in the Seven Kingdoms, every second or third son, every uncle, every brother will believe they can rise against the rightful heir because they think themselves more fit for a position.”

“People will not follow Stannis into war. He will not be able to overthrow Joffrey, and I can’t let a monster born of incest rule over the Seven Kingdoms,” Renly argued.

“Can you prove me that Joffrey comes from an incest? Or is your only proof an empty claim by your older brother, a brother you’re about to fight?” she asked.
“I don’t think Stannis would lie,” Renly replied.

“Me neither.” She laid down her cup. “But other people can lie to him, and that’s what happened. It’s not difficult to convince a man of something when he wants to believe it.”

“I can give Westeros a good king for the first time in centuries, but for that I need the help of House Tyrell.”

“You say that you are a good king, but a good king never starts a war without a very good reason, and he never starts a war unless he is sure he can and will win. A good king wouldn’t turn against his own family, and he wouldn’t be ready to kill his brothers and their children to ensure his place on the Iron Throne.”

“I’m doing that for the Seven Kingdoms. I’m the only chance for the people of Westeros to have a good king.”

Margaery refrained herself from scoffing. If they could choose their king, she knew very well who she would choose. But they didn’t get to choose. “Lord Renly, you will not win. Joffrey has the support of House Lannister and House Tyrell. My lord father will never help you. As for Robb Stark, he will never support a younger brother over the elder, and he is far away from you. I ask you to consider your actions. I came here in the hope we could put an end to all this madness. Lay down your crown, abandon any claim you have on the Iron Throne, proclaim Joffrey the only true Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Lord Tyrion and I will make sure that you keep your titles as Lord of Storm’s End and Lord of the Stormlands. We will put your decision to declare yourself king on a sudden and short madness after you heard lies concerning Joffrey. There will be no retaliation against you, if you engage your forces next to ours against Stannis and Robb Stark to protect your nephew. All you have to do is to bend the knee, and everything will be as if nothing ever happened.”

Renly’s face remained neutral, but she could see in his eyes very quickly that he wouldn’t accept. “I’m sorry. I took my decision, and I will sit on the Iron Throne.”

“No, you won’t. Even if you take King’s Landing, you will have enemies all around you. My father will never support you as long as I live. The Dornish won’t help you. They hate the Baratheons since Elia Martell died with her children. Robb Stark will never fight for you, and neither will Stannis. You will be alone. You may hold the capital for a few months, but it will be taken from you quickly enough, and you will only be remembered in history as another usurper who tried to steal his nephew’s throne.”

“Do you truly believe that Joffrey is not a bastard born of incest?”

“I don’t believe it. I know it.”

“I don’t know what the Lannisters told you, but they lied.”

“I know the Lannisters much better than you, Lord Renly.”

Rely seemed to resign that he wouldn’t convince her. “I ask you to remain here for now, Lady Margaery.”

“Am I your prisoner?”

“No, you are my guest. You may leave whenever you want. But I ask you to reconsider my offer of an alliance between our families.”

“My family is House Lannister as much as it is House Tyrell. If you want to make an alliance with
one, you must make it with the other, and no alliance will be possible as long as you contest Joffrey’s rights over the Iron Throne.”

Renly’s expression showed that he expected it to go better, and he was disappointed that it didn’t. “As I told you, you can stay as long as you want. But I will take King’s Landing, my lady. Mark my words. I will be king.”

Margaery smiled. “Lord Renly, I am no great strategist, and I never took much interest in the matters of wars and tactics, but since I got married and deeply involved in the politics of the Realm, there is one thing I learned. In war, nothing is certain. No plan ever goes the way we expect. You think you will take King’s Landing easily, but you are wrong. There are many things that can happen to prevent you from seizing the Iron Throne.”

“Really, like what?” he asked.

“Anything. As I said, in war, nothing is certain.”

“That goes both ways. Loras, I think you should escort your sister to the quarters I had arranged for her. She must be tired from her journey. I think you should talk with her.”

The way Renly said it, that didn’t look or sound like an order. It was more like an advice a friend gave to another friend, or a lover to a lover in this case. It was the kind of words you used, and the way you said them when you told someone you cared about to do something for his own good. It wasn’t the king or the lord who spoke, but her brother’s lover. Margaery watched Loras, who nodded. He looked at her, and his eyes seemed to ask her to follow him as much as they asked for her forgiveness. Margaery was about to stand up when a man ran inside the tent.

“Your Grace,” he said, panting.

“Gerard. How’s your foot?” Renly asked him, his pleasant demeanour returning immediately.

“Your Grace, Storm’s End is under attack. By Stannis.”

Chapter End Notes

The Lannisters are no longer the only family with internal quarrels.

Please review

Next chapter: a POV we haven’t seen for a while
Chapter Notes

It is time to see how the little wolf is faring.

Be watchful and you will notice the presence of three characters of Game of Thrones who hadn't appeared in this fanfiction yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARYA II

The cloth she used made a hiss every time she rubbed it against the stone. She was halfway of the twenty-second step, scrubbing until her hands were red and beyond. She was used to get dirty and to make activities that left her breathless and exhausted. Sometimes, she would fall asleep in the middle of supper, and Sansa would roll her eyes, reflecting once again that her sister didn’t know how to behave like a lady, or berating her about the very same subject in a very lady-like manner. Still, being out of breath after an entire day of riding or have her muscles sore in the morning because she spent an entire night shooting arrows and fighting with a branch, imagining it was a sword, was different from her actual predicament.

She was at Harrenhal, one of the many people the Lannister army captured and forced to work for them as they occupied the castle. It had been exactly seventeen days now since she was taken prisoner with Hot Pie and Gendry.

She was there when her father was murdered. He said he plotted against King Robert and his son to usurp the throne, that he was a traitor. Arya didn’t believe any of this. Her father wasn’t like that. He was a good man, and he and the king were friends. That he tried to overthrow Joffrey, that she could believe, especially after what the boy did, but to plot against his best friend, that was simply impossible. Anyone who believed it was a fool and an idiot. Yoren had stopped her from looking while her father was being killed, but he couldn’t stop her from seeing her father’s lifeless body, missing a head on his shoulders, while her sister fainted in front of everyone.

Yoren had taken her with him and a group of recruits for the Night’s Watch, saying he would bring her back to Winterfell, then continue on his way to Castle Black. However, they had a problem on their way. They were intercepted by a group of men serving the Lannisters led by Ser Armory Lorch. He killed Yoren and many of the people travelling with them to the Wall. Lommy, Hot Pie’s friend, was killed by a man named Polliver with Needle after he took it from Arya. Lommy couldn’t walk because he received an arrow in the leg during the battle, and Polliver killed him to not have the trouble to carry Lommy.

They were brought to the Lannister army, walking in line all the way, their fists tied by ropes. The knights of House Lannister took some time to plunder a village on their way and added their people to the prisoners they already had. She tried to stay with Gendry and Hot Pie as much as she could, though the men who captured them didn’t really care whether they were with their friends or not. When they arrived at their destination, Arya saw for the first time in her life an army on the march.

She read about wars and heard about them, but seeing it was entirely different. The Lannister camp looked like a little city of tents, well organized, ready to hold a siege if need be. As soon as they were
inside the encampment, they were intercepted by a knight with shining gold hair that she knew far too well. Ser Jaime Lannister, clad in a black and red armor to the opposite of his usual white cloak, looked at the lot of them. Arya tried to remain discreet, hiding herself among the prisoners, hoping her dirty state and her short hair would be enough for the Kingslayer to not recognize her.

“May I know what this is?” he asked.

“Prisoners,” the man who called himself Armory Lorch said.

“I think it’s quite obvious, Ser Armory, but I would like to know what they’re doing here? If I recall, you were supposed to scout the area ahead of us, not to take peasants into custody.”

“They resisted.” The man who stole her sword stepped forward. Arya could see Needle dangling at his side. Her sword was so close, and yet out of her reach.

“Resisted? How?”

“They refused to give us food and shelter, so we destroyed their village.”

“Did they fight you?”

“Some did. They were with a man of the Night’s Watch. He was keeping a boy the City Watch of King’s Landing was searching. They refused to give him to us. So we dealt with them.”

Jaime Lannister turned to Ser Armory Lorch. “Is it true?”

“Yes, Ser Jaime,” he answered.

“Why would officers of the City Watch look for a boy miles away from King’s Landing?”

“I don’t know, ser, but they were following an order from the king.”

“That boy, he was with a man of the Night’s Watch, you said? Was he going to the Wall?”

“I think so, ser, though I cannot be sure…”

“You attacked men heading for the Wall?”

“The gold cloaks said they had an order from the king…”

“Did they carry a royal decree with them?”

“No.”

“So my nephew didn’t deem this affair important enough to give these men an official document, and all the same, you attacked men of the Night’s Watch?”

“They resisted…”

“Did they attack you?”

“No, ser, but…”

“Were they a threat to you and your men?”

“No, ser…”
“The Night’s Watch is older than House Lannister, and they are respected even in the Riverlands, and even more so in the North. No one attacks the Night’s Watch. Did you get the boy, in the least?”

Arya looked at Gendry, who kept looking on the ground. “He is dead. One of my men killed him.”

“Who?” Without hesitation, Armory Lorch pointed Polliver. Jaime Lannister walked to him until one single feet separated them. “So, not only you attacked members of the Night’s Watch unprovoked, but you killed the boy the king sent you to find?”

Polliver nodded. He looked nervous. Jaime Lannister turned around him, examining him from every angle. When he was back in front of Polliver, he scoffed and turned to Lorch. “Ser Armory, my uncle will need a serious discussion with you.”

The Kingslayer turned away and Arya heard Polliver sighed in relief, right before the Lannister knight drew his sword and brought it at Polliver’s neck. It didn’t take his head away from his shoulders, but blood came out of his neck. His body fell on the ground as it shook, whatever was left of his life fading away.

Everyone stood in shock, the soldiers even more than their prisoners. Jaime Lannister pointed his sword, a thin line of blood on it, to Ser Armory. “When my lord brother gives the order to not kill or mistreat the people unless it is necessary, you obey. Pray that Ser Kevan is more merciful with you than I was with your mindless fool.”

Arya felt it was justice, though it was strange for her that Jaime Lannister was the one who rendered it. At least he wielded the sword. The knight stared in disgust at the body at his feet. It had turned on his back in the fall. He approached it and seized Needle. He was examining it.

“Your men have curious weapons, Ser Armory. Where did he get it?”

The other knight shrugged. “Don’t know, and don’t care.”

“Go and see my uncle. He will deal with you,” the Lannister said on a very hard tone.

“What of the prisoners?”

Jaime looked at them with disinterest. “It would be useless to send them back. Their village is in ruins. Put them to work. Make them useful.”

Arya had hoped that Kevan Lannister, who commanded the army, would execute Armory Lorch, but he didn’t. The knight rode on his horse and wandered through the camp all the way to Harrenhal. Before the threat of a siege, Lady Whent surrendered without offering any resistance and the Lannisters took residence into the huge castle.

Arya did everything to not find herself in the presence of the Kingslayer or his uncle. They both saw her at court and could recognize her. Luckily enough, her physical appearance was very different and they didn’t seem to notice her, let alone suspect that she was a girl.

Gendry worked in the smithy, Hot Pie in the kitchens, and Arya spent her days scrubbing floors and stairs. She spoke with them whenever she could, mostly when it was time to eat, but aside from that, she barely saw them. She asked Gendry is he knew what happened to Needle. Apparently, the Kingslayer was very interested in it. He brought it to Gendry and asked questions about it. Gendry swore he told him nothing, and Arya believed him. He said nothing about her true identity. He confessed to Ser Jaime that the sword was very good work, but didn’t tell that it was castle-forged, so they may not link it to Arya.
She had asked Gendry if he could steal the sword if he saw it again, but Gendry told her it was impossible. He would be killed if he was caught. After being initially angry for his answer, she had to agree that he was right. She didn't want Gendry to die for Needle. She would find a way to get it back. She asked Hot Pie if he would know a way for it, but of course he had no idea. He was a cook, a kitchen boy. She even asked Jaqen to get her back her sword instead of one life, but he refused.

“A man owes you three lives, nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.”

Jaqen was very strange. She knew he was a murderer, but at the same time he was an ally here. She gave him the name of Ser Armory Lorch, for killing Yoren, and the day after Ser Armory fell from a window and died. Arya hadn’t been sure of what Jaqen told her, but now she knew he would kill anybody she asked for. She still had two names to speak. She wasn’t sure which ones to choose. There were many men she would like to see dead. After Ser Jaime killed Polliver, the men who captured them put them to work, like he ordered, but they also vented their frustration on them. Arya was also thinking about speaking Jaime Lannister’s name, but she wasn’t sure. He killed Polliver and seemed better than most of the people in the Lannister army. He mistreated no one. Arya still kept his name in mind just in case killing him would mean she could recover Needle.

“That’s all you could do.” Weese’s spiteful voice came from behind. He was understeward of the Wailing Tower. He grabbed her by the shoulder and threw her against the wall.

“It took me longer,” she said, as pain flashed in her shoulder.

“Longer? I was tempted to give you a nice piece of meat today. You work harder than the others. I thought you knew where your place was, but it seems I was wrong. Finish that. Don’t bother to go to the kitchens. You’ll eat in the evening.”

Her stomach was grumbling. It wasn’t the first time it happened but working hard all day with barely anything in the stomach was hard. She went back to work. She was done before the evening, well before in fact. She wasn’t that late. She could have eaten later than the others.

She went to the kitchens. Near the entrance, she could see Hot Pie. She made a sign to tell him to come and see her. He ran at her.

“Can you give me something to eat?” she asked. “Not much. Just something. Weese forbade me from eating before tonight.”

“Okay, Arry.” He kept calling her Arry even though he knew that she was a girl now. “Can you just render me a service, please?”

“Aye.”

“There’s a lady who just arrived, and they told me to prepare something for her to eat, but the guy who was supposed to bring her tray is gone. He’s nowhere to be found. Could you bring it to her? You know better than me how to behave before these people.”

Arya agreed. A small piece of bread in her stomach later, she was bringing a tray full of food into one of the apartments of the Wailing Tower. It was a generous service, more generous than what she got at Winterfell. There was a nice piece of chicken with salad, potatoes, a peach, even strawberries. Her mouth watered, but she knew better than to eat from the tray. She already had enough marks on her back from beating, mostly gifts from Weese. He was among those she thought about saying his name to Jaqen.
The tray she brought was for a lady, indeed. When Arya walked into her room, she was writing something on a parchment. She raised her eyes to look at Arya the moment she entered.

“Thank you. Put the tray here.” She indicated a place nearby on the same table she was working at. She set aside her plume and looked at the tray as Arya was placing it on the table. She sighed and shook her head.

“They gave me way too much.” Arya found it unfair that so many people inside these walls only got bread crumbs while others said they had too much to eat. “Are you hungry?”

Arya had been looking at the tray, her stomach still rumbling. She could live without eating but starving while there was food right under her eyes was way more difficult. Deep green eyes were looking at her, an expression of pity in them, something Arya didn’t see for a while.

“You can take these if you want.” She offered her the bowl of strawberries. Arya didn’t know what to do first. The last time Weese offered her something to eat, she ended up being beaten. She hesitated, but since the young woman in front of her insisted, she seized the bowl and devoured the content in less time than you needed to say it. There were good, very good.

“Thank you, my lady,” she said. She walked back to the door to leave.

“Wait. Look at me.”

Arya did as she was told. The young woman was still sitting at her table, but she looked closely at Arya. She didn’t remember seeing her anywhere. She had seen the attire she wore before, at Winterfell, when the Lannisters visited them. Margaery Lannister’s handmaidens wore that kind of clothes. She had her black hair brought into a ponytail on her back, waving a little.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Cato.” She didn’t want to say Arry. She thought it might look suspicious. There was no big difference between Arya and Arry, so she said the first name to come to her mind when they were made prisoners by the Lannisters, and also because everyone else who followed Yoren knew her by that name. Her mother’s name almost came out, but she realized that it would look suspicious as well to call herself Catelyn, not to mention the fact she was supposed to be a boy, so she changed the second part of the name at the last moment.

“That’s a nice name. Are your parents part of Harrenhal’s household?”

“No, they’re not.”

“How did you end up here, then?”

“My parents are dead. I was brought here by soldiers who found me.”

“I’m sorry. You miss them?”

“Aye.” She missed her father, indeed.

“I have a friend who never knew her parents. They died when she was barely a baby. I know it’s not easy when you’re so young. What was your father’s name?”

“Gendry.” Again, she said the first name to come to her mind.

“What was he doing?”
“He was a smith.”

“How did your parents die?”

“Honor got them killed.”

“I’m sorry, Cato.” She took the peach and gave it to Arya. “Enjoy it. Winter is coming.”

“Winter is coming.”

She said the words without thinking. She heard them so often that whenever she heard them, she was brought to repeat them by habit. The young woman was already going back to her table. It was barely as if Arya didn’t run outside. That could get her identified as a Northerner, even as a Stark. If they learned it, she was in grave danger. She couldn’t take any risk.

Sadly, Jaqen was gone on patrol. She waited for the moment he would come back, doing her other jobs in the meantime. She finally saw him drinking ale alone and went to him.

“I need you to kill someone,” she said.

“A girl still has two names,” he said very quietly, taking another large sip, barely giving her attention.

“I need you to kill the lady who just arrived.”

“A man needs a name.”

“I don’t know her name.”

“A pity. A man cannot kill if he doesn’t have a name.”

Arya looked around. At the smithy, Gendry was working, his body covered with soot. She noticed the many muscles he had and found it interesting to watch him work. Someone entered her view at this moment. Her back was turned to Arya, but she wore the same gown and her hair was arranged in the same fashion.

“That’s her.” She pointed the woman.

“A man knows her name. That is enough. A man will do what must be done.”

“I need her to die soon.”

“A girl cannot tell a man when exactly he must do a thing. A man cannot make a thing happen before its time.”

“But she knows! She may know who I am.”

He sighed. “A woman will be dead before tomorrow.”

He walked away. That was better than nothing. Arya looked back at the young woman with black hair. She was talking to Gendry now. Arya hid behind a column and listened to them.

“It is nice work.” The woman was looking at the weapons Gendry was forging. “It could compete with the swords made in Highgarden.”

“Thank you, m’lady,” Arya’s friend said in return.
“What’s your name?”

“Gendry, m’lady.”

“Gendry?” She looked at him with a curious expression, and from the corner of her eye, as she looked from the column, Arya thought she saw Gendry redden. She didn’t like seeing this girl talking with her friend. “You have a friend, I think? A small boy, a few years younger than you, brown hair, grey eyes, very slim. He brought me my dinner today.”

“Oh, Arry, really? Did he do something wrong?”

There was an hesitation before she replied. “No. Thank you, Gendry. I won’t bother you any longer.”

Arya wanted to curse. She told her that her name was Cato, and Gendry just revealed it was Arry. She wouldn’t take long to make the link. The woman walked away but was met a few feet later by the Kingslayer.

“My lady.”

“Ser Jaime.”

“I was hoping you could help me.”

“Of course, ser. What is it?”

Jaime Lannister took a sword at his belt. Arya’s eyes widened and her heart pounded when she saw Needle. The Kingslayer kept it. If she told Jaqen to kill him now, she might have a chance to get her sword back.

“Tell me, have you ever seen a sword like this one?”

The woman looked at it for some time. “No, Ser Jaime. Not that I recall.”

“I was wondering if the Northerners used this kind of sword, because the last time I saw a sword similar to this one was at Winterfell.”

“Winterfell?” Arya felt as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over her head.

“Yes. I saw a smith there working on a sword like this one, and I think I saw the youngest of the Stark sisters with another one like that when I was in King’s Landing.”

This time, she was done. They would find out the truth. “May I have a closer look at it, Ser Jaime?” the young woman asked.

Arya knew she should escape, but she saw Gendry working not far away. She couldn’t abandon him there, and Hot Pie neither. She had to warn them. Jaqen promised the woman would die before tomorrow, but Arya could be trapped before. Just as she thought she may not have the time to bring Gendry and Hot Pie with her, she received a strong shove from behind, and her head struck against the pillar. As a sharp pain went through her head, she heard the voice she hated the most here.

“What are you doing here?” Weese next kicked her in the ribs. “All right, if you can’t work by yourself, then I will make you do it. There’s a knight who owes me a debt for a gamble. His name is Arkon. Bring this to him and make sure he pays me back. Don’t fail.”

He pulled her back on her feet and shoved her forward again. She staggered to the gates and left the
castle. On her way, she felt a pair of eyes following her, and she realized the woman who looking at her from the corner of her eyes. She knows.

She was outside. She could run away, escape. No, I can’t. I can’t abandon Gendry and Hot Pie. Anyway, as she thought about it, she knew she couldn’t get past the sentinels at the barricades that set the borders of the camp. And even if she could, she couldn’t leave Gendry and Hot Pie behind. Some people knew they were friends, and they would be interrogated about her. If they lied when they were asked questions, they would be killed. And if the Lannisters discovered her friends knew who she was the whole time and they never told them, they would be killed too. She couldn’t abandon them. Would she abandon Jon, or Robb, or Bran, or Rickon? Or even Sansa? Or Mother or Father?

The memory of her father’s death caused her to fear it would happen to other people she cared about. She went to see the knight Weese talked about. When she arrived, he was with a group of men, but what attracted Arya’s attention the most was the woman on his lap. She had to be in the twenties, with dark hair and dark eyes, and tanned skin. Disgusted as always when she saw that sort of things, she walked to the knight, the message crumpled into her hand.

“What do you want, boy?” Ser Arkon asked.

“I’ve got a message from Weese.” She gave it to him. A problem soon arose.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“Read it.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” he said after taking a look at it.

“Let me see it,” the woman on his lap said with a sweet voice. She had a strange accent that Arya couldn’t recognize. It was similar to that of Jaqen, but not the same. “A man called Weese…” She shot an amused look to Arya, “… says you owe him a golden dragon.”

“What the fuck!” He threw away the girl who just read the paper he couldn’t read.

“Hey, hold on, man.” Another man came from behind Arya and took position at her side, slightly between her and Arkon. He had dark hair too, along with a small beard and a moustache. “That’s no way to threat a girl.” He pointed to the girl Arkon just pushed away.

“She’s a whore,” the knight retorted.

The man next to Arya, who wore black chainmail, shrugged. “There’s a difference?”

“Mind your own business.”

“As you wish, but since you don’t want that girl, I think I’ll take her. That makes her my business.” The knight snorted. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Some man making money with his sword.” He patted the one at his belt.

“You’re a cutthroat, nothing more. There are hundreds like you here, and none has succeeded to take that whore from me.”

“I’ll be the first. There are hundred of knights like you here too, grubs in fancy armor who are better at beating women than fighting men.” He rubbed the palms of his hands. “Now, I have a girl to bring
to my tent.”

“You approach that whore, you… Argh!!!!!”

The sellsword in black had managed to take Arkon’s arm and to twist it when he tried to stop him.

“I what?” he asked, looking at the knight grunting in pain, his arm bent in an unnatural position. He
turned to the other men who sat around. “Anyone else wants to try?”

He didn’t wait for an answer and went to the woman who had gone back on her feet and stood again. She didn’t seem bothered by the fact she was tossed away on the ground.

“You okay?” the sellsword asked.

“I’m fine,” she replied on an indifferent tone, staring at the sellsword from head to toe.

“Look, I can’t pay you a lot. Sad for you, but I don’t have a rich lord to bring you to, but I think
you’ll be safer with me than with him.”

He made a movement of his head to indicate the knight still grunting on the ground. “Fine for me,”
she said.

The sellsword turned back to Arya. “How much did this Ser… Nobody of Nowhere owed you?”

“A golden dragon.”

He pulled a face and looked around. He seized a silver-banded drinking horn and threw it at Arya
who caught it in the air. “I think that will be enough. Go before whoever he owes to beats you.”
Arya ran away as she heard the sellsword say one last thing to the woman. “This time I won’t have
to find myself one.”

Arya wanted to make it back to the castle as quickly as possible with the horn, so she hurried. On her
way, she heard many conversations, about wine, about the war, about women, and many men
complaining that the Imp ordered them to not plunder the Riverlands or kill the people. They also
complained that while they were not allowed to plunder, the sellswords who were hired and rode
with them had all freedom to do so. She also saw a knight being dragged from under a wagon with a
hambone in his hand, and a boy with a rounded face trying to defend him, dressed like a squire.

When she arrived in the main courtyard, Weese was waiting for her. She gave him the horn. He
studied it for some time, then smiles. “Good boy.” Then without warning, he kicked her in the knee.
“Come now. We need a good talk.”

Although fear cut deeper than swords, Arya didn’t remember fear being as painful as how she felt
after Weese was done beating her. It was way worse this time, and she had blood running down
from her forehead. He dragged her by the collar of her tunic up the stairs, opened a door and threw
her inside.

“Here he is, m’lady.”

Looking up from her lying position, Arya saw the lady she brought food to earlier. I’m done. Then
she set her eyes on a sword’s handle on the bed, a handle she knew only too well. If only she could
grab it.

“What have you done?!”
Arya was troubled by the voice coming ahead of her. She looked back at the girl who was looking at her, but not in anger or hatred or anything alike. She looked horrified and outraged.

“I brought you the boy you asked, m’lady,” Weese replied. “Tell me what he did.”

She knelt next to Arya. “Are you all right?” she asked her. Arya didn’t understand. She truly seemed to care about her. Why?

“M’lady, tell me what he did wrong?”

“You idiot!” She stood up and faced Weese. “Did you beat her?”

“Yes, m’lady,” he answered as if that was the most common thing in the world, which was probably the case for him. Arya noticed he didn’t seem to realize the use of *her* instead of *him*.

“You beat a lady?”

A long silence followed. “A lady?”

“She’s a girl. Her name is Elya Chelsted. She is the niece of Lord Armoran Chelsted, a powerful lord of the Crownlands.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“I met her when I last went to King’s Landing about a year ago. Do you realize what you’ve done? You may have alienated a powerful house of the Crownlands to King Joffrey.”

“She… she should have told me.”

“That’s not the question. You beat a lady. I’m sure you’re aware of the punishment for that kind of things. The moment Ser Kevan Lannister will hear, he’ll have you hung.”

Something then happened that Arya never saw. “Please, my lady, don’t tell him. I don’t want to die.” Weese was actually begging for something. Arya had never imagined that to be possible.

“I won’t talk about it. I don’t want the word to spread. The king already has more than enough problems to deal with. She will come with me when I leave Harrenhal and I will bring her back to her family. I suggest you talk about this to no one. If you do, you won’t live for long.”

“Thank you,” Weese replied with a hurried voice. “Thank you, m’lady.”

He rushed out of the room and Arya was alone with the other girl. She knelt again near Arya. Her fingers went over her face. “This looks deep. Wait a minute.”

She came a moment later with a towel sozzled with water and began to put it on Arya’s cuts one by one. She did it for a while. She didn’t seem evil, but Arya didn’t understand why she was helping her.

“I’m not Elya Chelsted,” she said.

“I know. I had to lie. If I told him the truth, he would tell Ser Kevan immediately.”

“What truth?”

She stopped cleaning her wounds and smiled at Arya. “We never met, but your brother talked a lot about you.”
Arya stared in surprise. “You know one of my brothers?”

“Yes. You have the same eyes and the same hair, and he told me you liked to dress like a boy and to get dirty everywhere you went.” She looked behind at the sword. “And he also told me about Needle.”

She went to the said bed and took something hidden under it. There were three envelopes. She took one and put back the others in their place. She came back to Arya and gave her the letter.

“Open it,” the girl told her.

Arya did, and inside she discovered the familiar writing of Jon.

Chapter End Notes

So, did you see the three of them?

Please review

Next chapter: Sansa
Sansa VII

Chapter Notes

A short chapter. Sorry for the delay in the release of this chapter. I experienced a block recently. I hope that I'm back on track now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA VII

“Ow!”

The first word. Ow! That was the first word she said after they came back to the Red Keep. She didn’t say a word when they got her through the gates. She didn’t say a word when he asked her if she was hurt. She didn’t say a word as they escorted her back to her chamber. Not a word, until now.

“Shh. It’s not deep.”

The girl with clear brown hair and eyes of the same color pressed a wet cloth on her temple. She cleaned it, then applied some mixture, probably an ointment of some sort.

“Here. In two days, there will be no trace left,” the handmaiden said.

Perhaps there would be no trace left on her face, but on her mind, the trace would never leave. How could she ever forget the way they looked at her?

The princess Myrcella left for Dorne today. Lord Tyrion had arranged her a marriage with Trystane Martell, the heir to Sunspear, and she was sent under heavy escort to Dorne. Sansa was almost jealous of the princess. She wished she was the one to escape King’s Landing and Joffrey. Not to mention that Myrcella was always kinder to her than Joffrey. She and Tommen might be blind and unaware that she was miserable with their brother, but at least they were kind to her. Tommen even said in front of Cersei that he wouldn’t like that Joffrey kills her brother.

On their way back to the Red Keep, an accident happened. They were walking back to the castle under heavy escort. Since Ser Arys Oakheart had gone to Dorne with the princess, that Ser Jaime Lannister was with the army in the Riverlands and Ser Mandon Moore accompanied Lady Margaery in the Stormlands, there were only four kingsguards to protect Joffrey: Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Preston Greenfield, Ser Lancel Lannister and Sandor Clegane. The escort was completed by Lannister guards and men of the City Watch.

They were travelling in silence. People gave way to Joffrey, stepping aside on the passage of his guard. Some threw praise at him, but others insulted him. Sansa heard the insults more than the praise. Halfway, the king received dirt in the face. Someone in the crowd probably threw it at him. She didn’t see who else it could be. Ser Arys told her not long ago, before he left, that some people despised Joffrey since the riots and the slaughter of children. Joffrey had immediately ordered that the man who threw the dirt was brought to him and be executed. As a result, the guards began to fight the crowd and chaos followed.

Sansa was lucky that she got out of there with a simple cut. It could have been far worse. If it wasn’t
for the Hound’s timely intervention, she would be dead. He saved her.

“I thought they were going to kill me,” she said.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “It’s over. They can’t hurt you now,” the handmaiden reassured her.

“He hated me, the man who hit me. I saw it in his eyes. He hated me. He never met me before, but he wanted to hurt me.”

She moved a chair and sat in front of Sansa. “It’s over. Don’t think about it again. It won’t help. Better to forget.”

Sansa nodded, but she knew she could never forget. “Thank you, Sera.”

Lady Lannister’s handmaiden smiled a little. “I wish we were back at Winterfell.” Sansa wished for the same. “That’s where we met, you remember?”

“I do.” She remembered. Sansa had seen Sera Durwell for the first time the day following the king’s arrival, while she was heading for the glass garden. They sewed during the morning, and after that she walked with Lady Margaery in the glass garden.

“I think you should sew with me tomorrow, Lady Sansa. It could change your ideas.”

“Yes, good idea,” Sansa replied distractedly.

“I know I’m not the best when it comes to sewing but… At least, you’ll have some company, and we could talk a little.”

Sansa nodded. Then for some time they both said nothing. Sera didn’t leave, but she didn’t seem to know what to say. Sansa tried to resume the conversation. It might help her to think of something else than the events of this afternoon.

“Don’t you have friends you sew with?”

“Yes, but… Since Lady Margaery and Mira left… let’s just say that I’m not as much good friend with the other girls. I like them, but not as much.”

“Who’s Mira?”

“My best friend. She’s a handmaiden too. She left not long after Lady Margaery. She may be riding to her wedding as we speak.”

“Her wedding?”

“Yes. She’s getting married very soon to a cousin of Lady Margaery, Willas Tyrell.” Sansa thought she heard something about it some time ago. “I envy her.”

“Why? She’s your friend. You should be happy for her.”

“I am, but… I can’t help it. My best friend is getting married, and she has a good marriage.” Much better than mine, Sansa thought, musing about her own wedding. Now that she had bled, she could be married to Joffrey anytime.

“I have nothing. No marriage in sight,” Sera continued. “I’m seeing most of the handmaidens around me receiving marriage proposals, already betrothed, or even about to get married, while I stay there, waiting for my turn.”
“I’m sure you will marry a good man, Lady Sera,” Sansa said, not sure at all.

“Hm. It’s mostly that… I have no one. My father… died during a tournament while my mother was pregnant, and she died two months after I was born. I have no brother and no sister, so I can’t wait to get married.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Thank you, Sansa.” Sera took her hand in hers. “I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for your father. I should have told you before but… you see, I was afraid. Afraid… afraid of how you might react.”

Sansa understood the meaning behind her words. She was afraid of Joffrey. Everyone was afraid of him.

Another of her handmaidens came from the door. “Lady Sansa, Lord Tyrion would like to speak with you.”

Tyrion Lannister, the Lord of Casterly Rock. Sansa had few interactions with him. They crossed paths a few times back at Winterfell and exchanged a few words in the library before she left her home. Back then, he wished her all the happiness in the world with Joffrey, saying she would need it. He had looked sorry for her.

The only time she spoke with him, or more specifically exchanged a few words with him, wasn’t long after he and Lady Margaery arrived in King’s Landing. She was heading to her chambers after a supper in company of the queen and her two youngest children, and she was crying. At the turn of a corridor, she came face to face with the Hound.

“Look who’s come out to play. You think the king wants his little prize out wandering alone?” he told her, smiling, but the smile didn’t reassure her. She felt more reassured after Joffrey showed her father’s head and he wiped the blood from her lips.

“I’m going back to my chambers, ser,” she had answered, tears in her eyes, choking on her voice.

The Hound then looked at her from head to toes. “You’re almost a woman. The king will be having you soon.” He was right, for she bled for the first time two days later. He had approached her.

“Taking you into his bed.”

“My wedding night will be the happiest…” she had started to say mechanically.

“Stop lying!” He had grabbed her violently.

“You’re hurting me, please, ser!” she cried.

“Ser? I’m a dog. Remember. The king’s dog. And you’re his bird. Would you sing a song for me, little bird? A song about nights and fair maidens. Come on, sing.”

His expression had changed as he spoke. There was something different, like when he stopped her from pushing Joffrey over that bridge.

“You won’t hurt me,” she declared.

“Sing!”

She didn’t know how she gathered the courage, but she looked at him straight in the eyes when she answered. “I don’t know any songs, not anymore.”
His grip on her had weakened. He looked… sad for her.

“Clegane, what’s going on here?” That was when the Lord of Casterly Rock had arrived from the nearby stairs. The Hound had turned his attention to him, freeing Sansa from what was left of his grip on her arm.

“Never mind, Imp. I was just… taking the little bird…”

The little lord hadn’t waited for an explanation. “I’ll see to the lady. Go and find a tree to piss on.”

The Hound was gone in an instant, not without shooting a hating look to his lord. Sansa was surprised that Lord Tyrion did nothing before the lack of respect from the Hound. After all, he wasn’t a kingsguard yet at that time and still at the service of House Lannister. He could have punished him easily.

When Sandor Clegane was gone, Sansa thanked Lady Margaery’s husband and resumed her path to her chambers. However, he called her.

“Lady Sansa.” She turned to look at him, uncertain about what to expect from the Hand of the King. He served Joffrey, after all. He had a contrite expression. He was standing two steps up from her, but despite this she was a little taller than him. “My lady, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Sansa wasn’t sure what to make of it, but despite the fact he was Lady Margaery’s husband, she didn’t know if she could trust him. “My father was a traitor. My mother and brother are traitors, too. I am loyal to my beloved Joffrey.”

He had looked at her in a strange way when she said that, as if that was the first time he saw her. Then the shape of a rictus appeared on his lips for a very short moment, before he took back a very serious expression. “Of course, you are.” He then showed again a remorseful expression. “Sleep well.”

Sansa had walked away and the discussion had been over. It was the only time they spoke in King’s Landing, except for the short moment after Clegane had brought her back into the Red Keep, when he asked her if she had been hurt. She hadn’t been able to answer. The Hand of the King had never asked to speak with her before. Why did he want to talk to her? He was asking to speak to her. Sansa didn’t think the question had multiple possible answers.

“Let him in.”

Lord Tyrion Lannister looked exhausted when he walked in, but his eyes were very much alive and looked at Sansa without wandering. “Lady Sansa, I hope you are right.”

He seemed concerned, just like his wife. “I thank you for your concern, my lord.”

“Lady Sera, could you leave us alone for a moment, please.”

Sera Durwell bowed and obeyed immediately. She followed his orders without question. She didn’t care to ask Sansa her permission to leave. The Lord of Casterly Rock looked at the handmaiden leaving, and when she was gone, he looked back at Sansa, still the same soft expression on his face.

“You won’t mind if I sit, my lady?”

“No, you can.”

He did as he asked and they found themselves sitting face to face. “Lady Sansa, I want to apologize,
in my name and in my family’s name, for today’s events. I know what happened with these men. Clegane told me everything. You should never have found yourself in danger. What happened is unforgiveable. I wish Joffrey had come to present his apologies himself, but he wasn’t very receptive to me after the riot.”

Sansa would have been surprised that Joffrey was receptive to anybody. He listened to nobody but himself. Even Cersei was afraid of him. She overheard a conversation between the queen and her brother on the docks, as the ship carrying the princess receded. She wasn’t far from them and heard Cersei say something to Lord Tyrion.

“You love your rose, don’t you, little brother? I know you love her. I pray you love her. I pray you love her so much, when you close your eyes, you see her face. I want that for you. I want you to know what it’s like to love someone, to truly love someone, before I take her from you.”

She didn’t think anyone else heard. Tommen was crying, and Joffrey too occupied mocking him to notice the discussion between his mother and uncle. As they proceeded to leave the docks, however, Sansa saw Lord Tyrion taking his nephew aside and talk with him for some time. Joffrey had been hostile at the beginning, but as his uncle spoke, he quieted. Sansa couldn’t hear most of their discussion, but at the end, the king said he agreed with his uncle. After that, he had been in a lighter mood. On their way back to the Red Keep, Sansa even heard him muttering I’ll soon be rid of her. Joffrey looked happy, until he received the dirt.

“I’m sure the king has good reasons to not see me. I don’t blame him,” she said to Lord Tyrion.

“He has reasons, for sure. That doesn’t mean the reasons are right,” the little lord replied.

“The people should never have thrown dirt on him.” They shouldn’t have. That could only make Joffrey angry, and that’s what happened. Without this dirt, the riot would never have taken place.

“Indeed, they shouldn’t have, just like Joffrey shouldn’t have ordered them to be killed. But I suppose the man who threw that dirt had his own reasons to do it.”

“They attacked the king. It was wrong. We all swore loyalty to Joffrey,” she said, hiding behind words like she always did.

A quick smile appeared again on the lord’s face. “Tell me, what do you feel for my kingly nephew?”

“I love him with all my heart,” Sansa answered without hesitation. She learned slowly, but she learned, and once she learned something, she never forgot it.

“Truly? Even now?”

“My love for his Grace is greater than it has ever been.”

Lord Tyrion smiled and shook his head. “Lady Stark, you may survive us yet. Someone has taught you to lie well. You’re flowered, aren’t you?”

“Yes, my lord.” This was no secret by now, and anyone who might not be aware would learn it soon.

“Well, if it can give you some comfort, it is possible that you never marry Joffrey.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say a marriage is made when it is in the interest of the crown. Would you say your
marriage is in Joffrey’s best interest right now?”

“I only wish to be a good wife and a good queen to him,” she replied, not wanting to say anything dangerous.

“I don’t know if you would make a good wife to him, but we may never be able to find out. And I know for a certainty that Joffrey wouldn’t be good husband.”

“I’m sure he would be, my lord.”

“Today, he just proved he couldn’t be.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“When he heard that you had not come back, my lady, he shouted to his men to let the mob have you. A husband who abandons his wife to be raped is no husband.”

He said the last sentence on a lower tone. He was looking at the floor as he said that, the expression very dark. It only lasted a moment as he stood up.

“Well, I suggest you avoid Joffrey as much as you can, but I’m sure you already know it. Take care of yourself, my lady. If you have need of anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

He walked to the door, but before he pulled it he turned to face her. “Lady Sansa, I think you would make a good queen, but for your own sake, it would be better if the queen was another woman.”

When he was gone, Sansa pondered whether she could trust him or not. He was a Lannister, like Joffrey and Cersei, but so was Margaery, and he was her husband. Lady Margaery always spoke fondly of Lord Tyrion. Maybe she should trust him. Now that she thought about it, she believed he might have tried to warn her about Joffrey in Winterfell. Since Lady Margaery left, she thought she couldn’t rely on anyone. Maybe, after all, there was still someone she could trust in this city. Maybe two someones.

Sansa had an agitated night. In her dreams, the man who wanted to hurt her was stabbing her with a knife, and she woke up only to see that it was her moonblood again, which didn’t reassure her. Why did she have to start bleeding? Couldn’t she be barren? Joffrey wouldn’t want her for his wife then, and she would be free.

That morning, Sansa walked to her meeting with Sera Durwell when she came across the Hound, heading in the opposite direction, not giving her a single glance. She wished he did. Since he didn’t talk to her, like most of the time, she did, overcoming her fear to address him. It was easier to talk to him than to Joffrey.

“I beg pardon, ser. I should have come to you after to thank you for saving me. You were so brave.”

She received a glare in return. “Brave? A dog doesn’t need courage to chase off rats.”

Emboldened, Sansa shouted back. She wasn’t scared enough of him to not do it. “Does it give you joy to scare people?”

“No. It gives me joy to kill people. Spare me. You can’t tell me Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell never killed a man.”

“It was his duty. He never liked it,” she opposed. Whatever she couldn’t tell Joffrey, she said it to the Hound.
“Is that what he told you? He lied. Killing is the sweetest thing there is.”

Sansa sometimes thought she could understand him, and other times like that, she had no idea who he was. “Why are you always so hateful?”

“You’ll be glad of the hateful things I do someday when you’re queen and I’m all that stands between you and your beloved king.”

Sansa walked away, not daring to look one last time behind her. Would Sandor Clegane truly be the all that stood between her and Joffrey? She hoped that Lord Tyrion was right when he told her she might never marry Joffrey, for a part of her didn’t want to rely on the Hound for her safety. The other part wanted to rely on him. She hoped that Lady Margaery would be back soon.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
**JON VI**

**Chapter Notes**

Robb Stark makes plan for war, and his war council is interrupted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**JON VI**

“We’ve been sitting on our asses long enough. I say we attack and get done with it!”

“King Stannis’s orders are clear, Lord Umber. We are to stay in the Riverlands and to keep the Lannisters occupied. We are not supposed to initiate the battle, but to let them attack us, without pushing them back to King’s Landing. Our duty is to harass them, slow them, weaken them, but not to defeat them.”

Robb’s voice was loud and firm, giving no place to discussion. He had taken the habit to pull out their father’s face, and right now it was the one he displayed. Jon was with his brother in the command tent, along with his most important bannermen, Jon Umber, called the Greatjon, Rickard Karstark, Roose Bolton, Maege Mormont, Galbart Glover, Wylis Manderly and Halys Hornwood.

Jon always felt intimidated in the presence of these lords. Robb too, but he was better at hiding it. They had been in the Riverlands for some time, but at the exception of a few skirmishes between scouting units, there had been no real fight with the Lannisters. Men began to call it the phoney war, for armies were almost facing each other and yet did nothing. Robb’s army was settled on the borders of the Kingsroad, not far from Harrenhal, close enough for scouts to keep an eye on the Lannister army that settled there, but also far enough to not encourage the enemy to battle. Pieces on the map showed the position of two other armies, one on their side, the other against them. Their ally was represented by a trout, the army of Hoster Tully, stationed not far from Riverrun, while a lion showed the position of a second Lannister army at the Golden Tooth. No one dared to move. Orders from the king.

“King Stannis! King Stannis! Are we to ask Stannis Baratheon what we should do each time we must place a foot before the other?” the Greatjon continued.

“We received orders, Lord Umber, and we are going to follow them. Stannis Baratheon is a seasoned commander. You can be sure he didn’t give us this order without good reason. He has a plan.”

“A plan? There is a plan right here.” He pointed the map. “And all I can see is that we remain stuck at our positions, doing nothing, while the Lannisters occupy the lands of our allies.”

“If there was an invasion of wildlings on the North, Lord Umber, and that I gave you the order to remain inside the walls of the Last Hearth to hold the enemy while reinforcements are on their way, would you disobey me? Would you disobey a direct order from your liege lord?”

“Stannis is not my liege lord. You are.”

“Although he is being rude,” Lord Bolton said in his slow and soft voice, “Lord Umber is not in the
wrong when he says we’ve been sitting on our asses for too long. The men are growing restless. They need to do something. Stannis Baratheon ordered us to keep the Lannisters in the Riverlands. I think we can assume he’s preparing an assault on King’s Landing, and he’s counting on us to keep the Lannisters far from the city. We only have to attract them farther into the Riverlands. An organized retreat would be appropriate for that.”

“And let them plunder more of the Riverlands, live on the fields of our allies?” Ser Wylis Manderly asked. “The Tullys are already unhappy about the king’s orders. It’s their lands that are being ravaged as we speak. Not only they feed their men, but also the Lannisters and ours. Ser Edmure is demanding action. Our relations with our allies are strained. If it continues like this, they could consider defection.”

“Lord Tully will never do that. My father was his son-in-law. He will never side with the Lannisters,” Robb stated.

“Lord Tully, maybe not, but his bannermen are another story,” the Lord of the Dreadfort said. “Some already pledged an oath to Joffrey and allowed garrisons into their castles. Lord Tully didn’t send them help, and neither did we. And since the Lannisters so far have been quite accommodating for those who bent the knee, while maintaining a constant threat with the presence of their troops, their loyalty to House Tully and King Stannis is dwindling.”

“Retreating will not help us gain back their loyalty, if we do as you say, Lord Bolton,” Halys Hornwood said.

“No but attracting the Lannisters far from the Crownlands in our territory will give us the opportunity to confront them on the battlefield. One swift and convincing victory will bring the lords of the Riverlands who chose their side to turn against them. They will be isolated in enemy territory, cut from the capital with weakened forces, and this might force their army at the Golden Tooth to move and give us the opportunity to inflict them another defeat. All that without seeing our lands being ravaged.”

“The Tully lands will be ravaged,” Robb pointed.

“Tully lands, exactly. Not northern lands.”

Before Robb could reply, one of his men entered the tent. “My lords, excuse me, but there’s a group of Lannister knights who just arrived with a white banner before our encampment.”

“They’re asking for a parley?” Robb asked, surprised.

“Aye, my lord. They say they are escorting an emissary who’s here to bring you an offer of peace from Joffrey Baratheon.”

“What offer?” Jon asked.

“I don’t know, my lord. They just want the emissary to see your lordship,” he told Robb.

Jon found it odd and hypocritical that the Lannisters were sending them terms of peace, after what they did to his father. What could they offer? They murdered his father, held his sisters as hostages, and protected a murderer and a monster born of incest. He still couldn’t believe he was fooled in this way. Maybe the guys he met at the Rock were not that bad, but Lord Tyrion and his wife? They promised they would make sure everything would be fine. He was stupid to believe them.

“Very well. Bring him in.”
The man looked troubled. “Aye, my lord.”

“The Lannisters send us peace offers now?” Lady Mormont, the woman warrior, wondered aloud.

“I say we throw their terms in the fire. They’re not worth considering,” Lord Umber said.

“It would be better to listen to them. Better to not refuse an offer angrily without seeing it before,” Lord Bolton said in his still cold voice.

“Whatever Joffrey and the Lannisters have to offer us, I can guarantee you, my lords, I will see that justice is delivered. No matter what the Lannisters offer us, my lord father and his men will be avenged. We will overthrow Joffrey…”

Jon didn’t hear the rest of Robb’s words for at this moment the flap of the tent opened to let someone walk in. Her hair was cut short, she was all dirty, wore trousers and a tunic, but he would have recognized her anywhere. Especially with the thin sword he offered her dangling by her side.

“Arya!”

“Jon!”

The next moment she was running to him and jumping in his arms, almost knocking him on the floor. He would have fallen on his back if he hadn’t pushed her back on her feet and leaned to look at her. He saw that there were marks of bruises on her face.

“Arya! Is that really you?” Robb asked next to him. Their sister hugged him too. The lords were all looking at them, utter surprise on their faces, safe for Lord Bolton that nothing seemed to move. Jon didn’t give them much attention and turned back to his little sister.

“Arya. What are you doing here? How did you escape? How did you leave King’s Landing?”

“I found her.”

Jon turned his head immediately to the flap of the tent, where the voice came from. Someone else had followed Arya inside.

“Mira?” he asked, unbelieving what he was seeing right in front of him. She wore thicker clothes than when they last saw each other at Casterly Rock, more similar to those she had when they first met in the godswood of Winterfell. She genuinely smiled at him.

“Lady Mira.” Lord Glover stood up and walked towards her. “By the Old Gods, you’ve grown up since the last time I saw you.”

“Lord Glover. It’s a pleasure to see you again.” She bowed to him. then she turned to Robb and did the same. “Lord Stark.”

“I believe introductions would be helpful,” Roose Bolton said.

“My name is Mira Forrester, Lord Bolton,” she replied to the Lord of the Dreadfort. Jon perceived a certain edge in her voice. It was barely perceptible, but it was there.

“Oh aye, I’ve heard about your family. One of my bannermen speaks a lot about your father.”

Jon had very good suspicions about which bannerman Lord Bolton was talking about.

“I remember you,” Robb said. “You’re one of Lady Margaery Lannister’s handmaidens.”
“Yes, my lord. I am,” she replied.

“She helped me.” In the confusion, Arya had almost been forgotten. They all looked at her. “She helped me to come here.”

Robb placed a hand on her shoulder. “Everything will be alright, Arya. You’re safe now.” He called one of the guards at the door. “Rayon, bring the Lady Arya to my personal pavilion. Make sure she is fed and that she’s given a bath. I’ll go to see you later,” he added for their sister.

Arya looked disappointed. “I’ll go with her,” Jon said. Arya had just come back and it wouldn’t be fair to leave her alone. His brother was Lord of Winterfell and had duties, but Jon didn’t.

He accompanied Arya with Rayon out of the command tent. When they went close to Mira, he thanked her. She slightly bowed her head to acknowledge it.

Robb’s tent was simple but comfortable enough, at least for a Northerner. A command tent for the Lord of Casterly Rock or Highgarden would certainly have more luxuries, even though Jon couldn’t say that by experience. He saw how the Lannisters lived at Casterly Rock, at home, but not when they were at war. Judging from his time chasing criminals in the Westerlands, the inferior officers probably had no more commodities during a campaign than Robb’s men, but he could be wrong. Chasing down criminals running free in the wild was different from marching into war.

Robb’s guard left him and Arya alone as he took care of bringing her food and a big bucket of water. Arya hugged him as soon as he was gone. “I’m glad to see you,” she said.

“Me too. Are you all right?”

“Aye, I am. I’m well.”

He looked at her, breaking their embrace. “What happened?”

Her expression of joy turned to anger. “They murdered him. Father.”

“I know.” Jon said in a low voice. “I mean, how did you get here? We believed you were still in King’s Landing.”

“I escaped. I don’t know what happened, but men with red armor came to take me, and Syrio held them off as I escaped the Red Keep. They were Lannisters. I spent some time in Flea Bottom in King’s Landing, and then a man of the Night’s Watch, his name was Yoren, he made me leave King’s Landing with other recruits and told me he would bring me back to Winterfell. We were caught by the Lannisters on our way in the Riverlands and brought to Harrenhal. They didn’t know who I was. I worked there, I scrubbed floors, washed latrines, that sort of things. And then Mira arrived, and she found out who I was. She made people believe I was the niece of some Lord Chelsted and brought me with her. She even gave me back Needle.”

She pointed the short sword he gave her before they all left Winterfell. He couldn’t stop smiling. “I’m really glad you’re safe.”

Rayon came back with some food at this moment, but Arya didn’t notice him. “I was there, Jon. They murdered Father. I was there. I saw it.”

Jon shook his head. Arya should never have seen it. “We’re going to deal with the Lannisters. What about Sansa? Do you know where she is?”
“Last time I saw her was when they killed Father. She fainted. The Lannisters still have her.”

“Well, we got you back. We’re going to get Sansa back as well.”

“Aye, we will.” He saw the determination and the assurance on Arya’s face.

Two maids then arrived with a bucket full of water. Jon made to leave. “I suppose it’s time for you to look like a girl again,” he japed.

“It should be time for you to look like a boy too,” she shot back. Jon left, chuckling. Theon had made a similar jest like this before, mostly meant for his hair.

Jon walked back to the command tent. On his way, he travelled through narrow alleys between tents. It was time for dinner and men were either eating or waiting in line to receive their bowl of stew with a piece of bread. Depending of the house they served, men either had to prepare their meals themselves or cooks took care of it. All the food that was provided to the army was managed centrally by an intendant named by Robb, who then distributed it to the different houses in Robb’s army. The amount given to every house depended of how many men they had. Each man was allowed the same ration, whether he came from the shores of the White Knife, the swamps of the Neck, the banks of the Weeping Water, Bear Island or the foothills along the Bay of Ice. The lord of the house, or his steward, then had the duty to distribute it to his own men, or to his bannermen who then had to distribute it among their men. The method of distribution varied from one house to another. Some gave more food to their officers, like the Manderlys. Some were said to vary the quantities of food depending on the tasks and efforts of the men, like the Boltons. Some distributed the food equally, like the Glovers and the Umbers, where even the Greatjon and Galbart Glover ate the same stew than their own men. Sometimes the lords had a special intendancy that took care of providing more refined food. Robb had one such service, though he limited it to dinners when he had to discuss with the other lords. The rest of the time, he ate the same food than his own men. Jon did the same.

For now, they didn’t lack resources to feed their men, though since the Lannisters occupied Harrenhal, they had cut them from the river lords of the south, depriving them of a part of their food sources. They couldn’t bring stocks from the North, for the distance was too great and the food could be lost during the travel, especially with winter approaching. They relied on the Riverlands to provide everything, which wasn’t without causing some friction with the local lords, especially since there had been no battle with the Lannisters so far. Obeying the orders of the king might be their duty, but duty wasn’t always easy.

“Snow!”

Someone hailed him. He wasn’t very far from the command tent. Jon looked at his right where the man’s voice came from. He was wearing red armor. He was probably one of the men who escorted the emissary of House Lannister. As he removed his helmet, Jon recognized him.

“Ser Lyonel.”

Lyonel Frey, second son of Emmon Frey and Genna Lannister, quietly walked in his direction. Jon didn’t spend much time with him back at Casterly Rock, though they sparred a few times while training.

“Well, it’s strange to see you here,” he told Jon.

“Strange?”
"After seeing you wandering through the Rock for months, yes, it is.” He sighed. “Look, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your father.”

Jon wasn’t sure if he was being genuine, for his face betrayed no emotion. “My father was murdered.”

Lyonel twisted his lips. “Well, I’m not sure if an execution can be called a murder. Your father was accused of treason.”

“My father is not a traitor,” Jon snapped.

Lyonel Frey raised a hand. “Excuse me, I shouldn’t have brought up that discussion. I understand your choice. I would make the same if I were you. You might not have the Stark name, but you have the blood, and we all remain loyal to our family. It’s good for me, for you, and for everyone else.”

“Then what are you doing here, serving the Lannisters, when you’re a Frey?”

“You’re a Snow, Jon. Does that make you less a Stark than your brother Robb? You have the same amount of Stark blood than he does, only your parents weren’t married. I’m not a Lannister in name, but I still have Lannister blood as much as you have Stark blood. I was born at Casterly Rock, I grew up there, I was raised by my parents in this castle, and I was knighted in the Great Hall by Lord Tywin himself. I swore to serve my family and the Lord of Casterly Rock that day, not House Frey.”

Lyonel sighed again. “Look, I don’t blame you, that’s all. And I want you to know is that I hold no grudge against you for siding with your family. Everyone would do the same. I just wanted to tell you that I regret that it must happen. And I hope we won’t meet on the battlefield.”

“Why? Because I defeated you every time we fought at the Rock?”

“No, because I wouldn’t want one of us to kill the other. We may be on different sides in this war, Jon Snow, but that doesn’t make us enemies. I didn’t kill your father.”

“No, but you fight for the boy who murdered him.”

“I fight for House Lannister. Lord Tyrion declared for Joffrey, which is normal. King Joffrey is his nephew. I would have no more respect for him if he turned his back on his own blood than I would have any for you if you turned against your family and fought with us. Just promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“If we face each other on the battlefield and I fall, send my bones back to Casterly Rock. I’ll send yours back to Winterfell if you die.”

He kept a serious expression, but Jon had the impression he was seeing something in this man’s eyes. “I will.”

“Thanks.” He offered his hand. “I regret we have to fight on different sides in this war. You seem to be a man of honor.”

After a short hesitation, Jon shook his hand.

“One last piece of advice, Jon Snow. Tell your brother to not trust House Frey so easily. They may be bannermen of House Tully, but Walder Frey is not called the Late Lord Walder Frey for nothing. Believe me, even if I had grown up at the Twins, I would side with House Lannister all the same if no oath bound me to my grandfather.”
He walked away, but Jon called after him before he was too far away. “You would serve a family who executed an innocent man if you had the choice. I knew my father. He was no traitor.”

Lyonel Frey turned to speak before he resumed his way. “If Lord Eddard Stark tried to overthrow King Joffrey, then that makes him a traitor, whether you like it or not, and even in the North, the punishment for treason is death. You can’t blame a king for serving justice.”

Jon would have wanted to shout at him, to tell him about how Joffrey was the result of incest, that the Lannisters were the real traitors and they betrayed their word, but he didn’t. He shut his mouth and walked away furiously. It would be better if he avoided the Lannister men until they left.

When he arrived in sight of the command tent, he saw Mira leaving it with another one of Robb’s men. He continued his way, but she noticed him, and walked in his direction. He had to stop when she stood before him.

“Jon.”

“Mira.” He tried to smile. “You said we would meet again. It seems you were right.”

“Yes, though I was hoping it would be in different circumstances. I’m so sorry, Jon. For your father. You have all my condolences.”

“Thanks. And thank you for bringing back Arya.”

She smiled at him. “I’m going to see my father. Do you know where his men are? You walk me to them?”

“Aye, of course.” He made a sign to Robb’s man to stay behind and he led the way, though Mira quickly matched his pace and walked by his side. “Arya told me you helped her to escape Harrenhal. How did you find her?”

“When I arrived in the castle, she brought me some food. Your sister may have dressed herself as a boy and cut her hair, but she still talks like a lady, and she cannot hide her northern accent. Plus Arry isn’t the best name she could use to hide her identity, and I found a sword like the one you said you gave her at Harrenhal. When I realized that she had the same eyes and the same hair than you, it wasn’t difficult to put the pieces together.”

Jon chuckled a little. Despite his brief encounter with Lyonel Frey, his conversation with Mira coupled with Arya’s return could only make him happy. “Thank you again. There aren’t many people who could recognize my sister when she’s disguising herself.”

“I’m glad I did. It was a rough place. The man who was supervising her mistreated her. He didn’t know she was a lady. It was difficult for me to bring her out of the castle. I had to keep her identity hidden. Even the knights and the soldiers travelling with me were not aware of who she was.”

“You took huge risks.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t let her there. I gave her your letter, by the way.”

“Good.” He said in this letter that they would save her, but also that the Lannisters would arrange everything and that they would all soon be together. He wished he could take back what he wrote about the Imp. “Have you seen Sansa in King’s Landing?”

“No, I’m sorry Jon. I couldn’t give her your letter. She could barely leave her room, and the queen and Lady Margaery don’t get along very well. Cersei wouldn’t allow one of her handmaidens near
her. But she’s alive, don’t worry about that.”

Jon nodded, then he realized something. “What are you doing here? You said you travelled with the
Lannisters. Are you... are you accompanying their emissary?”

“No, Jon. I am the emissary.” He stopped and so she did. She looked down before she answered.
“Lord Tyrion sent me here with an offer of peace for your brother. I’m only supposed to give the
terms and to bring back an answer to King’s Landing. I’m merely a messenger. Lord Tyrion believed
your brother might give more thought to the terms if they were brought by a Northerner.”

Jon looked carefully at her. She had a sorry expression on her face. “You’re still serving the
Lannisters?”

“I’m serving Lady Margaery. My mother wanted me to go in the south, and I’m betrothed with her
cousin, remember. I told Lord Tyrion that it was very unlikely your brother would accept any peace
that didn’t involve Joffrey’s death, but he insisted that I should still go.”

“Robb will never make peace with Joffrey as long as he lives.”

She shrugged. “In this case, I already know what answer I will bring back. That’s no surprise. I’ll
have long explanations to give after I brought back your sister.”

She resumed to walk. Jon caught up with her. “Wait, Tyrion Lannister doesn’t know that you
brought Arya to us?”

“Arya disappeared after your father died, Jon. The Lannisters had no idea where she was. They’re
still looking for her. They had no idea she was right under their eyes. I was lucky to find her first.”

“And you brought her here?”

“That was the right thing to do. Now that Arya is safe, I’ll have to tell Lady Margaery and Lord
Tyrion about what I did.”

“You can’t do that. They’re going to kill you for that.”

“No, they won’t Jon. It’s not their style. The worst I could have is to be a hostage like Sansa.”
She talked about it very calmly, with serenity. “They killed my father.”

“No, Jon, they didn’t kill Lord Stark.”

“What do you mean? Is he still alive? Did they lie?”

For a very short moment, he hoped, but she deceived his hopes very quickly. “Jon, your father was
already dead when we arrived in King’s Landing. He was executed two days before our arrival.
Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery were furious. They’re stripping Joffrey and Cersei of all the power
and the influence they have in every possible way.”

“They promised they would solve the situation.”

“They couldn’t. In fact, your father was never supposed to die. The small council and even Cersei
planned everything to send him to the Wall. He only had to acknowledge Joffrey as the true king,
and he did it.”

“No, he couldn’t.” Jon didn’t believe it. His father couldn’t forsake everything he believed in and
recognize a false king, a boy born from an incest.
“He did, Jon, on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor, in the presence of many lords and knights, and a large crowd. But after he did it, Joffrey just ordered his execution, like that. He’s the one who had your father killed. Everyone else was against it.”

Jon felt anger boiling in him. Joffrey had truly murdered his father. His father would be alive, if only Joffrey had let him live. “You shouldn’t go back.”

“I must, Jon. It’s not up to me.”

He seized her arm and forced her to look at him. “They’re going to kill you. You cannot go back there.”

He already lost his father. He couldn’t lose her. She sighed, then placed a careful hand on his cheek.

“Jon, listen. You don’t need to worry about me. I’ve been serving as Lady Margaery’s handmaiden for four years, and she’s been married to Lord Tyrion for three. I know them both, and I know I risk nothing. And maybe I could help Sansa if I go back.”

He reluctantly released her arm, and she removed her hand from his cheek, though they kept looking at each other. “I just don’t want something to happen to you.”

“Don’t worry, I will be fine. Besides, I’m betrothed to Willas Tyrell. I cannot really run away.” They resumed their path. “By the way.” She took something in her cloak and gave it to him. It was a letter. His father’s name was on it, written by him. “I’m sorry I could never give it to him.”

Jon looked down at the letter, then crumpled it. “It’s not your fault.”

They passed before a banner of House Glover. The Forrester weren’t far away. They made the rest of their trip in silence. At one moment, he felt her hand on his arm. It was a simple gesture that comforted him. Finally, they arrived in sight of a banner of House Forrester, with the white tree upon the black field.

“It’s here,” he said.

“Thank you. Jon, I’m so sorry.”

He walked away, leaving Mira to see her family again. As he moved away, he heard great shouts and turned to see what was happening. Lord Gregor Forrester was hugging his daughter into his arms. Jon reflected on the fact that this would never happen again to him.

He thought about something that happened almost ten years ago. That was one of his oldest memories, one of his worst and his best at the same time. A servant who had brought fire into his chamber had been complaining. Jon didn’t know why exactly. Perhaps he only had a rough day, but before he left, the servant said he shouldn’t have to bring wood to a bastard.

“You’re not even a Stark. You should be working, like the whole lot of us. You shouldn’t even exist. You shouldn’t have been born,” he had told him before he left his chamber.

Jon had cried, and he hadn’t wanted to come for dinner. No one could convince him to leave his chambers. His lord father had finally come to see him. Jon had told him what had happened.

“He said that I’m not a Stark, that I shouldn’t have been born.”

His father had placed a comforting hand on his arm at this moment, a little like Mira did today. “Jon, it doesn’t matter what name you have. You have my blood, and that’s all that matters. I don’t regret a
single moment your birth. You were born at the end of a terrible war, a war that should never have happened. You were a symbol of hope among so much death and blood. No matter what other people say, you are a Stark, and you will always be a Stark. Come, my boy.”

And then his father had embraced him, like Mira’s did with her right now. Jon saw her brother, Rodrik Forrester, coming to hug her as well. Mira had told him everything about her family, about her parents, the four brothers and the sister she had. Jon had a family too. He had a brother and a sister waiting for him. He walked away and went to the command tent for real this time.

Inside, Robb was looking at a map. The other lords were gone and his brother was alone. While approaching, Jon realized his brother was clinging to the edges of the table, a furious look on his face. Then he saw the scroll and the seal at the bottom of it. It was the seal of the Hand of the King.

“This is Joffrey’s offer?” Jon asked.

“Aye.”

“So?”

“The Lannisters claim that Father’s execution was a mistake,” Robb replied sharply. “A mistake,” he almost spat. “They claim our father was fooled by Stannis and Renly’s supporters to believe the story of the incest, and that his only crime was to believe a lie that led him to foolish decisions. They say that they were wrong to execute him and discovered how he was manipulated only after his execution. They apologize for his death.” He looked at him. “They apologize. Do you believe that? They killed our father and then they apologize.”

“It was Joffrey,” Jon slowly said. “Mira told me. It was Joffrey who killed him. Everyone else wanted to send him to the Wall, but Joffrey decided to kill him instead, after he recognized him as the one true king.”

Jon could tell that Robb was angrier than before, and he shared his feelings. “This boy is going to pay for that.”

A silence followed. They looked at the map. Jon looked at the Lannister army positioned at Harrenhal. If they could destroy it, they would have a free path to King’s Landing. He looked at the city. That was where Joffrey was, and Sansa was there too. That was where their father got killed.

“What else? What else did they say?” he asked Robb about the terms.

“They want us to fight against Stannis and Renly, to support Joffrey. And they also want Sansa to marry Ser Loras Tyrell, and they want one of us or our uncle Edmure to marry a lady of House Lannister.”

Disdain was plain on his brother’s face. Jon took the parchment with the red lion seal and the signature of the Lord of Casterly Rock at the bottom. He read it. It was like Robb told him, though Lord Tyron used softer words. Also, the Lannisters didn’t only make demands. They made concessions.

Joffrey didn’t only acknowledge murdering their father. He would present official apologies, cleanse the name of Lord Eddard Stark of all accusation and shame, and recognize his error of killing him. His bones would be returned to Winterfell, with the bones of all the people of his household who died in King’s Landing. He would also return his sword, Ice, to his family. House Stark and House Tully and all their allies would be forgiven for their rebellion against the crown, and all the houses of the Riverlands whose lands were occupied or whose resources were requisitioned would be
compensated by House Lannister. Since Joffrey recognized that he was responsible for Lord Eddard Stark’s death, he was ready to cancel his betrothal with Sansa and instead offered that she marries Ser Loras Tyrell, heir to Highgarden. To further mend the relationship between House Stark and House Lannister, Robb, Jon, Bran or Rickon would be betrothed to a lady of House Lannister, who the Starks could choose. They could instead arrange a marriage between Ser Edmure Tully and a Lannister if they wanted. Finally, Arya would be returned to them.

Jon read the terms. The words were conciliant, but at the same time he couldn’t stop from noticing the demands. The Lannisters wanted the Starks and the Tullys to help them put down Stannis and Renly Baratheon. Jon was also upset by the claim they would set Arya free, when in fact they didn’t have her when these lines were written. His father died, and it wouldn’t be apologies and marriages that would allow justice to be given. Joffrey killed him. Justice demanded that Joffrey paid for it. He agreed with Robb. On the other side, he thought about what Mira told him. *Your father was already dead when we arrived in King’s Landing. He was executed two days before our arrival. Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery were furious.*

The seal on the piece of paper was the one from the Lord of Casterly Rock, and not that of the king or his Hand. The signature at the bottom was from the Imp, not Joffrey’s signature. These were the terms of peace from Tyrion Lannister, not from Joffrey Baratheon.

“Robb…” he began.

“Hey. How are you both?” He was interrupted by Arya who just walked in. They both turned their attention to her.

“Hey, Arya. I thought you would be resting,” Robb said.

She pushed aside the concern. “I don’t need to rest. How are you? How is everyone?”

“You don’t have to worry about Bran and Rickon. They are safe at Winterfell,” Jon said.

“Mother is at Dragonstone with Stannis Baratheon,” Robb added.

“So, what are we going to do now? Sansa is still in King’s Landing. We have to save her,” she said.

“I know, and we will. Don’t worry about it, Arya. We’re going to save our sister. In the meantime, I will send you to Riverrun.”

“Riverrun? Why?”

“The army is no place for a lady, Arya.”

“I’m not a lady.”

Jon smiled a little. Arya always hated being called that way.

“Arya, I’m doing this for your own safety,” Robb said. “The Lannisters have a strong army at Harrenhal, and you just escaped them. We cannot take the risk that they could get you back. You’ll be much safer at Riverrun. Our uncle Edmure will take care of you, and our grandfather Lord Hoster as well.”

“And what am I going to do in Riverrun?” Jon had a good idea of what was probably going on through Arya’s head right now. She thought she would be condemned to sewing all day.

“Arya, this is for your safety. You will leave tomorrow with a strong escort.” Robb’s voice didn’t
Arya remained silent for a moment. She was obviously upset. “What about the terms of peace? The ones Mira brought with her?”

“I won’t make peace with the Lannisters, Arya, if that’s what you want to know. We won’t stop to fight until Joffrey is dead.”

An idea came to Jon’s mind at this moment. “Robb, what if we could get Joffrey’s death without fighting?”

Arya and Robb looked at him. “What do you mean?” his brother asked.

Jon turned to his sister. “Arya, I know it might be difficult, but you said you were there when Father was killed.”

“Aye.”

“Was it Joffrey who gave the order?”

“Aye.” Arya frowned, trying to remember the events. “He said something about Cersei and Sansa asking to spare him, but that he wouldn’t, and then he asked Ser Ilyn Payne to bring him his head.”

“So Mira was telling the truth. It’s Joffrey who did that.”

“Well, that only confirms what we already knew. Joffrey has to die,” Robb said.

“Aye, but maybe we could ask the Lannisters to deliver him to us.”

“What?” Robb and Arya shouted at the same time.

“If we tell the Lannisters we only are after Joffrey and that we will stop all hostilities with them if they give us Joffrey… perhaps they could accept.”

At the moment he said that, Jon was sure this would never work. He remembered his conversation with Lyonel Frey. Robb voiced the opinion pretty quickly. “They will never accept that. They will fight for Joffrey.”

“We could at least try. I’ve spent some time at Casterly Rock. Most of the people there are good men. I wish we didn’t have to kill them. Joffrey murdered our father, but they didn’t.”

Robb seemed to think about it. “Stannis will not be satisfied with Joffrey’s death. He is the rightful king. It’s not only Joffrey he’s after.”

It was true. “In this case, we can offer the Lannisters that in exchange for Joffrey’s head, we will try to convince Stannis to spare the princess Myrcella and the prince Tommen. I believe that’s something Father would have done.”

“The Lannisters will refuse.”

“We can still try. Mira is heading back to King’s Landing with your answer anyway. We lose nothing by trying. The Lannisters are not in the best position. They are surrounded from all sides. Renly and Stannis are against them, just like us, and Theon’s father will soon bring his ships into the war. The Iron Islands may already be raiding the shores of the Westerlands and the Reach. They might be willing to consider it.”
Theon had left the army not long after they received the news of their father’s death. Robb sent him to Pyke to convince Balon Greyjoy to mobilize his fleet and to attack the lands of the Lannisters and the Tyrells. He had reached the islands by now, even though they received no word from him yet. Jon knew that the Lannisters would never give up Joffrey, but he felt they had to try. He felt that was the right thing to do, after they welcomed him at the Rock, and for all the people he befriended there.

“I’ll think about it,” Robb said after a few seconds of silence. “Arya, I want you to rest now. You already made a long journey, and you have a longer one ahead of you. Jon, escort her back to her tent.”

With that, the discussion concluded. On their way, Arya talked.

“Robb is different.”

“Aye, I know,” Jon answered. “He’s Lord of Winterfell now.”

“He made me think of Father.”

Jon agreed. Robb had been prepared soon to succeed their father, since his birth., and it was visible in the way he behaved on a daily basis. His movements, his decisions, his facial expressions, everything reminded the men of Lord Eddard Stark. When they arrived at Arya’s tent, she turned to him again.

“Do you really think the Lannisters could give us Joffrey?”

“I wish they do,” he replied, “though I admit I’m not very hopeful.”

Arya seemed to consider something for a moment. “Jon, there’s something you must know. At Harrenhal, I met someone. His name was Jaqen H’ghar.”

“Jaqen Agar?”

“No, H’ghar. I think he was a Braavosi. He spoke the same than my dancing teacher in King’s Landing. And he gave me this. It’s a Braavosi coin.”

Jon looked at the coin Arya was showing him. It didn’t look like anything he ever saw.

“I saved him when the Lannisters captured us,” she resumed. “I saved him and two other men. He said he owned me three deaths because of that, and he told me to name three people and he would kill them.”

“Arya?”

“And he did. I named Ser Armory Lorch and Weese, and he killed them. They never found out who did this.”

“Arya, this man, did you know who he was?” Jon asked, afraid.

“I don’t know. An assassin, I think.”

Surely. “Arya, you should never have talked to him. Assassins cannot be trusted.”

She didn’t seem to care about what he said. “Jon, I gave him another name just before I left.”

Chapter End Notes
In the canon, after Robb was proclaimed King in the North, he sent an offer of peace that he knew the Lannisters would refuse. Here, Robb hadn't won a single battle yet and his bannermen never proclaimed him their king. He is following Stannis's orders, which is not without causing some problems with his bannermen who want a more direct strategy. Instead, Tyrion is the one to send an offer of peace, and without surprise, Robb is not very keen to accept it.

Jon feels the Lannisters betrayed him, but on the other side, he made friends while he was at Casterly Rock, and finding himself to fight against them is not a very comfortable position. So he is in a position where he is more willing to consider options of peace, even though he knows the chances for peace are very limited. He is more clinging to the hope that peace is possible.

Jon somehow finds himself in a similar situation to the one he had in canon, where he was divided between the wildlings and the Night's Watch. Now the division is between the Lannisters and the Starks, and again he is caught between the two, unable to stop the two sides from destroying each other because reconciliation is almost impossible.

Please review

Next chapter: a new POV
Chapter Notes

So here it is, the first chapter told from Mira Forrester's perspective. Mira wasn't supposed to be a POV when I started to write this fanfiction. In fact, the events happening in this chapter were supposed to be told from Jon's perspective, and then I thought it would be better to have a part of the action told from the perspective of the other side, and Mira seemed to be a natural choice.

I know some people complained that Mira's chapters in "A Shadow and a Wolf" only slowed down the pace of the story, and this is true. Mira in ASAAW is a sideline character with a sideline story that is loosely tied to the main plot. That will not be the case for A Rose and a Lion (ARAAL). Mira will be directly involved in the events of Westeros and her chapters will be part of the main plot. There won't be a sideline story this time. I let you read this chapter to see it by yourself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MIRA I

“Now the Lannisters are using you as their ambassador,” her brother grumbled.

“No, Rodrik. I’m not really an ambassador. I’m only carrying an offer of peace. I was chosen over any other person because I am a Northerner,” she explained.

“If Tyrion Lannister believes this will make Robb Stark consider his offer, then I’m afraid he will be disappointed,” her father replied.

They were together in her father’s personal pavilion. She was happy to see her family again, but just like for Jon, she wished they met in better circumstances, and so did they. She believed the next time she would see them would be at her wedding in Highgarden, but destiny decided otherwise. She couldn’t believe everything had gone so wrong in such short time. She should have thought better. History books were full of wars that started when they were the least expected, when everyone believed they were safe and happy. Not long ago, she had been serving the Lady of Casterly Rock, peacefully attending her while she ran the biggest castle in Westeros and helped her husband rule the Seven Kingdoms.

Mira wasn’t an idiot. She saw enough of the world to know who wielded the real power in Westeros. That was why she had been so confident that nothing would befall Lord Eddard Stark. Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery had no interest in a war with half of Westeros. Tyrion Lannister was a man who loved to read, to drink and to rule and play politics and diplomacy, even though he sometimes complained about the idiots he had to deal with, but he had no love and no interest for war. Lady Margaery was quite the same. It was no surprise that they came to love each other. Her mistress loved to rule as well, to care for the people and to be loved by them. She wanted the fields to be fertile so she could feed the hungry people of Lannisport and King’s Landing, not to see them devastated by armies. She wanted warm cloaks for children who froze during winter, not armors for soldiers. The only weapons she loved to be made were the gifts she offered to her guests and her friends, not the swords that were put into a hastily mobilized farmer so he could kill someone on the battlefield. The people Mira served disliked war, whether the war was cold or hot. They didn’t like it
And yet, war had come.

“I told him so, Father, but he sent me all the same,” she said. She suspected that Lord Tyrion knew she told the truth but kept it to herself. Even if her duty mostly consisted in carrying a scroll, she was still officially an emissary of Lord Tyrion and couldn’t share details of this sort. That was her duty.

“Well, we’re glad to see you, my daughter.”

“Do you think it is wise that you stay in the south?” Rodrik asked. “Maybe it would be better for you to go back to Ironrath.”

“You’re forgetting about my wedding.”

“You can stay at Ironrath for the time being, and once the war is over, you can travel to Highgarden.”

“It would be unwise, Rodrik. If Mira leaves Lady Lannister, the betrothal is likely to be cancelled. Though I would rather know that you are safe and unwed than in danger and about to be wed,” her father said, worried.

“I won’t be in any danger, Father. Lady Margaery has known me for years, and she trusts me. Besides, we don’t know what this war could bring to us. If things somehow don’t go in our favor, I will probably be better in the south. I could even influence Lady Margaery to see that our family is safe. And if Lord Stark wins, I won’t have anything to fear from him or you.”

“You trust them?” Rodrik asked, a little suspicious.

“I trust Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery, yes. They’re not that different from us. They were only born south of the Neck.”

“If you say so, sister. I know you’re enjoying your time in the Westerlands, but don’t let that cloud your judgement.”

“I don’t, Rodrik. I worry about everyone of you every day. I don’t know what the future holds for us, and it scares me.”

“Don’t be scared. You’ll see. In a few months, we’ll be riding through the gates of the Red Keep, and at this moment the Lannisters would be better to not have mistreated you,” he said with a smile. He meant it as a joke, but it didn’t reassure Mira.

“The future is always uncertain, Rodrik. We cannot say what will happen in two months, or two years, or twenty years. Anything is possible during a war.”

“Aye, it’s true, it goes for us like it goes for you. So be careful.”

“I’m not the one who will be fighting with a sword soon, Rodrik. But I will be careful. I always am. Unless being careful means acting without honor. “By the way, I never thanked you for the book you sent me.”

Rodrik smiled. Mira was happy to bring conversation back to a less serious topic. “I know you’d like it. You must have seen your share of wonders by now.”

“Yes. It’s quite pleasant. I miss home, but I’m glad I can see some of the world. I couldn’t have
travelled so much had I remained in the North.”

“Well, I hope you will continue to enjoy it. When do you think you will get married?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know any longer. With this war, everything’s been delayed, again. My wedding is not at the top of Lady Margaery’s priorities.”

“I can understand that,” her father said. “After all, you’re my daughter, not hers.”

They shared an accomplice smile, like those they often shared. “She’s my friend.”

“I’m happy for you. It’s not often that powerful ladies become your friends.”

“Mother was happier than you the last time I saw her.”

“Well,” Lord Gregor Forrester began with a smile, “your mother sent you in the south to learn the southern ways, and you end up being friends with the Lady of Casterly Rock and betrothed to a Tyrell. I don’t believe she ever dreamed of it.”

“Who knows, at this pace, you will be Lady of Highgarden one day,” Rodrik joked.

“Not a chance. Anyway, Willas Tyrell makes for a better husband than his cousin.”

Lady Margaery’s brother wasn’t an evil man, far from it, but Mira knew better than to hope for reaching such a high position so quickly, and she wasn’t eager to get married to a man who slept with other men. She had come to accept the particularities of Ser Loras, just like she accepted the particularities of many other people in the south, including Lady Margaery herself, but that didn’t mean she approved them. She knew Willas very well. He was a very good friend, and she didn’t mind the fact he was lame. Besides, what Willas lacked physically, his cousin lacked it in brain. She would rather marry someone without legs than without a head. And Willas was already a very good match for her family and in her mother’s view.

“Don’t ever say that in his presence,” her brother warned her.

“I wouldn’t dare,” she replied in all honesty. Though she might let it slip in the presence of Lady Margaery, for she shared Mira’s views about her brother.

“What about your friend Sera? Is she doing well?” her father asked.

“Yes, she is. She remains in King’s Landing for now. I suppose we’ll stay in the capital as long as Lady Margaery will live there. I have to admit that I don’t envy her for now. I don’t like being around Joffrey.”

Her father looked at her with questioning eyes. “Are you afraid of him?”

“Yes, I’m afraid of him,” she answered after a moment.

“You think you could be in danger?” her brother asked, worried.

“Not as long as Lord and Lady Lannister are the ones ruling the city. I think I will be safe, but Joffrey is unpredictable and violent. Sometimes he reminds of the Mad King, the way Mother used to describe him.”

Lady Elissa Branfield grew up in the Reach, and twice she went to King’s Landing, back in the days when Aerys Targaryen the Second was king. Once when she was only twelve, the second not long before her wedding with Gregor Forrester. She once told Mira about her visits and about the
impression that Aerys Targaryen made on her. A man who laughed at cruelty and enjoyed it, whose
behaviour alternated between evil grin and mad fury. No kindness in his eyes or on his face, no
manners towards anyone, just madness and cruelty. Her lady mother said she had wanted to leave the
city as soon as she arrived both times.

“Do you think Lady Lannister could send you to Highgarden after you return? After all, I suppose
your betrothed must be eager to see you again. For how long have you been engaged yet? It must be
two years now. She would certainly let you leave, and you would get far from Joffrey,” her father
said.

“I think it would be better if I stayed with Lady Margaery, Father. I don’t know why, but I feel this is
the place where I must be right now.”

“Why do you think so?”

“I don’t know. It’s just…” She hesitated to tell them. “I feel I can be useful as her handmaiden.”

“I have to admit that I don’t like it, Mira,” Rodrik said. “You’re putting yourself in danger.”

“So do you, Rodrik, and Father too. Every man in this army is putting his life in danger right now.
Why should it be any different for me?”

“Because you have a choice, Mira. We don’t.”

“We always have a choice, Rodrik.” She cast a glance to her father, who looked down.

“My son, would you go and make sure all men are resting? I don’t want any of them to get drunk
tonight.”

“Aye, Father.”

Her eldest brother walked through the entrance of the tent, leaving Mira alone with her lord father.

“We always have a choice,” her father quoted.

“Yes, always.”

He sighed. “Sometimes, I wish I made a different one.”

Mira looked at the ground for some time, then stood up and paced before she turned to her lord
father. “I used to blame you, Father, but I stopped a long time ago. I understand why you did this,
and I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been for you.”

“I regret it every day, Mira. You have no idea how often I wish I could go back and change the
decision I took this day.”

“Many more people would wish you chose another path, had you taken this one.”

“I know. I keep telling myself that I did the right thing, but that’s not enough. None of your brothers
talk about it, and neither do your mother or your sister, but sometimes I can feel they still despise me
for what I did.”

“I don’t, and I’m sure no one does.”

Her father laughed humorlessly. “You spent too much time away from home. I’m quite sure that
Rodrik’s first decision when I die will be to undo this.”
They remained silent. They both knew what trouble this could cause. “Has Rodrik ever read the *Chronicles*?” she asked.

“No,” her father confessed. “I never told him to.”

“Why? You told me to read them.”

“I know.” He avoided her gaze.

“Why not Rodrik then? Don’t you believe it would be important for him? He will be Lord of Ironrath one day?”

“Perhaps because I don’t want him to make the same decisions that I did. You will never be Lady of Ironrath, Mira. But of all my children, you were always the one who looked the most like me, who could understand me the most. I suppose I told you to read them because I wanted someone to understand me, and because I knew you would never face such a situation.”

A sardonic smile came to her lips. “You knew nothing, Father.”

Lord Gregor Forrester looked at her, stood up and placed his hands on her shoulders. “You respect her, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do, Father. I will never betray the North, or you, or my family, but I could never betray Lady Margaery either.”

“It seems your mother didn’t think about it when she sent you to Highgarden,” he said on with sad voice.

“We both know what will happen tomorrow, Father. Lord Stark will refuse the terms of peace, and we know what will come next.”

“Aye, I know. Only too well.”

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

“No, but this is not a question of what I want. It’s about what I must do, and about my duty. I swore an oath to House Stark.”

He released her shoulders and went back to his chair. “Once, you took a different decision.”

“Aye, but it was my decision back then. Now it’s not.”

“We always have a choice, Father.”

“Not this time, Mira. Not this time.”

Yes, we do. She kept it for herself. She knew her father wouldn’t agree with her and wouldn’t change his mind, and she wasn’t even sure she wanted him to change it. Being loyal to two people who were enemies was difficult.

“Do you want to stay with us tonight? I already had my men arranging a place for you. You’ll be comfortable,” he offered.

“Of course, Father. I’ll be glad.”

They both smiled to each other, and for a moment Mira Forrester was back in the Great Hall of
Ironrath, when she and her father would share a joke or a few words at table that only both of them could understand.

Later, Mira was in her own tent among the Forrester forces. She warned the knights who accompanied her that she would be sleeping with her family, and although some seemed to disagree, Ser Lyonel Frey said she had every right to spend time with her family.

She just untied her hair and laid back in her bed when she felt a burst of wind coming from the back of the tent. She turned to the origin of the noise to find a small shape with something dangling by her side. She realized who was there before she called for help.

“Arya, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Sorry, they wouldn’t let me see you,” she apologized.

“You shouldn’t be here, not so late.”

“It’s okay. Only a few people know I’m here. Robb is keeping it a secret. Apart from some of his men and his main bannermen, no one knows about my presence. They still see a boy when I walk around.”

Mira allowed a smile to come upon her lips. “Jon was right about you. Nothing can stop you.”

“Jon talks a lot about me?”

“Yes, of course. He speaks of all his family, but about you more than anyone else. I think you are his favourite sibling. You seem very close.”

“Aye, we are. I just wanted to thank you. I didn’t tell you before, and I’m sorry. You risked your life to get me out of Harrenhal, and I wasn’t very kind with you, Mira. Thank you, really.”

“There’s no need to apologize, Arya. You’ve been through more in a few weeks than me during my entire life, so I don’t blame you for not saying thank you.”

“I know but, I’m sorry all the same. I’m really sorry. I thought you were trying to give me to the Lannisters first, and I thought you were working for them.” You’re not that far from the truth, Arya.

“I misjudged you. Do you forgive me?”

“Of course, I do. But I think you would be better to leave. Someone could realize you slipped away and it would terrorize your brothers.”

“Aye, I’ll go. Good night, Mira.”

And Arya was gone as quickly as she came. Mira went back to bed and fell asleep. However, she woke up in the middle of the night and felt the need to make water. She used the chamber pot next to her bed and, while she went back to sleep, her right foot touched something metallic on the ground. She had lit a candle to prevent any accident while she made water and was about to blow it off. It was a chance she didn’t do it yet, for the light of the candle reflected on the small piece of metal her foot touched. She knelt and took it. Because of the darkness, she couldn’t see the details, but it didn’t look like any coin she ever saw.

She approached it of the candle and looked at the detail. The coin was round, all dirty and old. It showed only three strange forms. Perhaps before it displayed a face but wear probably got the better of it. It was definitely not a golden dragon nor a silver stag. She bit it. It wasn’t made of copper either. It seemed to be made of iron. She turned the coin to look at the other side, and there she froze.
There were inscriptions, letters from a language she couldn’t speak or read, but whose alphabet she knew. She couldn’t read most of the letters on the outline of the coin, for again wear made half of them unreadable, but the two letters at the centre of the coin were more than visible. And she knew what these two letters meant together. Quickly, she put on a gown and a cloak and walked to the first person she thought about.

He was quite surprised when she woke him up. He was wearing most of his daily clothes, so Mira had no problem looking at him in this attire. Ghost had woken up the moment she walked in, but made no sound to warn his master.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, blinking at the light of the candle she lit as soon as she had entered.

“Excuse me, Jon, but I needed to talk to you, and it couldn’t wait.” She rubbed Ghost’s fur a little as she spoke, and the direwolf squealed. He hadn’t forgotten her.

Jon Snow rubbed his eyes and sat in his bed. “You don’t have much respect for convenience for a lady,” he said.

“You should know what some of my friends were doing in Highgarden, and even at the Rock. Anyway, that’s not as if that was the first I entered your chamber,” she said seriously. Though today it wasn’t technically a chamber, but it was a detail. She tossed the coin at him. “Look at it. Arya came to see me and I think she dropped it on my floor.”

He looked at it. “Aye. She showed it to me. A man at Harrenhal gave it to her.”

“Did she tell you who he was?”

“She said a name. Jaqen Hagar, or something similar.”

She recognized the style of name. “Braavosi.”

“Aye, she thought so too.”

“Jon, is there anything else she told you about this man? Any detail, any little information.”

He hesitated. “She said he killed people for her. She saved him, so he allowed her to choose people he would kill.”

She opened her mouth. “Did someone find out it was him?”

“No, not that I know of. She didn’t see him after she left Harrenhal.”

“Jon, I believe it was a Faceless Man.”

“A what?”

“A Faceless Man. They come from Braavos. They are members of a secret society of assassins. Very little is known of them, but they are reputed for being very efficient killers. They never miss their targets, and they are very costly. Some say they are some kind of religious order whose members worship death.”

Jon didn’t believe her. “Mira, what are you talking about? This is impossible.”

“I’m not joking, Jon. They truly exist. Many years ago, I saw a picture of a coin like this one in a book. The Faceless Men are using it to communicate between them and to show they belong to the
organization. It is said that if you show a coin like this one to anyone from Braavos, he will do anything you ask from him. They are feared, and not only in Braavos. They are known through all the Free Cities of Essos, and even among the rich and powerful people of Westeros, or by those who have the means to pay them. They’re dangerous.”

He seemed to realize she was being serious. “Are you sure this is one of their coins? You said yourself that very little is known of them.”

“No, I’m sure. These coins are known by everyone in Braavos. You see the letters on this side? They stand for Valar Morghulis. This is High Valyrian, and it means *all men must die*. The Faceless Men are said to use these words all the time.”

“So you’re saying that Arya received this coin from a professional assassin from the other side of the Narrow Sea?”

“Yes, and if that’s the case, then she might be in great danger. We almost know nothing of these men. Some say that the reason why they are so good at killing is because they can change their faces. That’s why they’re so hard to find.”

“Changing their faces?” he asked, skeptical.

Mira took a good inspiration. “Jon, listen. I don’t know who this man was, but he is dangerous, and I don’t believe it is wise to let your sister carry this coin around with her. Only the fact he could kill people in Harrenhal without being caught is reason enough to worry.”

“Aye, I admit. But Arya is no longer in Harrenhal, and she’s leaving for Riverrun today. I doubt she could ever see this man again.”

“Maybe not, but I would rather be careful. I think your sister shouldn’t keep this coin with her.”

“I agree. I should have taken it from her in the first place.”

“I would like to bring it back to King’s Landing.”

Jon looked at her, very surprised. “Why?”

“If I’m right and this man was a Faceless Man, then I might find something there. There’s the library, the archives, and even people who could give me information about these assassins there. I don’t like it. And either way, if I’m wrong and it’s only a common assassin, then you’ll get your sister rid of the coin anyway. The coin could help me to catch the assassin at Harrenhal.”

“Aright,” Jon conceded after a moment, giving her back the coin. “Try to find what you can.”

“I will. I don’t like that your sister could have been in contact with a man who can change his appearance to kill people.”

Jon nodded. “You’d better go back to sleep, Mira.”

“Yes, I should. Good night, Jon.”

She rubbed Ghost’s fur one last time and left. He whined as she walked out.

Back to her tent, she hid the coin carefully in her cloak an slept with it. She wouldn’t let it go anywhere far from her. Jon’s sister might be in danger, and she had to find out what this was all about. She didn’t think she would try to locate the man at Harrenhal. The Faceless Men were too
often mentioned and talked about to be a simple rumor. Maybe they couldn’t change their faces, but
behind every legend there was some truth. It couldn’t be a coincidence that the coin was so similar to
the image she saw a long time ago.

Early in the morning, after spending the night thinking about the implication of this coin and the
assassin who supposedly helped Arya, she was summoned to Robb Stark’s command pavilion. She
had a good idea of what was waiting for her.

She was escorted by Ser Lyonel Frey and the other knights who came with her from King’s
Landing. Ser Kevan had offered to provide her with more guards when she stopped at Harrenhal, but
she kindly refused. All the men who came to the Stark camp had followed her since King’s Landing.

Ser Lyonel Frey was a cold man by many standards, and few in Casterly Rock spent time with him,
but Mira didn’t mind the fact that he commanded her escort. As cold as he could be, Lyonel Frey
was also very respectful of everyone, especially people who behaved with honor and discipline. He
seldom spoke with Mira during their journey, but on the few times he did, she could feel he had the
utmost respect for her and her family. He allowed her to spend time with her father and her brother as
much as she wanted, without asking any question. Once, he told her that her loyalty towards Lady
Margaery was worthy of praise. While the other knights looked at her suspiciously because of her
northern origins, no such thing was to be seen with the Frey knight.

They arrived before the command tent. Ser Lyonel and Ser Vaner Nash, who walked before her,
stepped aside to let her in. Before she stepped into the wolf’s den, Ser Lyonel wishes her good luck.
“I think you’ll need it,” he said, no sarcasm and no mockery piercing his voice, only a genuine wish
that everything would be alright.

Inside, Robb was standing behind a table, a map of Westeros laid before him, without any piece on
it. Mira supposed he didn’t want to risk his tactics being discovered by a possible spy. Mira was no
spy. She didn’t come with the intent of discovering Robb Stark’s intentions, but if she was asked by
Lord Tyrion or Lady Margaery to talk about what she saw in this camp, she would have no choice
but to speak, unless she was bound by an oath of some sort to tell nothing.

Jon was sitting to his brother’s right, while Lord Jon Umber sat on the left. There were many lords
including Lord Glover and Lord Bolton. She didn’t know some of them, but she presumed the most
fat of them was Ser Wylis Manderly, heir to White Harbor. Her father was also present, at the right
end of the table. He nodded to her. He tried to look encouraging, but Mira knew better. She stood
before all of them, all those high lords of the North, the most powerful men in her homeland, and she
was all alone. She wasn’t supposed to be there. She was born at Ironrath, a daughter of a rich if not
powerful northern family, a worshiper of the Old Gods, member of a house who had been loyal to
House Stark of Winterfell for centuries. And yet there she stood, opposite to all these men and
women, representing a king who murdered Lord Eddard Stark.

Iron from Ice. She repeated her family’s words in her head. They gave her courage. She bowed and
pulled up a passive face, joined her hands in front of her, and waited. Robb Stark spoke.

“Lady Mira Forrester, first, I want to thank you, as Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, but
also as a brother, for bringing back to me my sister, the Lady Arya of House Stark. I know you took
huge risks for that, and that you take again more risks by going back to King’s Landing, knowing
Joffrey and his advisors might find out what you did.” She didn’t know if Joffrey would ever know
about it, but Lord Tyron and Lady Margaery would. “You have my personal gratitude, and the
gratitude of all House Stark, and of the entire North.”

“Hear,” said all the lords save one. Roose Bolton was looking at her with cold eyes, expressionless.
She tried to not let his cold stare unsettle her.

“I have read the terms of peace that were sent to us by Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the King and Lord of Casterly Rock, Joffrey’s uncle.” Disdain was plain in Lord Stark’s voice as he said the name. “After considering them thoroughly, I have come with another proposal to make to Lord Lannister.”

A servant gave her a large scroll with the seal of House Stark on it. She saw Maester Ortengryn open many of these seals on many papers through the years. It was the first time she was being given one though. The Lord of Winterfell continued.

“Since Joffrey is acknowledging that he murdered my father without good cause, I consider he deserves the same justice as any murderer. Joffrey must surrender himself to me so I may carry out the sentence he deserves for killing Lord Eddard Stark. I will consider in return that all the other members of House Lannister are innocent and were not responsible of my father’s death. House Lannister and House Tyrell will drop their weapons, cease all hostility and recognize Stannis as the one true king of the Seven Kingdoms. My sister Sansa is to be released without delay. Lord Tyrion Lannister is to stand in trial for the attempt of murder against my brother, Brandon Stark. My father’s bones and the bones of all the people the Lannisters slaughtered in King’s Landing must be returned so their families may bury them with dignity and honor. My father’s sword, Ice, must be returned immediately. All the houses in the Riverlands whose lands were occupied or crossed by the Lannister troops will be compensated with an amount that will be fixed by the wronged houses and approved by me and Lord Hoster Tully of Riverrun.”

“In return, I will consider that all the other members of House Lannister are innocent and were not responsible of my father’s death. I will hold no grudge against them and consider that justice has been made. I will talk for them and House Tyrell to King Stannis and do my utmost so that they can keep their lives, lands and castles. I will also do everything I can to ensure that Myrcella and Tommen, the children of Jaime and Cersei Lannister, are allowed to live in exile with their parents, though the final decision will belong to Stannis of the House Baratheon, our rightful king. There will be no marriage between House Stark and Houses Lannister and Tyrell, and they shall obey Stannis in everything he commands them.”

“If the Lannisters and their allies refuse this offer, I will not protect them from Stannis’s wrath, and I will hunt them as accomplices in my father’s murder. They shall suffer the same fate as my father, only I won’t use a servant to do my beheading for me. I will litter the south with Lannister dead.”

“Hear, hear,” said all the lords together. She noticed her father and Jon said so with less enthusiasm than the others.

“You will ride for King’s Landing right away, Lady Mira, and I encourage you to hurry, for as long as the Lannisters do not answer my offer, I will consider them as enemies and keep fighting them to avenge my father. They can give me Joffrey willingly, or I’ll take him from them over their dead bodies.”

That was all. She performed her duty by bringing the terms of peace to Robb Stark and receiving his answer. Duty only demanded that she brings back his answer to Lord Tyrion who would then decide whether he accepted or refused. That was all she had to do, and nothing more.

However, she felt she couldn’t leave.

_The whole city was filled with wailing, lamentations, shouts and sufferings of all sorts, for men were killed in close combat and others, still alive, were thrown from the top of roofs and fell to the ground, some even falling on spears and swords. The main roads were burned down and districts went on fire one after another. This day saw other horrors, for the fire set ablaze all buildings and made_
them crumble, while soldiers, instead of progressively opening breaches in constructions, made the walls fall in one swift movement. Along with stones, lots of bodies and even people still alive fell upon the enemy soldiers. These people were mostly old, women and children who hid in their houses, some covered with injuries, others half-burned and shouting horrible screams. Others, pushed from heights, were thrown into a thousand horrible pains, reduced to ashes, smashed, torn apart.

She looked at her father. He made an imperceptible movement with his head, begging her to leave. Their gazes met, and he knew immediately. She saw his lips squeezing even from where she stood. They both knew what she was about to do, and they both dreaded it.

“My lord, you realize that Tyrion Lannister will never accept peace at these conditions,” she finally said.

“I don’t expect him to, but I’m giving him a chance.”

“He will never recognize that his nephews and his niece come from an incest.” After all, they had no proof that Joffrey and his siblings were not Robert’s children. They might look more like Ser Jaime than their father, but this proved nothing. Talia was so alike their mother that she seemed to have nothing in common with their father. That didn’t make her less the daughter of Gregor Forrester than Mira. “And you know that Stannis Baratheon will kill the children no matter what happens.”

“I gave you my answer for Lord Tyrion, Lady Mira. There’s nothing else to discuss. I wish you a safe travel.”

He had pushed aside the matter. He now began to stand up. “I demand the right to speak freely.”

“My lady, I have nothing to listen to. Whether the Lannisters accept my terms or they refuse. I will not negotiate. You may leave.”

She heard two men approaching her from behind. Leaving was no suggestion in Robb Stark’s eyes. “A man you knew once told me that a good lord listens to his people.”

The two men who were approaching her stopped in their path, and Robb Stark stopped his movement as well. He stared at her, as if that was the first time he saw her.

“I may only have been six when Eddard Stark visited Ironrath, but I remember it very well, and this is what he told my lord father during his visit. And I’m quite sure he told you the same at one time or another. I ask the permission to speak as a Northerner who spent the last years of her life in the south and who knows more about the southern kingdoms than any other person in this tent.”

A heavy silence fell upon the place. Her father was looking worriedly at her, and Jon was surprised, and so were many other lords. Some displayed anger. After all, she almost defied the Lord of Winterfell in front of his most powerful bannermen. Only one man remained quiet, and he was the one to speak.

“Perhaps Lady Forrester could share with us what she knows of the south. Better to go to war when you know your enemy.”

She wasn’t sure which enemy Roose was talking about. Mira knew enough about politics to understand that Robb Stark couldn’t refuse her now. The Boltons and the Starks had a history that was as complicated as the history of Mira’s family with the Whitehills, or the Tyrells with the Florents or the Lannisters with the Reynes. As soon as the Lord of the Dreadfort said he was interested in hearing someone, the Lord of Winterfell couldn’t refuse it.
“You may speak,” Robb Stark said, taking back his seat.

Again, Mira had the eyes of the entire North on her, but this time she wouldn’t only listen. She would speak. She straightened and reminded herself once again that she was a Northerner. She may have spent the last four years in Highgarden and Casterly Rock, but she was a child of the North, and she would always be. As such, she went straight to the point.

“You cannot win this war.”

“That’s a bold statement, my lady,” the Lord of the Last Hearth said. “It seems the south made you weak.”

“I know you fought during Robert’s wars, Lord Umber, but you fought against armies of the Crownlands and Dorne, and against Ironmen. You never fought the Tyrells and the Lannisters. They already raised more men than you will ever be able to muster. Their armies are ready and well trained, and they have better weapons and armors than you do. Even if you defeat them in battle, they will always come back with another army, no matter how many times you beat them, until you lose. They already occupy a part of the Riverlands. Lord Stannis and Lord Renly are fighting each other. I know you don’t have the support of the Vale, or else I would have seen some banner from the Arryns or their bannermen since I arrived. And since Theon Greyjoy is not here, I suppose you probably sent him to the Iron Islands to make an alliance with Balon Greyjoy.”

She struck at the right place. Many lords couldn’t hide their surprise. She noticed that the son of Balon Greyjoy was standing next to Robb Stark when he was acting Lord of Winterfell, back when Lady Margaery and her husband visited the North, and she supposed there had to be a good reason that he wasn’t here. Her theory just proved to be right.

“Even if you gain an alliance with him, Balon Greyjoy will eventually turn on you, like he did ten years ago. Joffrey is supported by the two most powerful houses in Westeros. As long as they support him, you will not be able to defeat him.”

“For a Northerner, you seem quite certain that southerners are going to win,” Lord Bolton pointed out. “Are you so certain we will lose, Lady Mira?”

He was testing her. She could see it. “A wise man once said that the best commander is not the man who wins every battle, but the man who knows when he can fight and when he cannot. I don’t wish to see the North defeated, and eventually invaded.” She looked back at Jon’s brother. “I know you want to kill Joffrey, my lord, but all you will achieve by fighting him will be thousands of deaths, if not more, and many of them will be your countrymen.”

“So you suggest I accept Tyrion Lannister’s offer?” Robb Stark asked, obviously disgusted.

“Yes, I think you should.” She didn’t hesitate to say what she thought, not a single second.

“Coward!” Lord Karstark shouted.

“Careful, you’re talking to my daughter,” her father warned the Lord of Karhold.

“Your daughter is a coward then.”

“Enough!” Robb Stark stood to speak. “My father, the Lord of Winterfell, was murdered by Joffrey. Justice demands that Joffrey dies, and I will stop at nothing to bring him justice.”

“With all your respect, Lord Stark, killing thousands of people to render justice for one man is no justice for the people who will die,” she countered.
“If it had been Lord Forrester who was killed, would you say the same?” he asked.

She looked at her lord father, who returned her gaze. “Sometimes, we must sacrifice someone of our family for the people we rule.”

Lord Gregor Forrester looked down again. “You may think that way, Lady Mira,” Lord Glover said, “but Lord Eddard wasn’t only a lord for all of us. He was a friend, almost a brother. The entire North is grieving for him, and we are ready to die to avenge him.”

He tried to say it on a gentle tone, though she perceived a certain sharpness behind it. She saw that all the lords agreed or didn’t dare to disagree. Mira knew she was stuck into a corner, but she had gone too far to draw back. She did the last thing she could do and called in a loud voice.

“Ser Lyonel, the case.”

Robb Stark frowned and many looked suspicious. Two Silent Sisters entered, carrying a huge case, and laid it on the ground between Robb Stark and Mira. Everyone looked at it, perfectly knowing it what it was.

“What’s that?” Jon asked in the end.

She looked at him, trying to convey with a simple look how sorry she was. “We brought everyone’s bones. They’re yours. Your father’s greatsword is at Harrenhal. I was instructed to send it to you right away if you accepted the terms of peace. It’s still not too late.”

She allowed everyone to look at the case one more moment, and then Robb Stark walked to it, knelt, and opened it. Mira couldn’t see the content from where she was, but she knew everyone else could. “When I arrived at the Red Keep, the first thing I saw was Lord Stark’s head on a spike over the battlements. I wanted Joffrey to die at this moment, and I still want him to die, but not at any cost. Because if you wage war against him, there will be other cases like this one, other heads on ramparts, more blood that will be spilled. And some of it will be northern blood, northern heads, northern bones. I don’t want to see Northerners die for something we cannot get. And if you go to war, the death of these people will be on your hands as much as Joffrey’s hands.”

Robb Stark didn’t lift his face from the content of the case. He didn’t show any sign that he heard her. After a long moment, he looked up.

“Go. If Joffrey turns down my proposition, I will kill him and all his family.”

Mira closed her eyes for a short moment and sighed. She had done all she could. “I will pray that Tyrion Lannister accepts it, but I know he will not. Good luck, my lord.”

She left, shooting one last look at her father. When she came out, tears were running down her cheeks.

“What are you well, my lady,” Ser Lyonel asked her.

“I’m fine. We ride for King’s Landing now.”

He nodded, and the men followed her back to the space they were given. Everything was almost ready. Only last preparations were required, and they would only take a few minutes. Mira thought about going to see Rodrik one last time, but they didn’t have time. She was also afraid that it might be the last time she would see him. A man once said that in peace, sons bury their fathers, while in war, fathers bury their sons. She was afraid it might turn out she would have to bury her father and her brother. She had tried to avoid this possibility, and she failed. If she couldn’t convince Robb
Stark to make peace, she didn’t see how she could convince Tyrion Lannister or Lady Margaery.

“Mira what just happened?”

She would recognize this voice anywhere. Jon was approaching. His presence was comforting and dreading at the same time, for she knew he might die in this war too.

“I did what I thought was right,” she told him, “just like when I saved Arya.”

“You truly want us to make peace with Joffrey?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, with all the conviction in the world.

“He killed my father!”

“And many more fathers will die if you fight him.”

“So what, we let him live?”

“Do you have another solution that doesn’t involve thousands of people dying?”

Jon shook his head in disbelief. “If it had been your father, would you really let Joffrey go with it?”

“I would have to, just like my father did?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Have you forgotten my brother? I told you about him. You think my father wanted to exile him? Asher was forced to live the rest of his life on another continent, only because he fell in love with the wrong woman. My father didn’t want to send him away. Do you know why he did it? Because if he hadn’t, we would have been at war with the Whitehills. He couldn’t be sure he would win, but even if he was, his people would have suffered. Why do you think he is called Gregor the Good? Because he placed the interest of the people he ruled over his own, over the interests of his family. That’s why the people love him.”

“Do you have any idea what war really is, Jon?” she asked him. “History tells us the date of battles, the lords and the kings who took part to it, who won and who lost, but never tells us what truly happens during wars. People die on the battlefield, and for every man who is killed, many more are injured. Some lose legs or arms. Some are so severely injured and suffer so much that their comrades kill them to shorten their pain. And it’s only the people on the battlefields. What do you think happens to those who can’t fight? They get murdered and raped. Their houses are destroyed. Entire villages disappear. When it doesn’t happen, the armies steal from the people, take their crops, their clothes, their steel, even their children, anything they can use for the war. Lands are left unattended and cannot produce crops anymore while men are at the front. And when winter comes, people starve or freeze to death because they have nothing left to eat or to keep themselves warm. THIS is war. Do you think it’s justice?”

Jon was looking at her, agape. Her memories brought her back to a long time ago, in the North, when her brother Asher was forced to leave. She had been so angry at her father. That was one of the rare times when her mother yelled at him, and Mira yelled at him too. She was so angry, that her father exiled her brother, his own son. That was when her father suggested her to read something very special: Chronicles of wars and their consequences, written by an unknown maester. A passage of it had come back to her mind while she spoke with Robb Stark. It detailed the casualties and the suffering caused by all the conflicts that took place in Westeros and Essos for the last five hundred years. The man who wrote this had collected numbers and testimonies that showed the consequences
of all these wars. After she read it, her father had spoken to her, telling her that would be what would happen if he didn’t exile Asher. It had taken time for Mira to forgive her father, but in the end she understood, and she forgave him. Her father, on the other side, never forgave himself, and Mira knew her lady mother never completely forgave him either. She was the only Forrester to truly forgive him, but she didn’t blame him for not forgiving himself. She wouldn’t either, if she was in his place.

“We cannot let Joffrey escape with this, Mira.” Jon said after a long moment. “If we let people go away with that, if there’s no justice in this world, what will it become? What will stop people from doing what they want?”

“They’re already doing what they want, Jon. If we are ready to kill people to avenge your father, what’s the difference between us and Joffrey?”

He approached and stared at her. “We’re not like him.”

“I know you’re not, but I don’t want you or your brother to be anything like him one day.”

“We won’t.”

“You can’t promise that, no more than you can promise someone you will not die. Anything can happen during a war. Nothing is sure.”

“One thing is sure,” Jon said. “If we do not fight, Joffrey will be free to do anything he wants.”

“Not as long as Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery are there to control him,” she replied.

She believed everything she said. Although the Tyrells hesitated so far, she knew they would side with the Lannisters at the end. And as long as the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock could keep Joffrey in check, the Seven Kingdoms could know justice, prosperity and peace, if only the kingdoms were ready to give them a chance.

“They really had nothing to do with my father’s death?” he asked her.

“I swear it on my life, Jon. Joffrey killed your father, and no one else.”

He looked away. “I’ll try to convince Robb to not kill every Lannister, but our father just died, and I can’t see how that will be possible. I fear the Lannisters and the Tyrells are enemies now.”

She looked straight into his eyes. “I will never be your enemy, Jon. Never.”

They kept looking at each other for what seemed like an eternity.

“My lady, we’re ready to depart.” Ser Lyonel’s voice broke the moment. Mira looked at Jon one last time then proceeded to mount her horse that Lyonel Frey brought her.

“Do you think we will see each other again?” Jon asked her.

“I don’t know.” This time she couldn’t be sure of it. She couldn’t be sure of anything. Nothing was filled with more uncertainty than war. She settled herself comfortably on the saddle. She was a clumsy rider before she left Ironrath, but after years spent riding with Margaery and her friends, she got quite decent at riding.

“I know you said I couldn’t do that, but I promise you, Mira. I won’t let your father and your brother die.”
“Promise me in this case that you will not die either.”

“I promise.”

She smiled for the first time today. “Then I suppose we will see each other again, after all. Be careful, Jon.”

She ordered her horse to move forward. An hour later, they were already far from the camp of the Stark army and riding for Harrenhal. There, she would take the greatsword Ice and carry it back to King’s Landing. She wished she could have left it to Robb Stark like his father’s bones and his sister.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jaime
Chapter Notes

The shortest chapter to be uploaded up to now in this story. The reason is simple, we have another chapter that will be uploaded tomorrow, much longer. You'll see why at the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JAIME V

Every time a war happened in Westeros, the Riverlands paid the price. Fed by the three forks of the Trident and the Blackwater Rush, its lands were fertile, its population high. Had it not been for the lack of natural boundaries, the kingdom could have been as rich, if not richer, than the Reach. However, wealth and absence of means to defend them never made for a happy marriage. The Riverlands were like a rich merchant who traveled on the Kingsroad without a strong escort. He was certain to be robbed, and almost sure to be murdered. For every conflict, the Riverlands were the main battleground, a vast source of riches to be drained for the war effort. All the riches and wealth accumulated in times of peace served to feed the armies in times of war. Right now, the Lannisters lived on and from the lands of the Tullys and their bannermen.

Their army had been on the march for a few days now. Their scout reported that Robb stayed camped on his positions. He didn’t move. After Mira Forrester came back from her diplomacy mission with the answer everyone expected, Kevan decided to march on Robb Stark and push him to battle. Ned Stark’s son was new to war, hence he could be prone to quick and rash decisions if thrown against a wall, his uncle reasoned. They had to force him to fight. If they won, their hold on the Riverlands would be stronger than ever, and they could have a free way to Riverrun. If they lost, they could retreat to Harrenhal, or King’s Landing if it came to that, and reorganize their defences. Kevan thought it was better to provoke the fight now, while Stannis was occupied in the Stormlands with his brother Renly. Jaime talked about it with someone this very morning before they resumed their march.

“I can’t believe the favor Renly did to us,” Jaime told the man.

“I know the three brothers never loved each other, but I must admit I didn’t expect them to go as far as to actually start a war between them,” Addam Marbrand said.

“Well, I won’t complain about it, though I hardly imagine Renly riding into battle. He would be afraid to rip his doublet.”

The two of them laughed heartedly. Ser Addam Marbrand was a childhood friend of Jaime from his time as page at Casterly Rock. He was one of the many knights in service of his father, and when Tywin Lannister passed away, Jaime’s brother kept Addam at his service. Tyrion had respect for Jaime’s friend, and Jaime respected him too.

“Please, don’t beat the Starks by yourself. Leave some for us,” Jaime told his friend as he prepared his cavalry squadrons.

“Ser Kevan only ordered me to harass the Starks. He was very clear on that. I wouldn’t mind
defeating them right away, but I’m afraid it will have to wait,” Addam had replied.

“We’ll see. Who knows what opportunities could present themselves to us today.”

They exchanged these words this morning. Now they were in the middle of the afternoon, and while Ser Addam was harassing the Stark troops, Jaime had to content himself with leading the vanguard. As soon as they were on the move, Robb Stark moved as well. He retreated. The Stark boy was running away from them. Jaime had always thought the Starks were fools, but not cowards. He respected, even admired their courage, as foolish as it was. He thought Ned Stark’s son would be made of the same stuff than his father, uncle and grandfather, but it seemed he was wrong. Robb Stark was afraid to fight. Perhaps after he learned how Rickard and Brandon Stark died, and now that his father joined them, he feared to face the same fate. Jaime couldn’t blame him. The Lannister army was one of the most feared in Westeros, and they had the best weapons in this country. Robb Stark would know the true might of House Lannister soon enough. He could run away, Jaime was ready to chase him as far as the North went if necessary.

Kevan pushed their men forward, making sure they were always close enough to eventually decide of an attack and do it on the same day. Skirmishes had already taken place between their scouting units, and each time the Starks withdrew. Jaime couldn’t wait for the moment where they would actually fight. Twice he rode against an enemy unit that was close, and twice the enemy ran away before Jaime could reach him. That was beyond frustrating. They only had to come and fight, Jaime would give them one. This game of hide and seek was insufferable. He didn’t fight the Starks during Robert’s Rebellion, but from what he saw during Balon Greyjoy’s rebellion, he expected more from the northern armies.

He kept riding forward, pushing his horse a little more, impatient for a real fight. And as always, his thoughts went to the woman he loved. Cersei was in King’s Landing with her children, queen like she always wanted. Well, not exactly the way she wanted. Cersei believed she knew Tyrion, but the truth was she didn’t know him at all, while Jaime and Tyrion knew Cersei very well. Jaime knew his little brother wouldn’t allow Cersei to rule the way she wanted. To Jaime, it didn’t matter that much. As long as it was one of them who ruled, he had no problem. It was true, however, that his sister’s first decisions didn’t prove to be very wise. Jaime didn’t blame Tyrion for his brief episode of anger when he arrived in the capital. Truth be told, he was grateful to Tyrion for relieving him of the unbearable title of Hand of the King. He knew what Tyrion enjoyed, and war wasn’t among them. His little brother would rather spend his days with his wife at his side, doing whatever they liked to do together.

Jaime wanted this for Tyrion. He was set aside and mocked by their lord father long enough and deserved some happiness in his life, and Margaery Tyrell had provided him with that. Jaime had never seen Tyrion so happy before he was married to her. His little brother had loved his first wife, and he loved the second even more. He understood that Tyrion wanted to make peace, though he didn’t see how Tyrion planned to do that. War was unavoidable between Stannis and Renly who wanted the throne and the Stark boy who wanted to avenge his father’s death. Maybe the Martells would join them to avenge Elia and her children. Jaime wouldn’t blame them. He still regretted the fact he couldn’t protect the children and their mother. If there was one man he would understand if he rebelled against Joffrey, it would be Doran Martell. Had someone done the same to Cersei, he would kill everyone who had something to do with her death, whatever the way and the level they were involved.

The truth was, Jaime didn’t really mind how and when peace would be made, or if it would ever be made. He was a knight. His place had always been on a battlefield, a sword in his hand. He could have died of boredom if his father and sister had their way and he became the Lord of Casterly Rock. Tyrion and Kevan were far better suited for the task, and both didn’t complain about it. Furthermore,
being Lord of Casterly Rock would mean leaving Cersei. He could leave her to go into battle, but not to deal with petty lords, judge robbers or listen to merchants complaining about their taxes. He knew this war wouldn’t last forever. Wars could be long, but not without end. One day, he would go back to Cersei, and the desire to see her again motivated him to win this war.

From the horizon, Jaime spotted a group of knights heading in his direction. He recognized Addam Marbrand at their head. He stopped before Jaime as the column continued to advance.

“Jaime, we have them.”

“You need to be more precise,” he told his childhood friend.

“The Starks. We’ve caught their rearguard, and they’re not expecting an attack. I saw them, they’re entirely disorganized. If we attack them now, we could catch them unaware and inflict them great damage. I already sent one of my men to warn Ser Kevan.”

Jaime sighed in relief. “Finally, some action. Go back to harassing them. I’ll take them right away.”

“Jaime, we should wait for your uncle. If we attack them without being prepared…”

“I’m tired of waiting. I’ve been wiping my ass with the back of my horse for days. The Starks are here, and I’m not going to let them escape.” He turned towards Ser Gregor. “Clegane, lead the men on feet. Make them run for the Starks. I’ll hold them with the cavalry until you arrive.”

“Yes, ser,” the Mountain replied.

Jaime spoke again to Addam. “Go back and take their flanks. I’ll take their rear.”

Not waiting for an answer, Jaime rode towards the cavalry that followed the vanguard of the Lannister army. After a few orders, they followed him at full speed. They would stop the rearguard of the Starks, giving time to the infantry of their vanguard to arrive and cut them to pieces. It was time Robb Stark stopped to run and fought. It was time for the Starks to taste Lannister steel.

It wasn’t long before they came into view of the enemy’s rearguard. Jaime drew his sword, then the shout came out of his mouth.

“Charge, men! For the Westerlands!”

The knights with him roared and they sped up, charging the enemy.

Jaime cut easily the head of the first man he came upon. He wasn’t even wearing a helmet. The second man on feet he crossed was fully quipped, but from his advantageous position Jaime managed to smash him across the throat. Blood spurted from it.

Jaime kept fighting, the battle fever winning him over. There was nothing like this. That was his place. This was where he ought to be. Not guarding a fool of a king, not riding into a tourney, but here, on the battlefield, cutting through the flesh of the enemy.

The Starks were quickly in disarray. Their men were running away. It seemed to be the only thing they could do. Jaime gave them chase, and his men followed the movement, killing every man they could before they got too far.

All this was exhilarating, but Jaime came to realize this was too easy when his men met a volley of arrows. They might wear helmets and armors, but arrows shot from bows traveled so quickly that it pierced them. There was a line of archers not far from them. Jaime saw where the arrows came from
and shouted to his men to follow him. The knight who bore the banner did hear him and followed him, causing all the other knights to do the same.

They found the archers who fired on them, and more. When Jaime’s men approached, the archers hid behind a wall of spears that was waiting for them. Jaime tried to get his men around the deadly spikes, but it was difficult to break the movement of a cavalry. Many knights and their horses ended up skewered on spears. Jaime managed to avoid the same fate by slowing down. He used the opportunity created by the dead knights to attack spearmen. With their weapons buried into the bones of men and horses, they couldn’t fight as well as before. Jaime proceeded to kill as many as he could, trying to make a breach into their defenses. Finally, he got some real challenge.

He received help, for he spotted the banner of Addam Marbrand on the left wing of the enemy. His friend saw what the enemy was trying to do, of course, and he adjusted his tactics to it. The spearmen, as a result, were stuck between two cavalries on different sides. The problem was, Jaime didn’t only meet spearmen. There were swordsmen as well. His cavalry kept fighting them, but the enemy didn’t give ground easily. The knights were immobilized, losing the advantage of the greater mobility their horses gave them. Still, the odds were equal. They held the Stark infantry just long enough.

Jaime spotted new men joining the fight, and they wore the red armor of the Lannisters. Clegane had arrived with the infantry. Jaime rode along their lines and ordered his horsemen to give way for their swordsmen to fight the Starks. He had another use planned for the knights of the Westerlands.

While Clegane and the rearguard kept fighting the enemy forces, relieving Jaime’s men, he assembled the cavalry. They were fewer than before, but still more than enough for what Jaime had in mind. The Stark infantry was busy with their infantry. Addam had taken them on their left wing. Jaime would do the same for the other wing.

“Men, ready to show the Starks who they’re dealing with?” he roared.

“Yeah!” the knights replied in chorus. Again, they charged, but this time they turned around their own troops and took the enemy by its right flank. The Starks were now surrounded, and it wouldn’t be long before they ran away in panic. All they would have to do then would be to chase them and slaughter them in their escape. A horn sounded, and Jaime kept hacking through the enemy.

*You should have stayed at home, Stark boy.*

Chapter End Notes

Here it is, the first battle of the story. I thank you all for your patience, and I apologize for making you wait until we saw actual action. The rest of the battle is to be seen in the next chapter.

Please review

Next chapter : surprise
Chapter Notes

The second part of the battle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JON VII

Ghost was running next to him at the sound of the horn. Not far were Robb and Grey Wind, and behind them half the cavalry of their army. The other half was charging the right wing of the enemy. Theirs was charging the left wing. The horn gave the signal for the attack.

They had waited for that to happen any day. When Robb learned the Lannisters were moving on them from Harrenhal, he prepared an operation of fake retreat. They moved more slowly than the Lannister forces on purpose, tempting them to attack their rearguard. Today, it happened. Roose Bolton was tasked to hold the Lannisters long enough to exhaust them and to give the time to their main army to arrive. The cavalry, composed of knights and light horsemen, arrived first. They saw that Roose Bolton was holding, but in a difficult situation with the infantry of the enemy pressing on him from the front and horsemen pressing against his flanks. When he was made aware of the situation, Robb split his cavalry in two, commanding the first half and leaving the second to Lord Karstark. And now they were charging to save the rearguard that performed its duty very well.

The charge was strong, and the impact with the enemy as well. Jon had never fought in a full-scale battle before. His experience was limited to fighting bandits in the Westerlands and to skirmishes with scouting units. But the enemy didn’t expect them, and as a result they took them by their back, completely by surprise. From surrounding the Lannisters became surrounded.

Jon deflected a spear directed toward him and shoved his sword into the man’s chest. His armor blocked it. He was no knight, Jon could tell, but he was almost armored like one. All Lannister soldiers were equipped with the best armor and weapons that could be found in Westeros. As a result, Jon found himself fighting the horseman, but prevailed by knocking him down from his mount. He saw Ghost busy, burying his teeth into a knight’s throat, as another knight brought his sword against him. Jon parried the blow. He could only fight holding his sword with one hand, since the other was essential to hold the reins of his horse. After a succession of blow from each side, Jon got the upper hand by cutting the man at his neck.

Jon kept fighting against every horseman and knight he came upon. The Lannister cavalry was giving ground. They were repelling them.

“Stark!”

Jon heard the shout through the crowd, and he suspected who it was immediately. When he looked at him charging towards Robb, Jon immediately spun his mount to get in his way. As a result, he and Jaime Lannister ended up clashing swords. The violence of the impact was so strong that they both fell from their horses. When Jon stood up, he was face to face with the Kingslayer.

The knight sniggered when he recognized him. “The bastard of Winterfell. I see you have a better sword now.”
Jon readied himself, and it was a good thing he did for the blow came immediately. He parried or avoided several attacks from Jaime Lannister before he could go on the offensive. The Kingslayer stopped or deflected them easily. Not even once did he evade an attack. He always blocked it or changed its course, but he never ran away. He met every blow, every strike, every attempt against his life.

Some said that Jaime Lannister was among the best swordsmen in the country. He was Bran’s idol before his fall, and now Jon started to understand why. Not only his skills were impressive, but he seemed to fight better as the time went on. At one point, their swords blocked together and their faces came only a few inches from each other.

“You’re good, bastard. Just like your father. I wonder why he didn’t make you Lord of Winterfell.”

Jon roared in anger and launched forward, but again the Kingslayer stopped every one of his attempts. However, the smile was gone from his face. They continued to exchange blows. Jon couldn’t find his weakness, and he tried to not give a way in to Ser Jaime. He heard the horn that announced the bulk of the army was there.

Over fifteen thousand men, fresh and ready for battle, positioned by Robb to be on the march while still ready to enter battle at any moment, had arrived. He didn’t see the Lannisters send more men after them. This meant they had the advantage now. Jaime Lannister stepped back. Jon saw from the corner of his eye a knight still on his horse running towards him. He ducked just in time to avoid his sword, but the knight came back after him, and Jon had to fight him from a lowered position. He heard another horn sounding, though this time it seemed to come from the Lannister side.

He kept dueling with the mounted knight, until another Northerner on horse attracted his attention. Jon noticed the horseman in question was Harrion Karstark. He could no longer see the Kingslayer, or Robb. The whole battle was a general melee. Over it, he saw banners of the Westerlands approaching from one side, and banners of the North from the other. Jon saw a man with the red armor of the Lannister army fighting close and headed towards him. He dealt with the man very quickly, and spotted Jaime Lannister not far away, fighting three men at the same time. While Jon walked in his direction, he killed two of them and the head of the third was cut off by a man on horse. The man dismounted and went to the Kingslayer. Jon was closing on them when he was stopped by another soldier of the Lannisters. He got rid of him, but when he turned again to look at Lord Tyrion’s brother, he had mounted the horse and was riding away. The knight who gave him his mount looked at Jon and readied his sword. Jon saw Ser Jaime Lannister disappearing, powerless.

Jon raised his sword and approached the knight who stood in front of him. His opponent raised his sword too and brought it down. Jon stopped the blow, and counter-attacked. The knight avoided it and tried to hit Jon’s leg, but he blocked the attack. Attacks and counter attacks followed each other closely, none managing to break through the other’s defence. It was a familiar dance to Jon. It happened all the time when he was training at the Rock. Jon finally managed to make the knight lose his balance by targeting his legs. He fell face first on the ground and Jon placed his sword on the back of his neck.

“Jon, stop!” It was the knight who spoke. Jon frowned. The knight knew his name. And Jon knew this voice. He had been in a very similar situation months ago, in the practice yards of Casterly Rock.

“I surrender. It’s alright. It’s me.”

The knight turned to face Jon and removed his helmet. “Teron?”

Teron Hill, a knight who was part of House Lannister’s household, who Jon befriended at Casterly Rock. They had fought in a duel one day, for a bet, and their fight had ended the same way. He didn’t expect to meet him on the battlefield, not like that. Jon had his sword directed at his throat. But
he had surrendered. Jon looked around to see that there were no fighting Lannister to be seen. Those he saw were either dead or on their knees. Their banners were still visible when he looked south, but in his immediate surroundings, none were fighting. He lowered his sword. He saw the relief on Teron’s face, just like Jon was relieved too. He spotted a squire who came near.

“Hey, you. Bring this man. He’s a knight of House Lannister and he surrendered. We’ll keep him prisoner.”

“Aye, my lord,” the squire said. He had a rope with him and used it to tie Teron’s wrists. Jon walked pass them and went back into the battle.

He made his way through the Northerners who fought against the men of the Westerlands and quickly met hostility. He fought against many enemy soldiers, but he felt they were giving ground. They didn’t seem to be fighting at the top of their strength. The left wing of the Lannister army seemed like it was crumbling. No more red armors on horses were visible, while the Stark cavalry dominated the battlefield. It wasn’t long before the enemies ran away.

Jon didn’t take part to the chase. He no longer had a horse for that. When he realized the Lannisters were retreating and too far away for him to catch them up, he stopped running. He realized how exhausted he was. During the battle, he didn’t realize how he overextended his forces. They won. He started to realize it. They won. It wasn’t easy, but they did it.

Three hours later, the sun was almost down and they had set their camp. Men were coming back from the chase, some carrying prisoners with them. Many others were healing their wounds, and there were even some who started to drink to celebrate the victory or to forget what just happened. Jon was in the command tent with Robb and his bannermen. Roose Bolton was giving the count of their losses.

“The vanguard took the bulk of the damage. We’re talking about two thousand dead men. Most of the men who died were in the infantry and they could easily be replaced if needed. We count less than fifty casualties among our horsemen, mostly light cavalry.”

“What about the Lannisters?” Robb asked.

“It is more difficult to ascertain, but based on the count we made so far, we expect their losses to amount at least five thousand men, maybe ten thousand. Add to this the men who will desert after this and their army will be considerably reduced. They will be lucky if they still have a third of it.”

“The river lords will turn against them after such a victory,” Ser Wylis Manderly stated.

“Aye, but their troops are with the Blackfish at the Golden Tooth,” Robb replied. “They can harass the Lannister but attacking them is over their means.”

“Then I say we run after the Lannisters and smash whatever is left from them,” Jon Umber declared.

“We mustn’t forget the orders we received from Lord Stannis,” Ser Wylis reminded them. “He told us to hold the Lannisters inside the Riverlands. Chasing after them might send them back to King’s Landing.”

“So what? We sit on our asses again?”

“No,” Robb said. “We will give chase to the Lannisters. We’ll use the night for our troops to rest and to treat our wounded, but we leave at first light tomorrow to catch them. We won’t go too far. I want them to remain at Harrenhal if that’s what the king wants. But we will take as much men from them as we can. And if we can destroy their army for good, then we will do it.”
The lords around the table seemed to approve. “What about the prisoners?” he then asked at the attention of Lord Karstark. The Lord of Karhold had red eyes. His eldest son and heir, Harrion, died in the battle. Jon had been one of the last people to see him alive.

“Many, but more important than anything, we have Ser Kevan Lannister, and his two sons, Martyn and Willem Lannister, along with many other hostages of great value.”

“That means the enemy is without leader,” Roose Bolton.

“Not entirely,” Jon interrupted. “I saw Ser Jaime Lannister during the battle. He escaped. If someone can regroup their army, that’s him.”

“Jon Snow is right. We cannot assume the Lannister army will disintegrate by itself,” Ser Wylis added.

“I’ll have a discussion with Ser Kevan later. He’s a valuable hostage. We could have use of him in the future,” Robb said. “It’s better if we leave these matters where they are for tonight. I want all of us and our men ready to ride at dawn. Thank you all for today. You all fought bravely.”

“Your father would be proud of you, my lord,” Lord Glover said.

“I think he would be proud of us all.”

The lords left, but Rickard Karstark lingered behind. Robb gave the order to fetch Ser Kevan Lannister, but when he saw that Lord Karstark didn’t leave, he addressed him.

“Is there something you want to talk about, Lord Karstark? By the way, you have all my condolences. I’m sorry for Harrion,” Jon’s brother said.

“Thank you, my lord, but I’m not looking for condolences. I’m looking for something else.”

“What is it?”

“Vengeance. Harrion is dead, but the man who killed him still breathes, and it happens he’s among the prisoners we made today. I’m asking your permission to execute him, in payment for my son’s death.”

Robb remained silent for a moment. “Bring the prisoner. I want to question him.”

Lord Karstark nodded and left. Robb and Jon were the only ones in the tent now. Arya had left for Riverrun days ago, right after Mira’s departure. Jon wondered how she was. He wished they had parted ways on better terms, and he regretted a few things he told her. He just hoped she was safe and well away from the battlefield. If her escort came across a group of Northerners who chased the remnants of the Lannister army, who knew what could happen? They might not realize she was from the North or not take the trouble to ask her. He didn’t worry as much about Arya. She would be far from any danger at Riverrun.

“First battle, first victory. We did it,” Robb said in a tired voice.

“Aye, we did it.”

“I heard you did well.”

“I heard you did well too. Apparently Grey Wind killed a dozen men and as many horses.”

Robb smiled. “Some say the same about Ghost.” They both chuckled. “I doubt it will be our last
battle. I didn’t sue for peace when I thought Joffrey had both Arya and Sansa. I doubt Tyrion Lannister will sue for peace because we have his uncle.”

“No, he won’t. If we had his brother…” Jon hesitated. “I could have gotten my hands on him. Jaime Lannister was right in front of me. I could have killed him, or made him prisoner, and I didn’t.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Jon. Jaime Lannister is one of the best swords in the Seven Kingdoms. It’s already a miracle you came out from a fight with him without a scar. You did your best. And that’s not as if we didn’t gain anything with this battle. We have valuable hostages, and we even killed Ser Gregor Clegane.” The Mountain had fallen during the battle. Jon had seen his body, covered with injuries made by swords and spikes, six spears still planted in his body. The story was that he killed about fifty men before he gave his last breath. “His head is on a spike now. And Ser Wylis was right, the river lords will rally back to our cause. The Lannisters will have their supply lines disrupted, and we could make our way to King’s Landing and rescue Sansa.”

“But Stannis is telling us to hold back.”

“Aye. I don’t know why, but he is the king and he gives the orders. I don’t see how we can go against them. Stannis is a seasoned commander. I keep telling myself he knows what he’s doing, but it’s hard to wait.” Robb sighed. “I’d say we will win this war if it wasn’t for…”

“Aye, me too.” Jon wasn’t sure they would win either. You cannot win this war. Mira’s words were present in his mind. He knew Mira well, and he didn’t believe she would say that unless she truly believed it. If she thought they couldn’t win this war… Despite their victory today, Jon doubted, and for the same reasons Robb doubted. The news from the North were distressing. After all, the Lannisters could raise other armies, and it was true they were better equipped than their own men. Their light cavalry was almost as heavily armored as the northern knights of House Manderly. Casterly Rock alone must have ten times the number of guards and professional soldiers Winterfell had in times of peace. And Casterly Rock was no longer their only enemy in the west they had to worry about. After meeting Teron on the battlefield, Jon wasn’t even sure he would be overjoyed if they won. He could have killed him, had the circumstances be different. And he had other friends in the enemy army. He didn’t want to face people like Daven, but he had to accept the fact it would happen.

Three men walked in. One was shackled and stood between the two who each held one of his arms. The two men across each side were men of Robb’s army, the one between them wasn’t, for he still wore his red armor.

“You may leave us,” Robb said, and his men left the prisoner with him and Jon. “Ser Kevan Lannister?”

“Yes. You must be Robb Stark.” Jon realized Ser Kevan was looking at him.

“This is my brother Jon. I am Robb Stark, Lord of Winterfell,” Robb told him.

“My apologies,” he replied curtly, this time looking at Robb.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“I know that I am your prisoner, and that I am unlikely to be returned to my family.”

“You know well.”

“But my family is also here,” Ser Kevan continued. “The only reason why I’m here is because my two sons were in the vanguard when the fighting began and I tried to save them. You wouldn’t have
won such a victory today if it hadn’t been for that. Don’t expect my army to disband. I left precise instructions before the battle. There’s a whole chain of command ready to take the relay after me. You won’t win this war so easily.”

Robb stood up. “You will not intimidate me into surrendering. You just lost a battle, Ser Kevan, not me.”

“You’ve won a battle, but not the war. Don’t expect Tyrion to give up. You might have known my brother by reputation, but believe me, you don’t know what Tyrion is capable of. He is as dangerous as Tywin ever was, if not more. Do not underestimate him.”

“And your nephew should be better not to underestimate me, ser. For as long as Joffrey lives, I will litter the south with Lannister dead.”

“King Joffrey is a Baratheon, Lord Stark.”

“Is he?”

Ser Kevan didn’t reply to this. “I would like to see my sons, to be sure they are alive and well.”

“You shall see them, after you’ve heard what I have to tell you. You can send as many men after us as you like, we won’t have any rest until Joffrey is dead, and if Tyrion Lannister has any sense, he will give up on fighting for him. Bring him back with the others,” he told his guards.

“Before I leave, Lord Stark, let me just tell you this. You should have accepted Tyrion’s terms.”

“And you should never have killed my father.”

“I’m sorry he’s dead.”

Ser Kevan was brought out and Lord Karstark came in right after, his men carrying a prisoner that Jon recognized immediately. It was Teron.

“This is the man who killed my son, my lord. As a father who loves his son, I ask for your leave to execute him.”

“You can’t do it,” Jon said immediately.

“I was asking the Lord of Winterfell, my boy, not his half-brother,” Lord Karstark said though his teeth.

“Robb, I know this man. His name is Teron Hill. He’s a knight of House Lannister’s household. I met him at Casterly Rock when I lived there. I saw him fight Harrion Karstark, but it was during the battle. He cannot be held accountable for his death.”

Jon remembered now. Teron was the knight who attacked him and then whose attention was diverted by Lord Karstark’s heir. Harrion Karstark died by his hand before he helped the Kingslayer to escape by giving him his horse. Then Jon had fought him on feet and taken him prisoner.

“You’re defending a Lannister?” Lord Karstark asked Jon angrily.

“I’m just saying that every other man on the battlefield would have done in his stead. He cannot be held responsible for the people he killed during the battle.”

“Yes, he can. It was my son he killed.”
“Are there people who saw him actually kill your son?” Robb asked.

The Lord of Karhold nodded towards one of his men, who happened to be Torrhen Karstark, his second son and now the rightful heir to Karhold. “I saw him kill my brother. They were fighting each other, and he brought his sword across his face. We tried to save Harrion, but he died an hour after the battle from his injuries.”

Robb turned towards the knight who was on his knees. “Are you Ser Teron Hill?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Yes, my lord,” Lord Karstark specified.

“Alright, yes, I am, my lord.” Teron looked at Jon. “Are all the Northerners so gloomy, Jon?”

Teron didn’t see Karstark’s fist coming. “Leave him,” Robb said in a calm voice.

“Why? You want to treat our enemies as if they were friends?” Rickard Karstark asked Robb.

“I want to hear him. Did you kill Harrion Karstark?”

Teron shrugged. “Well, you’d have show me his body. I don’t know how he looks like.”

“It was the man on a horse who interrupted our first duel. Remember?” Jon asked.

Teron’s eyes rounded up. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was him but, he rode against me, he was trying to kill me. That was him or me.”

“He confessed. My lord, I ask again for the right to execute him,” Lord Karstark repeated.

“I won’t allow it,” Jon interrupted before Robb could speak.

Karstark stared at him in disdain. “You think you have a say in this?”

“I do. I’m the one who made this man prisoner. He surrendered to me. By the laws of war, his fate lies in my hands. I can set him free, I can ransom him, or I can kill him, whatever I like, but this is my decision, not yours.”

He sustained the stare of Rickard Karstark. The Lord of Karhold turned to Robb to wait for his answer.

“Lord Karstark, I sympathize with your son’s trespassing, but he died on the fields of battle. Whoever killed him in the heat of battle cannot be held responsible for his death. If we were to follow your reasoning, then everyone in this army should hang for the people they killed today. This man’s fate belongs to Jon, just like it would have belonged to you if Ser Teron had surrendered to you.”

Rickard Karstark was obviously unhappy about this. He stared angrily at Robb, then at Jon. “Don’t stand in the way of a father’s revenge, boy.”

He walked away with his men.

“Thank you, Jon,” Teron told him once they were gone.

“Rayon,” Robb called after one of his men. “Bring the prisoners with all the others and post a man to keep an eye on him. Don’t allow Lord Karstark or any of his men near him.”
Rayon escorted Teron out. The knight shot a last thankful look at Jon as he left the tent.

“You know him well?” Robb asked his brother as soon as they were alone again.

“Aye. We often trained together back at Casterly Rock, and we chased down bandits together for some time. He was a friend, you could say.”

“You made many friends at Casterly Rock?”

“A few. Mira was one of them.”

Robb nodded. “I suppose it’s not easy, fighting against them.”

Jon sighed. “It’s more difficult than I thought. I just didn’t expect to come face to face with one of them.”

“It might happen, Jon. You’ll have to be ready if it ever happens. You cannot hesitate.”

“I know.”

“Since we’re on the subject of your friends in the Westerlands, there was something I wanted to ask you, concerning Mira Forrester.”

“Aye. What is it?”

“Well…” Robb hesitated to bring up the topic. “The night after she arrived, there’s one of my men who told me he saw her going into your personal tent.”

Jon felt his heart going up. “That’s not what you believe. She just wanted to talk about Arya. She was worried about her.”

“In the middle of the night?” Robb’s face was half serious and half holding itself from laughing.

“There’s nothing between us, Robb. She’s only a friend.”

“You spent a lot of time with her when she was here, and you also talk a lot with her father. And don’t believe I didn’t see the way you looked at her when she appeared from nowhere.”

“What do you mean? What is about the way I look at her?”

“Jon, I just want to be sure that there’s nothing wrong here. She is the daughter of one of my bannermen. I don’t want any trouble for either of us.”

“I’m telling you there’s nothing. She was the only Northerner apart from me at Casterly Rock, so yes, I spent a lot of time with her, but she’s a friend. A very good friend, but nothing more. Anyway, she’s engaged.”

‘Very well. Forgive me. Only, I didn’t want to take the risk to see Lord Forrester coming to me and accusing you of anything. Now I know what I can answer him without doubt.”

“What about you? Are you going to marry anytime soon?” Jon asked, half-joking, half-serious.

“I don’t know. I will have to, I know that, but with Father’s death and this war, I haven’t thought about it. I suppose it will wait the end of the war. By the way, there was something I thought about, concerning the end of the war. You remember this project Father had to establish new minor lords in the lands near the Gift?”
“Aye, I remember. To create a new barrier against possible wildling invasions.”

“I was thinking that you could be one of those future lords.”

Jon’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re serious?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t be right away, with the war and the winter that’s coming. This one will be long, but once this is all over, I could choose you to occupy some of these lands. You would have to build your keep and to organize everything there, but you would have something. I’m sure Father wouldn’t mind.”

“Do you think Lady Stark will not mind?”

Robb rolled his eyes. “My mother is not very fair with you, I know that. Don’t blame her too much. You’re not her son.”

“I know.” Jon never expected Lady Stark to treat him like Robb or Bran or Rickon, though he wished he didn’t have the impression that she hated him sometimes.

“But you’re my brother, and nothing will change that. My mother can say what she wants, I am the lord of Winterfell and she will have to respect my decisions. Anyway, it’s only for after the war. And if that’s not possible, I’ll find something else. I’m not going to leave you with nothing, Jon. The Karstarks are one of the strongest families in the North, and they are only distant cousins of us. What kind of lord would I be if I allowed them to have so much while my own brother gets nothing?”

“I’m not sure Lord Karstark would like to hear that,” Jon said.

“Certainly not. Be careful with him, Jon. I’ll talk to him, but he’s grieving his son and you hold the man who killed him.”

“It was during a battle.”

“I know, but that doesn’t change the fact it was this man who killed Harrion Karstark. So be careful. Now, better to rest for tomorrow’s march. Have a good night, brother.”

They left the command tent, blowing the candles before they walked out. Jon didn’t walk straight to his personal tent. He had something to do first. He headed for the place where all the prisoners were kept, chained to poles or kept inside improvised pens.

“You look very much like him, you know.” One of the men attached to a pole spoke to him. Jon realized through the darkness that it was Kevan Lannister. He never met the man before this day. He was in King’s Landing during the time Jon spent at Casterly Rock, but he saw his sons Martyn and Willem back then, though he didn’t talk much with them.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Your father.”

“You knew him?”

“Yes, we worked together. I was Master of Laws during his tenure as Hand of the King. I regret his death. He was a good man.”

He didn’t know if he should believe this man was sincere or not. “Then why did you kill him?”

“I was no longer on the small council when that decision was taken. I wasn’t even in King’s Landing
for his execution. I lost my office of Master of Laws not long after your father was arrested. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I was against the idea of killing him.”

Jon approached the man. There was something he needed to ask. “Who wanted my father to die?”

Ser Kevan sighed. “Look, my boy, I’m sorry, but in the end, the king decides. Your father tried to overthrow Joffrey. I know it, I was there. It’s the truth. The punishment for treason is death, and Joffrey applied it. That doesn’t mean that’s what I wanted.”

“Did the small council want to kill my father, or was it Joffrey’s choice?”

“There were talks of sending him to the Wall. I wish that Joffrey had taken that decision. Even if your father was a traitor, it would have been better for everyone if he was a member of the Night’s Watch rather than dead.”

Jon walked away. Maybe Mira had been telling the truth, or maybe there were people who lied to her. However, it confirmed more than ever that Joffrey was the main if not sole responsible for his father’s death.

Jon arrived where Teron was being kept, around many other prisoners. Most were sleeping, but he wasn’t.

“Hey, Jon,” he whispered.

“Hi.”

“Thanks again. Your countrymen are difficult fellows.”

“You just killed the heir of a powerful house in the North, Teron. Don’t blame Lord Karstark for wanting you dead.”

“I understand he can hate me, especially since it was his legitimate son. I suppose he wouldn’t have been so pissed if the son was a bastard.”

“Be careful,” Jon warned him. “Continue like that and they will kill you in your sleep.”

Teron seemed to realize the seriousness of his situation. “Well, I don’t have much, Jon. No one will pay for me, but if you release me, I have some money aside, and I can still give you my armor, my sword…”

“I’m not interested in ransoming you. I’m going to set you free.”

“Really?”

“Aye, I will.”

“But… You know I will go back to the Lannisters after that. We might end up fighting each other again, like today.”

“No, we won’t. I’m giving you back your freedom. In exchange, you must never fight my family again. You will not go back to the Lannister army.”

Teron didn’t speak for a moment. “Jon, I worked hard to get this place at Casterly Rock…”

“I know, but I don’t want to fight you again, and I can’t stop fighting the Lannisters. That’s the only way out. Do you agree?”
Teron nodded after a moment. “I agree.”

Jon used his knife to untie him and led him in silence to the stables. There, he gave him a horse.

“You know, Jon, I could have killed you today, but I spared you,” Teron said as they placed the saddle.

“What do you mean?”

“During our first fight, when I still had my horse, I could have killed you. You know it’s true. But I didn’t. Because I recognized you, and I held back because of that. In some way, you owe me your life.”

“I could have killed you too, when you surrendered.”

“True. I suppose we’re even now.”

“Friends?” Jon offered a hand, and Teron took it almost immediately.

“Friends.” He climbed on his horse.

“Good luck, Teron.”

“I wish you good luck too, Jon. I think we will both need it.”

Teron commanded his horse to ride forward, and he disappeared in the night. Yes, indeed. I will need luck for when Rickard Karstark hears of what I’ve done.

Chapter End Notes

So, a few divergences from the canon. The Starks won, like they did at the Whispering Woods, but their victory is not as complete as it seems, and the prisoners they made are not the same. We also get to see Jon’s position in this war getting a little more complicated.

Please review

Next chapter: Catelyn
Catelyn V

Chapter Notes

Okay, a lot of things happen in here. I can't really tell you more before you've read this long chapter. Only to say that it is a turning point for the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CATELYN V

They waited on a plateau. From where they stood, Storm’s End was easy to spot to the naked eye. Ser Jacelyn Waterfell stood by her side as her escort while they waited for the others to arrive. Stannis Baratheon was there too, with the Red Woman, Melisandre of Asshai, Ser Davos Seaworth and four more of his men, waiting for Renly to arrive. It was the designated hour, and there were still no signs of him.

Catelyn saw how large the camp of Renly Baratheon was. The king had brought five thousand men with him, levies from Dragonstone and the islands that fell under its jurisdiction. Renly definitely had more men than his elder brother, at least thrice the number. From afar, Catelyn could distinguish the colors of the banners. They were all lords from the Stormlands, and they were on Renly’s side. Men would pick whatever lord they wanted, and it seemed they chose Renly. The youngest brother of the Baratheon family declared himself king, and his bannermen followed him.

Robert gave Storm’s End to Lord Renly at the end of the last war. Catelyn started to agree with Stannis. Robert should have bestowed his family’s ancestral castle to his second brother. Still, how could they blame Robert? How could he foresee that his brothers would fight each other later? How could he suspect that his wife would share her bed with her own brother? In her house, they learned very early that family came first, above everything else. The same didn’t seem to go inside House Baratheon. Ours is the Fury. And the brothers were about to unleash fury upon each other instead of their enemies. Unless they convinced Renly to stop his folly and bend the knee before his brother.

The king refused to guarantee that he would spare his brother if he bent the knee, and Catelyn knew better than to press the issue. Stannis Baratheon was a man of action. He did much and talked little. It was useless to argue with him when he wouldn’t change his mind. The best Catelyn could do was to help to convince Renly Baratheon to surrender, and hope that Stannis would have enough sense to not execute his brother.

“Riders coming, my lady,” Ser Jacelyn said.

He was right. Three people were riding in their direction. Catelyn found it a small party for someone who claimed to be king. Perhaps Renly Baratheon had come to his sense and decided to bend the knee. For a moment, she hoped that everything would go for the better, but then she noticed the standards that two of the riders were bearing. One was red and gold, the other was green and gold. She quickly recognized the sigils. A golden lion and a golden rose. And then she recognized the person who didn’t carry any standard.

Margaery Lannister reined up before them, the banner of her birth family on her left, and the banner of her family though marriage on her right. The man who held the banner of House Lannister was dressed like a kingsguard, his white cloak spinning around because of the wind.
“Lady Lannister. I had not thought to find you in the Stormlands,” the king said.

“I wish I didn’t have to be here, Lord Stannis,” the Lady of Casterly Rock replied.

Catelyn and the Lady of the Westerlands had become very close during the time she spent at Winterfell before and after the king’s visit. She had been very helpful while Catelyn remained at Bran’s bedside, and also forced her to realize how selfish and stupid she was to remain next to Bran while her other children were lost and alone. She had come to consider her as a friend and never thought she had something to do with the Lannisters’ crimes. Since Ned’s death, she was no longer sure of the woman’s innocence.

“My lady, you’re talking to the king,” Ser Davos said.

Lady Margaery rolled her eyes. “I already had this discussion with your brother, Lord Stannis, so allow me to make things clear from the start. Joffrey Baratheon is my nephew, the son of Robert Baratheon, and as such he is the only king I know in this country. And don’t tell me that he is the son of Cersei and Jaime Lannister. This is a lie, and you won’t convince me otherwise.”

“Things are very clear, indeed. Thanks for being honest, my lady, but Joffrey shares no blood with me. To be true, I’m more interested in knowing what you’re doing here. Did you join Renly, or did he join you and your husband?” Stannis asked.

“If you and Renly had any sense, you would bend the knee before Joffrey and accept him as your king. That’s why I’m here. I’m hoping to convince you to end your stupid rebellion.”

“You can hope, my lady, for what it’s worth. The Iron Throne is mine by right. All those that deny that are my foes, and traitors.”

“It seems most of the Seven Kingdoms are traitors then,” Lady Margaery said. “You have no allies, Lord Stannis.”

“He does.” Catelyn stepped into the conversation. “House Stark and House Tully are fighting for Stannis.”

Margaery Lannister turned her attention to her. “Catelyn. I’m sorry for your husband.”

Catelyn wanted to strangle this woman right away, especially with the nerve she had not only to say that, but also to truly look sorry for it. Stannis spoke before she could say or do anything. “Where is my brother?”

Lady Margaery shrugged. “He decided he would depart later. He says a king does what he wants, and that a king should never wait.”

Catelyn could see Stannis Baratheon clenching his teeth. This was all a petty game of kings. The Lady of Casterly Rock looked over her shoulder. “Here he comes,” she said.

Indeed, he came. Renly Baratheon rode, a crown on his head, with six men. One had the arms of House Tyrell on his armor. Catelyn noticed a great resemblance between him and Lady Lannister. Could it be someone of her family? And riding with Renly?

The younger brother was all the opposite of Stannis. He looked like Robert Baratheon in his youth. No wonder the stormlords chose to support his claim. It was like going back into war with Robert at their head. Renly smiled widely, when Stannis was still clenching his jaw.

“Stannis!” Renly welcomed his brother with probably too much joy, as if they met for dinner. “Can
“Who else might it be?” his brother asked.

“When I saw your standard, I couldn’t be sure.”

Renly’s banners displayed the traditional sigil of House Baratheon, a black crowned stag on a golden field, to the opposite of Stannis, whose sigil showed a heart surrounded by fire, with a crowned stag at its core. The gold field was identical to Renly’s banner. Catelyn for herself thought a questionable choice by the king to choose the symbol of a foreign religion for his standard.

“What banner is that?” Renly asked.

“My own,” the king replied.

Renly laughed. Catelyn didn’t see any reason to laugh about the whole situation. This discussion could decide the life or death of one if not two brothers, along with the fate of the Realm. “I suppose if we used the same one, the battle would be terribly confusing. Why is your stag on fire?”

The woman who held the banner gave him an answer. “The king has taken for his sigil the fiery heart of the Lord of Light.”

“Ah, you must be this fire priestess we hear so much about. Mm, brother, now I understand why you found religion in your old age.”

“Watch yourself, Renly,” the king warned.

“No, no, I’m relieved. I never really believed you’re a fanatic. Charmless, rigid, boring, yes, but not a godly man. Though I suppose this can explain Joffrey’s accusations that you shared your bed with her and burned the statues of the Seven in Dragonstone.”

“That’s twice I’ve warned you.”

“Lady Stark, I suppose you have stopped on Dragonstone on your way here. You must have visited the sept there. Were the statues of the Seven intact?” Lady Margaery asked her.

Catelyn knew what consequences telling the truth could bring, so she avoided it. “I didn’t stay on Dragonstone for long. We left the day after I arrived.”

“But you visited their sept for sure. I know you, Catelyn. You’re too godly to do otherwise.”

Catelyn was furious that this woman was right, but Stannis cut short to the discussion.

“That’s irrelevant. You rebelled against me, Renly. I am the rightful king. Whoever denies it is my enemy. I have no quarrel with you, as long as you are dutiful. I am your elder, you owe me loyalty and obedience. Give me what is mine by right.”

Lord Renly’s face turned more serious. The discussion had taken another turn.

“You should kneel before your brother,” the Red Woman said. “He’s the Lord Chosen, born amidst salt and smoke.”

“Born amidst salt and smoke? Is he a ham?” Renly quipped.

That priestess hadn’t made things better, far from it. Catelyn decided it was time to say something.
“Listen to yourselves. If you were sons of mine, I would knock your heads together and lock you into a bedchamber until you remembered that you were brothers.”

“Are you that surprised, Catelyn?” Lady Margaery asked her, for everyone to hear. “They have no love for each other, and they had no love for Robert. I suppose I should wonder why they didn’t declare war among each other when Robert was still alive. What’s the difference between fighting Robert or Joffrey, except the fact Joffrey is only a boy and maybe easier to fight. Maybe that’s why you all waited for Robert to die.”

“This has nothing to do with my personal feelings for Robert, Lady Lannister,” Stannis replied. “The children of Cersei Lannister are all born from incest. Their real father is Ser Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer.”

“Do you have any proof of it?” She looked at him defiantly, daring him to prove what he said.

Stannis Baratheon didn’t reply immediately. “Very well, if you want it.”

Ser Davos Seaworth took a scroll of paper that Catelyn recognized immediately to be the last letter her husband wrote. He brought it to Lord Renly who read it. At the end, he laughed and handed it to the knight next to him.

“Read it, Loras.” So that was him, Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of Flowers, the brother of Lady Lannister. Renly turned towards Lady Margaery. “Isn’t that a sweet story, my lady? I must say that when I read my brother’s letter claiming who Joffrey was, it took my breath away.” He then turned to Stannis. “I had never suspected you were so clever, Stannis. Were it only true, you would indeed be Robert’s heir.”

“Were it true? Do you name me a liar?”

“Loras, let me read this,” Lady Lannister ordered her brother.

He gave the letter to his sister. Once she was done reading it, she looked at Catelyn. “We have to give it to your husband, Catelyn, he is honest. I received a similar letter while I was on my way to King’s Landing.”

“So you confess that Eddard Stark is telling the truth,” Stannis stated.

“I said he was honest, not that he told the truth. I’m saying he told what he believed to be the truth. And there’s one person here who had all the reasons for Eddard Stark to believe that Joffrey was a bastard and to make an attempt to overthrow him.”

She stared at Stannis. “This is ridiculous,” he simply said.

“Really? Let’s look at the facts, Lord Stannis. You never loved Robert, nor his children or his wife. You complained when he made you Lord of Dragonstone. You believed he should have given you Storm’s End.”

“Don’t worry, my lady. Stannis always finds something to complain about. If he had been given Storm’s End, he would have thought he deserved Dragonstone. And if Robert had given him both, he would have thought Robert ought to give him his crown.”

Lady Margaery resumed as if Renly never interrupted her. “When Robert Baratheon named Lord Eddard Stark Hand of the King, you left King’s Landing, because you thought you should have been Hand of the King. Eddard Stark wrote to you while he was Hand, asking you to return to the capital, and you never came back. Then when Lord Stark was arrested, you put forward your so-
called claim on the Iron Throne, telling everyone that Robert had no legitimate sons. Finally, you had a chance to take what you believed to deserve. And since Eddard Stark was executed, the North and the Riverlands rallied to you, while half of Westeros rebelled against Joffrey. It seems to me you’re the one who truly benefitted from the rumor of the queen’s incest. You even started it and spread it. And there’s a very simple way to know who is guilty of a crime. We ask ourselves who this crime benefitted the most. I just wonder if your plan included the death of Eddard Stark so that the North would support you or if you truly hoped he would take the Iron Throne for you.”

“You accuse me of setting all this? You call me not only a liar, but a schemer? The man who had Eddard Stark killed?”

“No one had more interests than you to make Eddard Stark believe that the children of his best friend were born of incest. And what better way to have the allegiance of a young boy who just became lord than to have his father killed and to make him believe that the man who executed him is not the true king.”

“I swear that I had nothing to see with Lord Stark’s death,” Stannis coldly stated. He wasn’t defending himself, only stating the truth.

“What do you swear upon? The Seven? You burned the statues of your ancestors’ gods. We know you did. We also know about this affair you have with this woman who is standing right there. How can we trust your word? Will you deny that you slept with her?”

“I have no reason to justify or defend myself to you, Lady Lannister.” Catelyn noticed that Stannis didn’t deny the accusations. She knew that the burning of the idols was true, but his relationship with the Red Woman was only based on rumors. What if there was more to it than she thought? “Not long ago, your family plotted with my brother to get you into Robert’s bed.”

“That shows how little you know about House Tyrell. My parents would never plot to make me a whore. You, on the other side, are plotting and have been plotting to overthrow your nephew for a very long time, and you have nothing to prove your accusations against him.”

“Can you prove any word of this fable?” Renly asked to his brother.

“You have my word, and the word of Eddard Stark. I say this is enough,” Stannis stated.

“Ah. So we have your word, and the word of a dead man.”

“My lord husband would never lie about this, Lord Renly,” Catelyn said.

“Unless he was fooled by someone,” Lady Lannister added.

“My lord husband would never make such an accusation without undisputable proof.”

“King’s Landing is a city of liars and schemers, Lady Stark. Any proof you find there is feeble at best. Your husband didn’t know the capital and how things worked there. I’m afraid he was played by certain people with specific interests.”

“Enough!” Stannis’s voice cut through the air and no one dared to speak but him. “I haven’t come to discuss who is the right king, nor how Eddard Stark was murdered or found the truth about the bastard. I have come to take what is mine.” He stared at his young brother. “For the sake of the mother who bore us, I will give you this one night to reconsider. Strike your banners, come to me before dawn, and I will grant you your old seat in the council along with Storm’s End. I’ll even name you my heir until a son is born to me. Otherwise I shall destroy you.”
“The whole Realm denies your claim, brother,” Renly replied. “From Dorne to the Wall, they deny it. Old men deny it with their death rattle and unborn children deny it in their mother’s wombs. No one wants you for their king. You never wanted any friends, brother. But a man without friends is a man without power.”

“Kings have no friends, only subjects and enemies. I may not have friends, Renly, but I have Dragonstone, the North and the Riverlands for me. What do you have?”

Renly smiled. “I have the Stormlands, the Reach and Dorne. And they follow me because they actually want to follow me, not because they have to or because I forced them to.”

“Renly, you don’t have the support of Highgarden, and you will never have it. You are just too stupid to see it. Dorne doesn’t support you either; you only assume they will support you,” Lady Margaery said. “As for you, Lord Stannis, the Stark and Tully hosts are far away, stuck in the Riverlands by the Lannister armies and unable to move. Half of the Riverlands are already occupied, and soon they will all be occupied and forced to bend the knee to Joffrey. House Tyrell and House Lannister made their choice a long time ago. We do not turn against our lawful rulers, and we don’t accuse our enemies of incest. We also don’t murder members of our own family. My father might have fought for the Mad King, but at least the Mad King never killed someone of his own blood. None of you can say the same. You’re all ready to kill brothers, nephews and nieces to get the Iron Throne. The Westerlands and the Reach will never give their support to such men. So I suggest you bend the knee and recognize your nephew Joffrey as your king. He’s ready to forgive your rebellion. It would be in your interest to seize this chance, before it’s too late.”

Catelyn noticed the annoyed expression that Ser Loras Tyrell wore. She had heard of the rumors concerning his special relationship with Renly Baratheon. She suspected the Tyrells didn’t all agree with Lady Margaery’s words.

“Everyone, look across those fields.” Lord Renly pointed at the standards of all the people who followed him. “Can you see all those banners? The men carrying them will make me king. This is my claim. The crown will suit me better than it ever did to Robert, and better than it would ever do for you, Stannis. I have it in me to be a great king, strong yet generous, clever, just, diligent, loyal to my friends and terrible to my enemies, yet capable of forgiveness. You don’t have it in you, Stannis, and neither does Joffrey. I don’t care if he’s a bastard or not, and I don’t care if you are my elder brother or a man I just met. You are not a king, Stannis. Joffrey is not a king. I am.”

“We shall see,” Stannis simply said.

Catelyn had enough of this. “This is folly! We have a common enemy, and all you find to do is to fight against each other. Have you forgotten you are of the same family?”

“I agree,” Lady Margaery said. “They look like two squabbling children throwing food at each during dinner. Though they shouldn’t just stop fighting each other, they should just not fight at all. Joffrey is a Baratheon as much as they are.”

“This parley is over,” Stannis declared. “Come the dawn, Renly, it will be too late for you. I hope you change your mind. As for Joffrey, Lady Lannister, his turn will come.”

“Lady Stark.” Margaery Lannister called after her. “I would like you to come. We need to talk. And maybe you can succeed to talk Lord Renly out of the idea of killing his brother, if not his nephew. I’ve been trying for days.”

Catelyn wasn’t certain. Lady Lannister seemed sincere, like always, but her sincerity had proved to be questionable. Ned had died despite her promise to save him. However, she wasn’t wrong either,
and although Catelyn might not trust her, she believed she could trust Renly to not kill her. She looked at the king, seeking his permission. He waved a hand.

“Try to convince him before dawn. Come back if he doesn’t change his mind. If things go wrong and you can’t, I’ll make sure my men don’t do you any harm.”

“Yes, let’s Lady Stark tell you how powerful my army is when compared to yours,” Lord Renly said with another smile.

Stannis rode away. As he and his men moved away, the Red Woman lingered behind just a little more time. “Look to your sins, Lord Renly. The night is dark and full of terrors. As for you, Lady Margaery, a rose and a lion will both break your heart.”

“Would you believe I loved him once?” Renly Baratheon said before he rode off as well.

Catelyn was left with Ser Jacelyn and Lady Margaery and her two guards. The sigils of House Lannister and House Tyrell kept flapping through the wind. They said nothing for a moment, then Lady Lannister made a sign to follow her.

They travelled through Lord Renly’s camp without problem. His men were ready for battle. Catelyn noticed how they were better armed than Stannis’s men. The lords of the islands in the Narrow Sea were not as rich and their smith’s work wasn’t as good as those established on the mainland. Stannis had a better fleet, but it would count for nothing in a battle on the ground.

She said nothing to Lady Margaery as they went through the men preparing for the battle that would take place at dawn. Both of them didn’t say anything. The young woman had been a great help at Winterfell after Bran fell.

She led Catelyn to a tent near the center of the encampment. The tent was lavishly furnished, with more comfort than necessary. As soon as they entered, Margaery poured them some wine and invited her to sit. Catelyn chose to remain standing.

“Before you say anything, Catelyn, I was sincere back then. I’m truly sorry for what happened to Lord Stark. He didn’t deserve to die.”

Catelyn looked at this woman she considered as a friend not long ago. “Did you lie to Jon Snow so he would slow us down, or did he know what you were planning and played along?”

“We didn’t try to slow you down. We were trying to save your husband.”

“You killed him.”

Lady Margaery looked down before she stared back at Catelyn. “Lord Eddard Stark was executed two days before Tyrion and I arrived in King’s Landing. When we approached the battlements of the Red Keep, we were welcomed by the sight of his head on a spike.” She sighed as she looked away. “We failed you, I know. We promised we could save him, but we couldn’t. I’m truly sorry. Joffrey is still a boy, and Lord Stark tried to overthrow him. Everyone advised him to spare Ned Stark, but he didn’t listen.”

“How can I be sure you’re telling the truth?”

“I am a Lannister. You think I would blame someone of my own family if I lied? If I did, I would tell you Joffrey wasn’t advised appropriately, that it was the Spider or Littlefinger or Pycelle or someone else who put the idea of killing your husband in his head. I would place the blame on someone else.”
“Joffrey killed Ned?” Catelyn slowly asked.

Margaery looked back at her with a pained expression. “Yes. He ordered his execution on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. We’re doing everything we can. We have held Joffrey away from power, we are doing anything to stop him from taking decisions. He wasn’t ready to rule. Cersei didn’t educate him well. She planted ideas in his head, wrong ideas, and now here we are, at war, and I don’t know how we can stop this madness.”

She really looked discouraged and powerless. “Your brother supports Lord Renly, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, on the top of that. He even said that I could marry Renly and become queen once Tyrion was dead. Do you imagine that? My own brother said this to me. He said he would kill the man I love.”

Maybe that wouldn’t be for the worst, but Catelyn kept her ideas for herself. “I won’t tell this to anybody.”

“Thanks.” She truly wouldn’t. However, she still didn’t trust this woman. At the same time, a part of her thought she might be worthy of trust after all.

“Lady Margaery, I believe your husband is not who you think he is. He’s the one who tried to murder Bran.”

Margaery Lannister looked back at her, utterly surprised. If she was playing an act, she was very good at it. “That’s impossible.”

“He did.” She took something she brought with her and placed it on the table before her. “This dagger belongs to him. The footpad who tried to murder my son used it. That’s the weapon who did this.”

She showed her scars from the struggle that happened not so long ago to emphasize her meaning. Lady Margaery took the dagger into her hands and removed the cloth it was wrapped in. Catelyn noticed an expression of surprise on her face. She unsheathed the dagger, then sheathed it again.

“Catelyn, this dagger does not belong to my husband,” Lady Margaery said.

“It does. I know it.” Perhaps she didn’t recognize it. After all, the Lord of Casterly Rock certainly had dozens of daggers, though she would expect a dagger like this one to come out of the lot. “It belonged to Joffrey. He received it for his name day, and during the tourney he bet on Jaime Lannister and lost it to Lord Tyrion after your brother defeated him.”

Lady Margaery frowned. She looked back at the dagger, then sighed and gave it back to Catelyn. “I don’t know where you got this information, but it is impossible.”

“How can you say that? Do you really believe you know your husband well? He is the son of Tywin Lannister.”

“I know!” She replied abruptly. “I know who his father was, but that doesn’t mean he is like his father. In fact, he is all the opposite.” She took a deep breath. “What you say is impossible because Tyrion never bets against his brother. Anyway, I was with him during the whole tourney, and I can tell you that he didn’t place a single bet, safe for one that was with me and didn’t involve any money or object. I don’t know who told you that, but he lied. Besides, what sort of imbecile arms an assassin with his own blade? Tyrion is many things, but not stupid.”

Catelyn took the dagger back and looked at it. The green pearl was still shining, and so was the handle of silver. If Lady Margaery was telling the truth, then who tried to kill Bran? And why would
Petyr lie to her? She couldn’t see any reason. Though he said he would protect Ned, and he was still sitting on the small council, working for the man who murdered him.

Why was everyone turning on her? Lady Margaery let Ned die, and so did Petyr. Lysa abandoned them when they needed her the most. Who would betray them next?

“Did you get this information during your trip to King’s Landing?”

Catelyn froze at the question of Lady Margaery. She refused to make eye contact with the Lady of the Westerlands.

“I haven’t gone to King’s Landing for years,” she blurted.

“Catelyn, I know why you left Winterfell, back when I stayed there. I heard your conversation in the godswood. I was walking and I heard you. I have known for a long time that you suspected us, and I know for the letter your sister sent you. House Lannister has a large network of spies and informants, not to mention the information we are provided by Varys and Littlefinger, so don’t hope to keep too many secrets from us.”

By the Seven, how didn’t she consider that? She had chosen for this meeting to happen in the godswood because she assumed no Lannister would hear them. None ever wandered into the godswood. Except Lady Margaery who took walks every day.

“So?” she insisted.

“I cannot tell you.”

“So be it, but I can assure you that I have nothing to see with the attempt of assassination on your son, and neither does Tyrion. Don’t you think it would be stupid for us to linger in the North while we would try to assassinate Bran? And Tyrion wouldn’t give him a special saddle so he could ride again if he wanted him dead.”

“What about the others? Cersei? The Kingslayer?”

“If Jaime Lannister wanted to kill someone, he would do it himself. He would never send someone to do the job in his place. As for Cersei, I don’t like her, but I don’t believe she would make an attempt of murder in such an obvious way. Poison would be more her style. I’m sorry, Catelyn, but someone played you, just like your husband was played.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know. We’ve tried to discover who made this attempt of murder against Bran. Ser Kevan inquired while he was in King’s Landing, and we did the same, but so far we have found nothing.”

“Do you truly think that Stannis could have manipulated Ned?”

“I believe Stannis is no longer the man your husband might have known, judging from the information Lord Varys gave us. You’ve spent some time at his side. I suppose you could see it by yourself.”

Indeed, Catelyn never imagined Stannis Baratheon embracing a new faith, or burning representations of the Seven, or being unfaithful to his wife for a foreign priestess. She started to believe the rumors concerning him and the Red Woman were more than rumors. Could he really be behind Ned’s death? It seemed so unlikely. They had fought together in two wars, and Ned always respected him. Stannis respected Ned too. No, the Lannisters had to be behind this. Perhaps Lady Margaery didn’t
play any role in that, but it was definitely House Lannister who was guilty. Lysa’s letter, the assassination attempt on Bran, Ned’s murder, the accusations of incest between the queen and the Kingslayer. All that couldn’t be a coincidence.

“How are my daughters? Sansa? Arya? How are they?”

These were the questions that plagued her every night. She needed to know what happened to them. Lady Lannister sat in a chair and crossed her fingers.

“Sansa is alive, and well. She misses her family, and she’s terrified.”

Catelyn believed her. She had no trouble to believe that Sansa was terrified. Even if the Imp had told her that, she would have believed him.

“And Arya?” she asked.

Catelyn had a bad feeling about this at the moment Lady Margaery inhaled deeply. Then she answered. “We don’t know where she is.”

Her heartbeat accelerated immediately. “What do you mean? You don’t know?”

“She disappeared, right when your husband was arrested. We’ve been looking for her everywhere, and she’s nowhere to be found.”

“I defend you from lying to me,” she warned.

“I’m telling you the truth. Your daughter Arya disappeared, and we have no idea where she is. If I wanted to lie to you, I would tell you we still have her, so we can have more leverage. I gain nothing from telling you we cannot find her.”

“No, nothing, unless she is dead.”

Margaery Lannister shook her head. “Why would we kill her? If you had Tommen or Myrcella as a hostage, would you kill them? She is much more useful to us alive than dead. And even if she was dead, I would either hide it by making you believe we still have her or tell you she was executed to make you afraid that the same fate could be awaiting Sansa.”

No, that couldn’t be. “I warn you, if something ever happens to Sansa…”

“You will go to war against us? You will kill us? We already are at war, and I’m quite sure your son already wants to kill us all. But it’s not me you should threaten. It’s Joffrey. He’s the one who executed your husband against the opinion of the whole small council. He’s the one who forcedSansa to look at her father’s head on a spike, and he’s the one who orders his kingsguards to hit her every time she says or does something he doesn’t like.”

Lady Lannister stared right at her when she was done speaking. Catelyn was agape. All she could do was imagine what Sansa was going through right now.

Lady Lannister sighed. “I’m doing everything I can to protect her, and Tyrion does too. We try to keep her away from Joffrey, but Joffrey is king. When he gives an order, we must obey him. And since we’re keeping him away from the politics of the Realm, he’s looking for other distractions, and I’m afraid mistreating your daughter is among them.”

“But… but Sansa is only a child,” Catelyn whispered.
“A child who is betrothed to Joffrey, who will be his queen.” The prospect of this terrified Catelyn.
“Unless we find a way to cancel the betrothal.”

“There’s a way? You could do that?” Catelyn asked, full of hope for once.

“Yes, that would be possible. I can also send Arya back to you as soon as we find her.”

If they found her. If Arya disappeared, if Margaery Lannister truly said the truth, then she could be
death. Catelyn tried to not think about it. Arya had to still be alive somewhere. She already lost Ned.
She couldn’t lose anyone else.

“But I need your help.”

Lady Margaery looked at her, telling very explicitly that she was more than serious.

“What do you need?” Catelyn asked her. If there was a chance to get back her daughters, then she
had to take it. The Lady of Casterly Rock replied with a single word.

“Peace.”

“Peace?”

“Yes, peace. As long as this war goes on, Sansa will remain betrothed to Joffrey, and she will remain
in King’s Landing. And we will not be able to organize an extensive research of Arya. Not to
mention what could happen to them both depending of the direction this war might take. You want
your daughters back? Then make peace.”

Catelyn shook her head. “My son will never agree to that?”

“We already made our proposal known to him. Before I left King’s Landing, we were about to send
someone to offer him our terms of peace. They included Arya’s freedom and the annulment of
Sansa’s betrothal to Joffrey. By now, he must have received them.”

“He will never agree to this.”

“I don’t expect him to, but right now it’s not him I’m asking, it’s you. We are offering you peace,
Catelyn. What say you?”

Catelyn shook her head. “Even if I could trust you and your husband, what about Joffrey?”

“We will make sure he accepts them. He signed the offer of peace we sent to your son. We will
make sure he respects them.”

“Even if it was true, how can I believe you? You said you would save Ned, and you didn’t.”

“We weren’t there. Now we are. Things will be different.”

“Joffrey killed my husband. He murdered him. And you’re asking me to make peace with him?
You’re asking my son, who is still barely a boy, to make peace with his father’s murderer?”

“I’m asking if you would rather have your daughters alive and safe rather than revenge for your
husband’s death! Ned Stark is gone. Killing will not bring him back. But Sansa and Arya are not
lost, not yet. But the longer this war will last, the more they will be in danger. And your son Robb is
leading an army. At every battle, every march, he will be in danger. And your sons Bran and Rickon
are alone at Winterfell. They may be safe, but they are alone, far from their family and from those
they love. Do you want to risk the lives of your children in the hope to avenge your husband?”
Catelyn knew that Lady Lannister knew her answer before she asked the question, but she didn’t
design to give it. It would be useless. “Robb will never agree to this.” She tried to sound firm, but her
voice betrayed her despair about the whole situation.

“They convince him.”

“How?”

“You are his mother. Remind him of his duty towards his family.”

“He also has a duty towards the North and his bannermen. And towards justice. If he makes peace
for Sansa and Arya, his men could turn on him.”

A long silence followed, then Lady Lannister spoke. “What’s the point to be a powerful lord if you
cannot even defend your family? What’s the point to ruling a great kingdom if you have to sacrifice
the people you love?” She was looking away as she said, as if she was addressing someone else,
someone Catelyn couldn’t see. She stared back at her. “Convince him, or else I might not be able to
protect Sansa, or to find Arya.”

She stood up and proceeded to leave, but before she said one last thing to Catelyn. “So that you
know, the terms we offered Robb Stark include a marriage between Sansa and my brother, Ser Loras
Tyrell. That would ensure the peace between our families, and this way Sansa would be free from
her engagement with Joffrey. She would be Lady of Highgarden one day.”

“But your brother… he’s with Renly. He supports him.”

“For now.” She almost sighed as she said the two words. “I suggest you talk to him before dawn.
Maybe you’ll persuade him to stop fighting Stannis.”

“If I do, you know Stannis and Renly will turn together against Joffrey.”

“Maybe not. Reminding him that it’s wrong to kill a brother might remind him that it’s also wrong to
kill a nephew.”

“But Joffrey is not Renly’s nephew.”

“He is,” Lady Margaery retorted. “You may think otherwise and many people as well, but I know
the truth. Do you remember what your husband wrote to me and Stannis?”

“Yes, and he said Joffrey was born of incest by Cersei and her brother.”

“He wrote this, but not only this. He also said that he wanted Cersei and her children to be spared.
These are his last wishes we know of. He didn’t want Tommen and Myrcella to die. Even if Joffrey
killed him, his brother and sister are innocent. If Stannis or Renly takes King’s Landing, they will be
ekilled. They see them as a threat to their claim. Is that what you want? Is that what your husband
would want? To see two innocent children die? Because that’s what will happen if Stannis or Renly
seizes the Iron Throne.”

“And if Joffrey remains on the Iron Throne, my daughters could die.”

“They won’t, not if you make peace with us.”

“You said you were trying to protect Sansa. Is there nothing more you can do? Can’t you send her
away? Somewhere far from the capital, far from Joffrey, if he’s so dangerous?”
Lady Margaery sighed again. “I don’t know. We cannot send her away without Joffrey’s approval, and they’re engaged. I could try to persuade him to send her to Casterly Rock or even Highgarden for her safety, in case the capital would fall, but it won’t be easy. I cannot guarantee her safety as long as this war lingers and that she remains betrothed to the king.”

“Can you at least promise me to do everything you can to protect her?”

“I’m already doing it.”

“Swear, and I promise I will do everything to convince my son to stop this war.”

That caught Lady Lannister’s attention. Catelyn was ready to do anything to save Sansa and Arya, but she wouldn’t try to talk Robb out of this war without some small guarantee, as weak as it was, that Sansa might be safe in the meantime.

“I swear. If Joffrey tries something on Sansa again, I will do everything I can to stop him.”

She seemed serious, and for Catelyn that was enough. She knew she couldn’t entirely trust this woman, but she didn’t see who else to turn in order to protect her daughter.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have other matters to attend. You can stay here in the meantime, or if you want I can ask Renly to provide you with other arrangements. He’s always pleased to be courteous.”

“No, thank you. I will not stay here for long.”

Margaery Lannister nodded and left for real this time. Catelyn left as well a few moments later and went to look for Lord Renly with Ser Jacelyn. He wasn’t in his personal pavilion. One of his kinsguards told her he was inspecting the horses.

On their way, Catelyn pondered on her latest discussion with Margaery Lannister. Conflicting thoughts cohabited in her mind when it came to the Lady of Casterly Rock. Catelyn couldn’t forget how helpful she was at Winterfell, and somehow a part of her still couldn’t believe she had something to do with this footpad, or with Ned’s death. At the same time, she could see the calculating nature of Margaery Lannister when she asked to convince Robb that peace was necessary. She knew that Catelyn would do everything for her children. She used the right cards.

When they arrived at the stables where the king was supposed to be, they discovered he wasn’t there. It may have been her imagination, but she thought the horses were better fed and taken care of than usual. They were probably preparing them for battle. She spotted the shape of someone she saw before as he discussed with a stable boy.

“Ser Loras.”

Lady Lannister’s brother turned to look at her. “Lady Stark.”

It was disconcerting to see how the brother and the sister looked so much alike. They had many common traits. Catelyn remembered her first years in the North, when she had to get used to her new home, how she felt out of place among these men and women who didn’t think like her, didn’t share the same faith, and even spoke differently. She needed some time to get used to all this. In the end, it worked out well enough. She and Ned had both been very patient. Ned gave her time to get accustomed to the North and helped her to become more familiar with it, and Catelyn was patient enough to get used to a new way of life. She supposed it must have been the same for Lady Margaery. She reflected that her auburn hair was as odd-looking in the North as Margaery Tyrell’s brown-wavy had been among the golden hair of the Lannisters. And yet Margaery defended House
Lannister with the same determination Catelyn had whenever it came to House Stark. Despite all this, Catelyn still felt a stranger in the North. Did Margaery Lannister feel the same about the Westerlands?

“I’m looking for Lord Renly…”

“King Renly,” Ser Loras corrected.

“I’m looking for Renly Baratheon.” Catelyn avoided to call Lord Renly king, while not calling him lord at the same time.

“I don’t know where he is.”

He proceeded to walk away, but Catelyn followed him. “I need to talk with him.”

“I don’t believe the king has anything to discuss with you, Lady Stark. You support Stannis, the enemy of my king. Those who support him are my enemies.”

“I just want to talk with him,” she insisted.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Shouldn’t the king be a better judge than you for that?”

Ser Loras turned to stare at her. “Listen, Lady Stark, we have a battle tomorrow. His Grace has more important issues to deal with than you.”

Catelyn remained calm despite the difficulty of the situation. “Ser, I’m only trying to prevent a battle that could be avoided.”

“How? You want Renly to bend the knee before his brother? To swear loyalty to Stannis?”

“He just offered him back Storm’s End and his seat on the small council. I think it is a very generous offer.”

“You think? Stannis just wants to get rid of him, confine Renly to a dark spot from where no one will notice him, when Stannis should be the one to stay in the shadows. Renly Baratheon deserves to be king.”

“I am sure that Lord Renly would make a decent king…”

“Then why isn’t your son supporting him? Why aren’t you supporting him?”

“Because Stannis is his elder brother.”

“That’s all? That’s the only reason? Stannis was born first, so he gets everything. I don’t think this is fair.”

“This is the law.”

“Law? Well, the law should be changed. Because Renly should be king. I’ve known him since I was a boy. He’s a good man, and he could be a good king if only people gave him a chance, but no one does, only because he’s the thirdborn son. Renly was never given his chance. He can give so much, and yet people don’t let him the opportunity.”

“He is already Lord of Storm’s End…”
“And he’s a good lord of Storm’s End, but he could also be a good king.”

“Stannis Baratheon will make a good king as well.”

“I don’t know Stannis. I barely ever talked to him. You want me to swear my sword to someone I don’t know at all? You want me to put the future of my house and my family into the hands of a man who avoids people like they are rats? I don’t think so. Renly Baratheon has always been good to House Tyrell, and I know he will always be good to us. Stannis, on the other side, he hates us, ever since we besieged him at Storm’s End during the last war. He won’t stop to punish and to ignore the Tyrells if he sits on the Iron Throne. We have nothing to gain from him, or from Joffrey. With Renly, we could have everything, finally our chance.”

“Is your sister of the same view than you?” she asked. She saw blood rushing to the face of the knight. “She doesn’t wish for Lord Renly to fight his brother either. They are family. Families shouldn’t tear themselves apart, or fight among themselves.”

He looked away, an expression of anger and disdain plain on his face. “Margaery is not well placed to talk about family. I tried to help her, and she only pushed me away, accused me of betraying her.”

“Why would she believe it?”

Ser Loras scoffed. “She seems to think that the Lannisters are her family now. It’s like… like she forgot that she was a Tyrell. She’s… different. Ever since she left Highgarden, she hasn’t been the same. She would never have defended the Lannisters three years ago.” Of course, she wouldn’t have, but that was before she was married to Lord Tyrion. Things were different now. “It’s like… she no longer cared about our family. Like she cared more about her husband and nephews with no blood ties than her actual family. She even says she loves the Imp. How can she love him?”

That was a question that Catelyn had been asking herself too. She fell in love with Ned, but that was different. She could conceive that Lady Margaery would do her duty as the Imp’s wife, be faithful, bear his children, but love him? She failed to understand the Lady of Casterly Rock on this point, especially in light of Lord Tyrion’s doings.

“Anyway, we’re going to battle tomorrow. We will defeat Stannis, and I’m telling you, Lady Stark, before the end of the year, Renly Baratheon will be the new king of Westeros. Once Stannis is defeated, I hope your son throw his support to us, or else he shall be destroyed, and I will lead the armies that will destroy them. I will do everything for my king.”

The Knight of Flowers walked away. It was this man that Lady Margaery wanted to marry Sansa to. Catelyn had no trouble imagining how Sansa would be thrilled at the prospect of marrying Ser Loras. He was like the perfect knight she dreamed of. However, if the rumors concerning him and Renly were true… Catelyn chased these ideas from her mind. Considering the actual predicament, Ser Loras Tyrell was still a better match for her daughter than Joffrey. If that was the price to get her away from the monster who killed Ned, then it seemed reasonable. There was no reason Sansa couldn’t have children with Ser Loras. He would have to produce an heir, no matter how he felt. Catelyn had been married to a man she barely knew at a very young age, and things had worked out pretty well, despite the fact he had a son with another woman, a son much more like him than all the sons she gave him, and despite the fact he didn’t love her first. Sansa would be able to deal with it as well. They just needed to get her engagement with Joffrey annulled.

They looked for Renly for a very long time. When they finally found him, he received her with all smile and manners, but he turned her down with the same smile and manners, announcing her he had a pavilion prepared especially for her. Except for the salutations, she didn’t have the opportunity to place a word before she was sent away. However, the knight who escorted her said the king would
meet her later.

Normally, Catelyn should have gone back to Stannis’s encampment for it was beginning to be late, but if she had a chance to talk Renly Baratheon out of his idea to become king, then she must seize it.

However, she didn’t expect to wait for so long. She waited, waited, and waited. It was very late in the night when Renly Baratheon finally called her to his pavilion. Catelyn suspected dawn would be there soon. That was her last chance. Stannis Baratheon might begin to wonder where she was, and he wouldn’t be happy if he found out she couldn’t persuade his brother.

“Lady Stark, please come in.” Renly was drinking wine when she entered. A tall woman dressed in full armor was preparing his own. She was wearing the armor of Renly’s kingsguards. “I apologize for delaying this interview, but I had many other matters to attend. A king is very busy. Now I have time for you. Please, speak.”

He made her wait on purpose, to the eve of battle, to prove again he was a king.

“Our two houses have always been close, Lord Renly. Which is why I am begging you to reconsider this battle. Negotiate a peace with your brother.”

“Negotiate with Stannis? You heard him out there, Lady Stark. I’d have better luck debating the wind.” He chuckled.

“He is your brother,” she insisted.

“A brother who never loved me. What is family without love? To me, Stannis is more a stranger than most of the men inside my army. Why should I show mercy to a man who is a stranger to me?”

“Because your blood runs through his veins too.”

Renly Baratheon laid down his cup. “Lady Stark, when Jon Arryn died, Robert chose your husband for his Hand, instead of me or Stannis. I don’t blame him. I liked Eddard Stark. I was very sad to hear of his death. By the way, you have all my sympathy. I should have offered it to you before.” She acknowledged it with a small bow of her head. “But the fact is, your husband was more of a brother to Robert than I ever was, and more than Stannis ever was to me. I regret it must come to that, but I cannot allow Stannis or Joffrey to sit on the Iron Throne. None of them is fit. Stannis is following a foreign god and Joffrey murders his own bannermen.”

He leaned forward and crossed his fingers while staring intently at her. “I see no reason for hostility between us. I don’t want to take the North away from your family. It is yours. And I want to avenge Lord Stark’s death me too. We have the same enemy, Joffrey. Together, we can defeat him. When I am done with my brother’s armies in the morning, I want your son to join me. We will fight our enemies together. The friendship of Robert and Ned Stark held the Seven Kingdoms together. I want the same with Robb. I don’t want you or him or anybody to fight for me. Stannis wants everyone to fight for him. I want you to fight with me. I’m asking to choose me as your king, not because I am the first in line of succession, but because I can be a good king, because I can give you what you want.”

“And what is it that we want?”

“Revenge for your husband. Freedom for your daughters. I promise you. The moment we free King’s Landing, my first priority will be to kill Joffrey and to make sure nothing has come to your daughters. I swear it.”

“And this will involve killing your brother tomorrow?”
He shrugged. “I don’t see another way. I might offer him to spend the rest of his days at the Wall if he survives the battle, but I doubt Stannis would accept. So, what say you?”

Catelyn hesitated. “My son has already pledged allegiance to Stannis. We told your brother that we would fight for him. That was Ned’s desire that Stannis became king.”

“Perhaps, but I’m afraid Ned Stark was wrong. He was loyal, everyone knows that, but he could never see the reality.”

“What reality?”

“That Robert was a horrible king, and that Stannis will be far worse.”

“The Realm prospered under Robert.”

“The Realm prospered under this long summer, which Robert had no part in making it happen. He was just lucky to rule during a long period without summer. It could have happened to any king. And we all know it was Jon Arryn who ruled, not Robert. The old man and your husband spent their tenure as Hand cleaning the shit Robert left behind. With Stannis, it will be worse. He will force you to fight forever. Stannis is a soldier. He will spend his reign into war, commanding all the lords to follow him into one war after the other every time someone will do something he disapproves. Is that the kind of king you want?”

“I believe you are wrong about your brother.”

“You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“I thought he was a stranger for you.”

Renly Baratheon chuckled. “Sometimes, we can know some strangers pretty well.”

Everything was a joke with this man. She didn’t see how she could convince him. Dawn was closing on them. She should leave.

Before she could, they heard a commotion outside. Margaery Lannister walked in, holding small pieces of paper in her hands, followed by one of Renly’s kingsguards on her heels.

“Your Grace…” He didn’t have time to explain as Lady Margaery interrupted him. The tall woman who remained silent during the whole conversation Catelyn had with Renly stepped forward, ready to draw her sword, as Margaery Lannister walked toward Lord Renly like a fury.

“We need to talk. Now.”

Her tone suggested there was no place for discussion. Renly Baratheon was his usual gracious self and told his kingsguard to leave them alone. Catelyn was about to leave but Margaery stopped her. “Stay, you’ll want to hear this. I just received some news. From the North.”

Catelyn frowned. “The North?”

“Winterfell has fallen.”

She felt her heart stop. “Fallen?” She wasn’t lying. The look on the face of Margaery Lannister clearly showed that she was telling the truth. “How… how could you…?”

“It wasn’t our doing. It was the Greyjoys.”
The Greyjoys. Theon. Robb decided to send him to his father to get his help not long before she left to see Stannis. Catelyn knew they couldn’t trust a Greyjoy, but Robb didn’t listen to her.

“Winterfell isn’t the only castle that fell. Torrhen’s Square fell as well, and Moat Cailin is occupied. It seems Balon Greyjoy decided to go into rebellion again, and he decided to invade the North since it was emptied of men.”

Winterfell had fallen. But then… “Bran! Rickon!”

“We don’t know. There’s no word about them. Most likely, they are prisoners. I’m sorry, Catelyn.”

No, that couldn’t be. They left Bran and Rickon behind, safe at Winterfell, or so they thought. Now… That couldn’t be.

“Lady Stark, I’m so sorry,” Lord Renly said, beginning apologies, but Lady Lannister cut him.

“There’s more. There was a battle at the Golden Tooth.” This awakened her attention again. “The Tully army was defeated. The troops are disbanding. The army of Stafford Lannister is marching on Riverrun as we speak. The castle is defenseless.”

Again, Catelyn couldn’t believe it. Winterfell and Riverrun, at the same time. She was stunned, unable to react for a good moment.

“Lady Stark,” resumed Renly, “I promise that once Stannis is defeated, I will help you against the Lannisters, and the Greyjoys too.”

“And how will you help them, Renly? You have no ships to move your men. Your only way to Riverrun is by land, and for that you’ll have to go through King’s Landing, Harrenhal and all the territories we control and the armies that occupy them,” Margaery Lannister retorted.

“I will have no problem dealing with the Lannisters with the help of your family, my lady. Once Lord Tyrell’s troops…”

“My father will never help you, Lord Renly. If Loras told you that he would, then he obviously doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Ser Loras Tyrell is heir to Highgarden. The Reach will fight by my side.”

“The Reach will never fight for you because you’re fighting against me. I am a Lannister by marriage, remember. You seem to forget that all the time.”

“Lady Margaery, I understand that you are concerned, but your brother and I will never hurt you. We have nothing against you. Our enemy is Joffrey.”

“And Joffrey is my nephew.” She sighed. “I’m going to make it clear for you. You will only kill Joffrey over my dead body.”

“You would be ready to die for Joffrey?”

“He is part of my family, and in House Lannister and House Tyrell, we are ready to die for our family. Unlike you, who are ready to murder your family to get what you want.”

“I have no choice, my lady.”

“Of course, you have.”
“Not if the Seven Kingdoms are to have a god king.”

“A good king? How can a king be called good when he murders people of his own blood like you and Stannis are planning to do? Even the Mad King never did this.”

“I will spare Joffrey and Stannis if I can.”

“You won’t. They will always be a threat to your rule. You will kill them, and Tommen and Myrcella too. I know it, and you know it. You’re just lying to yourself.”

“What do you suggest I do then, my lady? I’m open to suggestions.”

“Bend the knee.”

“We already talked about it, my dear Lady Margaery. It is out of the question.”

“Joffrey is offering you to keep Storm’s End and to forgive you.” She turned to Catelyn. “And he’s offering the same and more to your son, Catelyn.”

Catelyn had heard the discussion between Renly Baratheon and Margaery Lannister more than she actually listened to it. Learning at the same time the loss of her two homes and the uncertain fate of Bran and Rickon left her shocked.

“You’re ready to risk everything in the faint hope to sit on the Iron Throne, or to avenge someone who tried to overthrow his legitimate king. You’re endangering your family and everyone you love for stupid reasons,” the Lady of Casterly Rock declared.

“My husband was murdered,” Catelyn opposed.

“And look at what your quest of revenge led you so far. We don’t know what happened to three of your children, another one is risking his life every day on the fields of battle, and the other one is prisoner of a king who beats her. Is revenge worth it? Are you truly ready to sacrifice your family to avenge your lord husband?”

Lady Lannister turned to Renly. “And you, because you believe to be so much better than everyone, you give yourself the right to kill those who don’t want you as their king, when you have no right upon the Iron Throne. You’re even ready to kill your own brother, and your nephew, and to make the whole Realm bleed to sit on the throne.”

She stood right in front of Renly Baratheon, only a desk separating them, and she kept speaking. “Let me be clear with you, Lord Renly, when you will try something against the Lannisters, you’ll have to kill me first. And be sure of one thing, when you kill me, my whole family will have no rest until you’re in a grave, and Loras will be the first to plunge his sword through your heart.”

This time, Renly Baratheon wasn’t smiling anymore. He slowly stood up. The tall woman remained close, her hand still on the handle of her sword, though it remained sheathed. “Do you truly believe that Loras will choose you over me? That your family will choose you over him?” he asked her.

“My lord father listens to me and to my grandmother, Olenna Tyrell, when he takes a decision. Not to Loras.”

“We’ll see.” He turned toward the tall woman. “Lady Brienne, let’s prepare. Morning is approaching.”

The woman called Brienne began to fasten his armor. Renly Baratheon turned his back on them.
Catelyn now knew there was nothing to be done. The battle would take place. Stannis would fight Renly, and only one of them would come out alive.

“My lord,” she pleaded one last time. “It is not too late. Your brother promised to pardon you if you surrendered before dawn.”

“I’m done with this, Lady Stark. In a few hours, Stannis will be gone. As for you, Lady Margaery, I advise you to leave, for once Stannis is defeated, Loras and I will turn our arms against your husband and his nephew. Your nephew. I wish it hadn’t come to that, but you leave me no choice.”

“Loras will not fight for you if it involves fighting me,” Lady Margaery retorted.

“I think you underestimate his loyalty to me.”

“And I think you underestimate the love a brother and a sister can have for each other.” A great burst of cold wind went through the tent. “Of course, it is something you will never understand since you and your brothers never had any love for each other.”

“NO!”

Catelyn saw it before Lady Brienne yelled. One moment, Renly Baratheon was observing himself in the great glass before him. Then a dark shape appeared and stood right behind him. Catelyn saw its face in the glass. It was the face of the king Robb sent her to negotiate with. Blood flowed out of Renly’s mouth as he was stabbed by something dark that looked like a dagger. The shadow turned toward Catelyn and opened its mouth, then it vanished as Renly’s body fell on the ground.

Catelyn exchanged a terrified look with Margaery. She was as surprised and taken aback as she was. From the opening of the tent, two kingsguards came, swords out, as Brienne leaned over the body of her king. They looked at the scene before them and came to conclusions very quickly.

“You’ll die for this!” one of them shouted.

“No, wait. It wasn’t her!”

Catelyn’s words had no effect. The two kingsguards attacked their innocent comrade. The tall woman drew her sword immediately. Her two opponents ended on the floor, one after Brienne’s sword slashed through his head, the second with her sword buried in his neck.

“What was that?”

The question came from Lady Margaery. She was looking at the scene in front of her, with two kingsguards lying dead on the floor, and Renly Baratheon’s body not far away, Lady Brienne crying over it. Catelyn was as clueless as the Lady of Casterly Rock. A struggle could be heard outside. The flap of the tent opened and Ser Loras Tyrell ran inside, his sword covered with blood. He looked to Margaery, then to Catelyn, and finally to the lifeless body of Renly Baratheon. Brienne was still crying over him.

“What… What happened?”

He kept staring at Brienne. She still held her sword soiled by blood in her right hand, while she held Renly with her left arm.

“Brienne, how could you do this?” The woman looked back at the knight, tears running on her face. “He trusted you!”
“No, Loras!”

Her brother didn’t listen to Lady Margaery’s plea. He leaped forward, bringing down his sword on the woman. Brienne positioned her sword just in time to parry the attack. She managed to get on her feet and blocked a second blow, then a third, a fourth, until she stroke back.

“Loras, Brienne, stop!” Margaery shouted again, to no avail.

She tried to intervene, almost throwing herself between them. Brienne reacted instantly and placed herself between Margaery and Ser Loras, but by doing so became vulnerable. Loras Tyrell’s next blows forced her to step back, with Margaery right behind her. The two women stumbled and ended laying down on the floor, and Catelyn watched in horror as Ser Loras Tyrell raised his sword to deliver the final blow, unable to tell whether he was targeting Brienne or Margaery.

Then someone pushed Catelyn aside, and the next moment a man with a white cloak was plunging his sword through Ser Loras’s head. Time seemed to stop as Brienne, Catelyn and Margaery all looked in utter shock at Loras Tyrell, the point of a sword emerging through his face. The white knight removed the sword and Ser Loras’ body collapsed on the floor.

“Are you alright, my lady?” the knight extended his left hand to the Lady of Casterly Rock, but she only had eyes for her dead brother.

“Loras.” The first time she said his name, it came out as a whisper. “Loras!” She crawled to his lifeless form and turned his body so she could see his face. It was bloody mess. “No. No! NO! No, no, no! Loras, no!”

She took his face between her hands as tears started to leave her eyes. Her hands traveled to his heart, his neck, trying to find a pulse, but Catelyn knew she would find none.

“Loras, no. Don’t die! Loras!”

“We have to go.” Catelyn said it just as the white knight raised his sword, pointing it at Lady Margaery’s back. Then he lowered it.

Chapter End Notes

So, like I said, a turning point. At first, I was planning to have this chapter told from Margaery's point of view, but then I decided it would be Catelyn since we won't have her again as a POV before a while. Also, we had already seen dealing with Baratheons from Margaery's perspective, so I thought it would be better to have another perspective this time.

Please review

Next chapter : Sansa
Sansa VIII

Chapter Notes

We've been away from King's Landing for quite some time now. It's time to go back there. A lot happened in the Riverlands and in the Stormlands in the time being. Let's see what people in the capital are doing while the fighting takes place outside the Red Keep.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA VIII

She hurried along the corridors of the Red Keep, Sandor Clegane behind her, pushing her to walk quickly without touching her.

“Hurry, little bird. The longer you keep him waiting, the worse it will go for you,” he warned her.

“What have I done? Please tell me,” she begged him as they approached the Great Hall.

“You’ve done nothing, little bird. It’s your brother.”

“My brother is a traitor,” she repeated. It was an automatism for her now. She knew the words by rote.

“Keep going, little bird, and maybe you’ll live.”

This wasn’t to reassure her. “I only live for my beloved Joffrey.”

“Well, let’s hope he still wants you to live then.” The great doors of the Great Hall of the Red Keep opened. About thirty people were waiting inside, and their heads all turned when she entered. However, it wasn’t their judging or worried expressions that terrified her the most, but the king himself. Joffrey was sitting on the Iron Throne, a crossbow on his knees. His cruel eyes landed on her as soon as she walked inside the throne room. The crowd split before her, as if she was a queen whose head was about to be chopped on the executioner’s block.

The Hound walked by her side, just a little behind her.

“Be brave.” She barely heard the words, but he said them before he walked passed her and took his place alongside the other kingsguards before the dais. She fell on her knees.

“Your Grace.”

“Kneeling won’t save you now,” the king said. He stood up and pointed the crossbow, loaded, towards her. “Do you know what fate awaits every traitor?”

“Death, your Grace,” she replied, not having the choice.

“Yes, death.”

“Your Grace, I am no traitor,” she pleaded, new knots forming in her stomach at every second.
“I’m the one who says whether you’re a traitor or not. They say we are responsible for our family’s actions. You’re here to answer for your brother’s latest treasons.”

The crossbow was still pointed in her direction. One movement of Joffrey’s hand, and she was dead. “Your Grace, whatever my traitor brother has done, I had no part. You know that, I beg you, please…”

“Ser Lancel, tell her of this outrage.”

Lancel Lannister was one of those men Sansa always thought as comely and well spoken, but the recently named kingsguard showed neither pity nor kindness in the way he spoke to her and the way he looked at her.

“Using some vile sorcery, your brother fell on my father, Ser Kevan Lannister, with an army of wolves. Thousands of good men were butchered. After the slaughter, the Northmen feasted on the flesh of the slain.”

Gasps of horror ran through the crowd, and horror wrapped cold hands around Sansa’s throat. Joffrey was still targeting her with his crossbow.

“Killing you would send your brother a message.” Sansa looked away, tears flowing out of her eyes on her cheeks. *That’s it, it’s the end for me. They will write songs about how I died in Joffrey’s hand.* “But my mother insists on keeping you alive. Stand.” He lowered his crossbow. “So we’ll have to send your brother a message some other way. Lancel.”

Whatever relief she might have felt at the news she wasn’t going to die faded. Ser Lancel Lannister approached, contempt and anger for her in his eyes, but also something else. His eyes were red. He turned to the king. “What would you have me do, your Grace?” he asked with a hard voice.

“Punish her. Hit her. But leave her face. I like her pretty.”

There was a pause during which the knight looked at her, and then the punch came. He reached her shoulder with his gauntleted fist. Then he kicked her in the belly, driving air out of her and making her fall on her knees.

“Lancel, my lady is overdressed. Unburden her.”

She heard the noise of something being unsheathed. A grip on her clothes from behind followed by a strong pull and her gown was ripped. Sansa had to cover her breasts with her hands.

“If you want Robb Stark to hear us, we’re going to have to speak louder. Hit her with your sword!”

Another unsheathing sound, and Sansa truly thought her end had come.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The voice of Tyrion Lannister cracked like a whip. She turned to see him, half a dozen men following him, all wearing the red armor of House Lannister. These were the men Robb fought.

“What kind of knight beats a helpless girl?” he asked, disgust plain, as he reached the place where she was.

“The kind who serves his king, my lord,” Lancel Lannister replied, his voice shaking.

“Oh, shut up! Feel lucky that you are a Lannister, or else I would have you whipped like every man
in the Westerlands who beats an innocent child. Someone get the girl something to cover herself with.”

Sandor Clegane approached and pulled his cloak, then wrapped it over her shoulders. She tightened it, as if it could protect her.

“She is to be your queen. Have you no regard for her honor?” Lord Tyrion asked his nephew.

“I’m punishing her,” Joffrey shouted back.

“For what crimes? She did not fight her brother’s battle, you half-wit.”

“You can’t talk to me like that. The king can do as he likes!” He turned away and went back to sit in the throne. That didn’t stop the Lord of Casterly Rock from approaching him further, climbing a few steps on the dais, a long shadow lingering behind him. The kingsguard made no attempt to stop him.

“The Mad King did as he liked. Has your uncle Jaime ever told you what happened to him?”

“No man threatens the king in the presence of the Kingsguard.” Ser Lancel Lannister said very loudly, like a herald who wanted to be heard at all cost.

“I’m not threatening the king, cousin. I am educating my nephew. When you want to know what a threat is, remember the one I made for you, Ser Lancel.”

Sansa saw the knight’s face pale. “The queen will hear of this!”

“No doubt she will. And why wait? Run to her, good ser. Joffrey, shall we send for your mother?” Joffrey flushed. “Nothing to say, your Grace? Good. Learn to use your ears more and your mouth less, or your reign will be shorter than I am. Wanton brutality is no way to win your people’s love… or your queen’s.”

“Fear is better than love, Mother says.” Joffrey pointed at Sansa. “She fears me.”

His uncle sighed. “A pity Stannis and Renly aren’t twelve-year-old girls as well. Vylarr, bring her. Ser Barristan, clear the court. I need a good discussion alone with my nephew.”

Sansa moved as if in a dream. She thought that Ser Vylarr and his men would bring her back to her bedchamber, but instead they led her to the Tower of the Hand. She didn’t set foot there since the day her father fell from grace and her life turned from dream to nightmare.

They brought her to what she recognized to be Arya’s former bedchamber. Inside, a steaming tub was waiting for her, and several handmaidens, including the one who cleaned her wounds after the riot.

“Sansa, by the gods, what happened to you? Come. Get her clothes off. They’re not good for anything now. Everything is going to be alright.”

She let herself be guided to the tub by Sera Durwell where she was washed until all her skin was pink. After she was clean, Maester Frenken came to see her. He spread a salve across everywhere the fists and feet of Lancel Lannister had landed, then gave her some essence of nightshade.

“Sleep a bit, child. When you wake, all this will seem a bad dream.”

She slept. When she woke up, the bad dream wasn’t over, and the morning sun had been replaced by the darkness of the night. A robe was laid near her. It wasn’t one of the gowns she usually wore, but
she put it on all the same. It was fitting for her size overall, though it also felt too loose at some places.

She remained there, crying, thinking about how miserable her life had become, how alone she was. Joffrey beat her, humiliated her, and no one did anything, except for the Hound and the Imp. Knights were sworn to protect the weak, protect women, and fight for the right, but none of them did a thing. Even Ser Barristan, who was always kind with her even after her father was disgraced, did nothing.

After some time, someone walked in. Sera Durwell brought her a platter of cheese, bread and olives, with a flagon of cold water.

“Take it away,” she commanded.

The girl was about to lay the platter on the table. She stopped in her movement for a second, then placed the food where she intended. “Lady Sansa, you must eat something. Believe me, you’ll feel better after.”

No, she wouldn’t feel better, but she realized at the same time that she was thirsty. She emptied two full cups of water, Sera helping her to pour it.

“I heard what happened in the throne room. I didn’t believe the king would go so far,” the girl said.

“I am paying the price for my brother’s treason,” Sansa replied.

“It’s not your fault. We should not suffer for the actions of our family.”

“I am.”


“Thank you,” Sansa replied numbly. She had no interest talking about clothes or fashion right now, not after what she just went through.

“I think Lady Margaery would like to see you with it. It’s one of hers.”

Sansa was about to take an olive but halted her movement. “This robe… belongs to Lady Margaery?”

“Yes. It was of the first Lord Tyrion had made for her when she arrived at Casterly Rock. You’re already as tall as she was back then.”

Sansa immediately felt very odd. “I… I shouldn’t have…”

“Don’t worry, she won’t say anything. I brought the dress myself. It was the one that seemed to fit your size the most. Anyway, Lady Margaery doesn’t wear it anymore. It no longer fits her body.”

Sansa managed to convince herself that Lady Sera was telling the truth. The Lady of Casterly Rock had always been kind with her. She was the only one who tried to warn her about Joffrey. Sansa missed her. She had no one here, and when she talked with Lady Margaery, she had the impression someone was listening to her, even if she was careful with what she was saying. Now that she was gone, Sansa felt more lonely than ever, and she was more afraid of Joffrey than ever. Since her departure, Sansa was almost killed in a riot and beaten before the entire court. She felt safer with the Lady of the Westerlands around.

“Are you afraid, Sansa?” Sansa was taken aback by the question. Before she could think of an
answer, Lady Sera resumed. “I mean, there are rumours about a battle in the Riverlands, about Ser Kevan and Ser Jaime being dead. Some say Robb Stark will be at the doors of King’s Landing in a few days. I’m afraid of what might happen if we are attacked.”

“My… my brother would never kill you. He’s only after Joffrey, for what he did to my father. He is a traitor,” she added in the end.

“Yes, I suppose if he takes the city, you will be free. That’s one good thing that will come out of it, I guess.” She scoffed. “Look at me. I worry about myself when I’m safe behind walls while my best friend is out there, and I have no way to know if she’s still alive.”

“Your best friend?” The conversation they had after the riot slowly made its way back to her mind. “You’re talking about Mira?”

“Yes.”

“What is she doing? I mean, what is she doing outside King’s Landing?”

“Lord Tyrion sent her to discuss peace with Robb Stark. She must not have been far from Harrenhal when the battle took place. If she was caught in the middle of it…”

Sera Durwell didn’t dare to finish her idea. There was something Sansa found odd. “But your friend is a handmaiden. Why would Lord Tyrion send her to discuss peace with my brother?”

“Oh, well…” Lady Sera laughed nervously. “Maybe I shouldn’t worry too much about Mira. Her father is serving Robb Stark. He will make sure nothing happens to her if she is caught.”

“Wait, her father is serving my brother?” How could the father of a handmaiden serving the Lady of Casterly Rock be serving the Lord of Winterfell?

“Mira is from House Forrester, a northern house.”

The name of the house rang a bell. She remembered a time, long ago, when her lord father came back from a visit to a castle called Ironrath, the stronghold of a powerful house sworn to House Glover. He said the place rivalled with Winterfell in beauty. Lady Sera kept speaking.

“I regret you didn’t meet her. She was with us when we went to Winterfell, but she didn’t follow us there. She went to visit her family. When she finally came back, you were gone.”

Sansa nodded abstractedly.

“Is it true all of your brothers have a direwolf?” she asked all of a sudden.

“Yes, they do.” The painful memory of Lady rushed back.

“I saw the white one at Casterly Rock when he was grown up. I can understand that people are scared of them.”

“You saw a direwolf at Casterly Rock?” Sansa asked, not understanding how a direwolf could have been seen at this place.

“Yes, the white one. The one with your brother Jon. Well, your half-brother.”

“Oh, yes, it’s true.” She had almost forgotten that Jon had spent some time at Casterly Rock. It had been so long since she saw him or any of her siblings. She felt like she would hug them all, even her bastard brother, if they were ever reunited.
“He seemed nice. Your brother, not the wolf of course. Not very talkative, but he seemed to be a good person. Is your brother Robb like him?”

“Well… they… Robb is more… I mean, he’s more comfortable around people.”

That’s all she could say. She realized how little she knew about her half-brother, the only brother who didn’t have the same mother as she did.

“Well, Jon Snow wasn’t very comfortable around people, that’s true. He mostly kept to himself. Except with Mira. He spent a lot of time with her. I even saw them dance at a feast. I think she invited him to her wedding. They…”

Sera Durwell was interrupted by a knock on the door. Tyrion Lannister walked in. “Lady Sansa. Lady Sera.”

“My lord.” Sera Durwell stood up in respect, and Sansa did the same.

“Thank you for keeping company to the Lady Sansa, but I wish to have a private word with her now.”

“Of course, my lord.”

As the handmaiden proceeded to leave, Tyrion Lannister looked at her and frowned. “Lady Sera.”

The girl stopped in her path. “Did you choose this dress?”

His wife’s handmaiden looked quite uncomfortable all of a sudden. “My lord, I’m sorry, I just thought…”

“That’s alright. You may go.”

No one had to beg her to leave, and Sansa was alone with the Lord of Casterly Rock. The last time it happened was after the riot where she almost got killed. He looked back at her, then shook his head and took a seat. She did the same.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been used to see my wife wear this dress. It’s disturbing for me to see another woman wear it.”

“If you want, my lord, I can…” she began.

He interrupted her with a raised hand. “Don’t bother. I won’t make a case against you for a dress after what happened today. Keep it. She no longer wears it anyway.” A heavy silence followed before he said something else. “I trust I am not disturbing you?”

“No, my lord.” No more than Sera Durwell did. Did you send her to spy on me?

“The food is to your satisfaction? If there is anything else you need, you have only to ask.”

“You are most kind. And this morning… it was very good of you to help me.”

“Oh, yes, I am the very soul of kindness and goodness.” From his tone, it didn’t seem like he thought what he was saying. “I owe you another apology. Something else that should never have happened. But what do you want? My kingly nephew has the wits of a goose and the charm of a dead slug.”

“He is the king,” Sansa flatly said.

“You’re right. The king has the wits of a goose and the charm of a dead slug.”
Did he really think so, or was he trying to make her reveal her true loyalty? All the people who dared to mock Joffrey paid the price. Could Lord Tyrion truly be speaking like this without suffering the consequences? Did Joffrey send him to test her, so he could get another reason to beat her like he just did? There was a lingering thought in Sansa’s mind about this. When Tyrion Lannister intervened, none dared to stop him, not even Joffrey. There was something in the king’s eyes she hadn’t seen in a long time in the throne room, when his uncle walked in. Fear.

“Tell me the truth. Do you want an end to this engagement?”

She replied instinctively. “I am loyal to King Joffrey, my one true love.”

“Well, Lady Stark, you may survive us yet. In any case, you have a right to know why Joffrey was so wroth. Five days ago, a battle occurred north of Harrenhal, on the Kingsroad. Your brother’s army smashed against my uncle Kevan and won a victory. We received word only this morning.”

*Good. Robb will kill you all.* “It’s… terrible, my lord. My brother is a vile traitor.”

The Imp smiled wanly. “A traitor, maybe, but he proved he was a man, to the opposite of my nephew today who proved how childish and stupid he is.”

“Ser Lancel said Robb led an army of wolves…”

He gave a disdainful bark of laughter. “Ser Lancel’s a wineskin warrior who wouldn’t know a wolf from a cat. Your brother had his direwolf. In fact, there were two. Your half-brother Jon Snow was fighting too. My brother Jaime was stupid enough to attack their rearguard without enough men, and without being prepared. It was a trap and they were encircled. My uncle arrived just in time with the bulk of our forces to prevent disaster, but that wasn’t enough to avoid defeat. Jaime managed to escape, but Kevan and his sons Martyn and Willem were both captured. In fact, if Lancel seemed so angry at you today, it’s probably because his father and brothers are now prisoners. Ser Gregor Clegane was killed too, and I say good riddance. He was more trouble than anything. We lost half our men. Either they died in the battle or they deserted. The army is already regrouping and reorganizing as we speak. Don’t rejoice too much, my lady. Your brother won a victory, but not the war.”

“I’m sure that in the end, whoever deserves to win will win?”

“And who decides who deserves to win? The Battle of the Kingsroad is not the only one that took place recently. Robb Stark merely evened the odds, for the moment. We still have fifteen thousand men blocking his way to the capital, and then we have the city walls with the thousands of men guarding them. With your mother’s home under siege, I doubt he will march on us anytime soon.”

“My mother’s home is under siege?” she asked.

He blinked and sighed. “Sorry, my tongue is too loose, as always. I thought you knew. No one told about the Golden Tooth?” She shook her head. “There was another battle there, a few days before this one. My uncle Stafford and the army of your grandfather, Hoster Tully, fought. And this time, my house won. The Tully armies are disbanding and running away. At best, there are a few groups still resisting and disturbing our supply lines, but nothing more. Thirty thousand men have followed the River Road. I received the confirmation an hour ago that the castle was under siege.”

What joy Sansa felt when she heard Robb had won against the Lannisters was crushed by this news. Her lady mother had often talked to her about Riverrun. Sansa wished she had the chance to visit it one day, and now it was surrounded by Joffrey’s men.
“There’s something else you should know, my lady, and you’re not going to like it at all.” His face only showed regret. He waited to speak. Sansa dreaded what would come. “Riverrun is not the only castle with problems. Winterfell has been taken, by the Ironmen.”

A stone fell in her throat. The Lord of Casterly Rock seemed to wait for a reaction, but she didn’t have any. She couldn’t react.

“We don’t know much about it yet, but it seems Balon Greyjoy decided to start another rebellion. Truth be told, I considered that as a possibility when this war began, but I didn’t expect him to attack the North. I thought he would launch an invasion on the Westerlands or the Reach. The regions are way richer. But for now, he seems to limit his operations to the North. A few places have fallen. There are raids on the coasts. And a group of Ironmen somehow managed to take Winterfell.” He crossed his fingers and leaned towards her. “Look, we know Brandon and Rickon were there. We have no news from them. Up to now, we must consider they are still alive, but I won’t lie to you. The men of the Iron Islands are not like us. We don’t know what could happen to them. I’m really sorry.”

Bran and Rickon. Were the Ironmen as horrible or worse than Joffrey? Was it even possible to be worse than Joffrey? She did a surreal effort to not show her distress. “My brothers are traitors. All my brothers are traitors.”

A heavy silence fell, and then Lord Tyrion spoke. “Don’t say that again.”

“I beg your pardon.” She was genuinely surprised.

“I mean, you can say that before Joffrey, to avoid trouble, but don’t say that in the presence of someone else. I saw Bran and Rickon at Winterfell. I met them just like you. They are children, too young to understand what a rebellion or a treason is. Your other brothers and your mother can be called traitors, it’s true. They rebelled against their king, that makes them traitors as a matter of fact. But Bran and Rickon have nothing to see with this. If someone else than you in House Stark doesn’t deserve to suffer from this war, it’s them.”

They remained silent for a moment. Sansa didn’t dare to speak. There had been a certain hedge in the small lord’s voice. He threatened her in case she would call her brothers traitors again. How was she supposed to deal with this and Joffrey who wanted her to do whatever he wanted at the same time, which included saying again and again that her family were turncoats, rebels and criminals.

“I’m sorry to bring you these news.” His voice had gone softer. “But I would rather have you hear the truth this way than from someone else. If Joffrey ever taunts you about this, better you are prepared.” She couldn’t argue against this. “And it is better to accept a horrible truth than to believe in a beautiful lie. I may have other bad news for you, however.”

What else? Couldn’t they be done with bad news for today? “What is it, my lord?”

“You will never marry Joffrey.”

The blunt statement confused her. How was that bad news? Still, she didn’t show it. “My only wish is to be loyal to Joffrey, and to marry him as soon as I can.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, my lady, but you won’t. There is too much bad blood between the Lannisters and the Starks to hope that a marriage could mend the fences. At least, not a marriage between you and Joffrey. My lady wife and I are working on an alternative. There will be other battles, but I don’t give much chance to your brother Robb. I can raise another army in the Westerlands. Your brother and Hoster Tully can’t raise more troops. Stannis and Renly are fighting
each other. Dorne now supports Joffrey, and as soon as the Tyrells enter the fight, your brother will
not stand a chance. The next time you visit the godswood, pray that your brother has the wisdom to
bend the knee. Once this war is over, I’ll make sure you never live again near Joffrey. Where would
you want to live?”

“I will go wherever the king wants me to go,” she replied.

She felt there was something very strange about the Imp. It was the same feeling she had when he
wished her all the happiness in the world before she left Winterfell. He had added *you’ll need it and
had looked to pity her, just like he did right now.

He nodded. “Of course, you will. Well, until the time the king gets bored of you and decides to send
you away, there’s something we can do to help him forget you. Or at least, to help him forget you
more quickly. I know you refused my offer to come and live in the Tower of the Hand, but it still
stands. My nephew would certainly reduce his more than welcomed visits to you if you lived there.
And I think Margaery would like it to have you closer to her when she returns.”

She thought about that for a moment. After what happened today, she was no longer sure. Did she
take the best decision by refusing him the first time? Would it be a mistake to accept the second?

“Well, my lady, in the meantime, this is for you.”

He produced a red rose. Sansa hadn’t noticed one when he entered. He laid it on the table close to
her. “Wherever you’re going my lady, I think you might receive more of these.” He smiled from the
corner of his lips. “I’ll let you stay here for tonight. Make beautiful dreams of knights fighting
valiantly in tourneys. It might help you.”

His words triggered something. The red rose. Someone offered her one just like this at a tourney. It
seemed like it was in another life, and yet it was barely a year ago, at most. She looked at Lord
Tyrion. He still had the same smile. Then he turned away and walked to the door. He put his hand
on the handle.

“My lord. I accept.”

“Good thing. I’ll have your things brought to you in the morrow. Have a good night, my lady.”

Chapter End Notes

Tyrion summarized all the battles and army movements that recently took place in the
war. Unlike Margaery who purposefully hid the Battle of the Kingsroad to Catelyn in
the previous chapter, to encourage her and Renly to abandon the war, Tyrion is not
hiding anything to Sansa since she is not a player with significant leverage in this war.
He doesn't endanger his position by telling her the whole truth.

Of course, some of you might have noticed that he didn't mention Renly's or Loras'
deaths. This chapter happens at the same time than the previous chapter, or not long
afterwards, and Tyrion is unaware of these recent events. For him, Stannis and Renly
are still fighting. His ignorance of recent events explains in part why he seems so sure
that Robb cannot win the war.

Please review
Next chapter: Mira
Mira is back in King's Landing, and she has some explanations to give.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

King’s Landing was a clear contrast to the Riverlands. The first time Mira came here, she was struck by the great number of people who lived cramped inside its walls. She never saw a city before the age of thirteen, when she travelled south to Highgarden. In the North, the only major city was White Harbor, and Mira never approached it of her whole life. On her father’s lands, Ironrath was the closest thing to a city, and it barely qualified as a village. When she arrived in the south, she saw bigger towns. She saw from afar the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, but they hadn’t stopped there on their way to Highgarden. The Reach was populated with villages, most of them with a larger population than Ironrath, but these villages were nothing compared to large cities, often located in the shadow of a great castle, from which the local lords levied many taxes that helped them to sustain their household, protect their lands and raise troops when need be. As for the Westerlands, the city of Lannisport had eclipsed everything Mira had seen so far when Lady Margaery moved to Casterly Rock. The city of the Lannisters was the third harbor in importance in the Seven Kingdoms, and now well in place to become the second harbor in this country since the signature of the Trade Agreement of Old Oak. Not that Lannisport could become a larger harbor than Oldtown, but the increase of commercial activity in the two main cities of the Westerlands and the Reach was so great that King’s Landing was threatened to be left in the third place.

The capital was nothing like Lannisport or Oldtown. Mira had walked and wandered in the streets of the city overlooked by the Rock, and she had read about Oldtown even though she never visited it. Both cities were well organized, with a good city watch to maintain peace and order, canals and sewers to keep it clean, and very well organized docks and wharves. No such thing existed for King’s Landing. It was as if half a million people were thrust inside the walls and left to fare for themselves. Half of its inhabitants seemed to live in the streets, from begging, stealing or murdering. Mira had read about the poor state of the capital, but she also knew that there had been improvements made under a few kings, especially under King Jaehaerys the First and his Hand, the Septon Barth. The improvements seemed inexistent, or invisible. The capital of the Seven Kingdoms fitted the description of refugee camps as depicted in *Chronicles of wars and their consequences* rather than an actual city.

As she progressed through the streets with her escort, her nose was assailed by the stench of decaying excrements, her ears were filled with the noises of merchants and prostitutes all alike, and her eyes couldn’t look anywhere without falling upon a beggar, a naked child or a crumbling building. There, men were working on making a new house, while others were demolishing one on the other side of the streets. Carts were positioned one each side to help either to move material to build the new house or to transport the remnants of the old one. Mira surprised men building the new house stealing bricks from the old house and bringing them to build the new one.

Ser Lyonel and his men had to force their passage through the streets, the carts narrowing it and people crowding the space between. The city of King’s Landing was so overpopulated that carts
were allowed inside its walls for one and only task: building or destroying human construction. Riders on their horses, people on feet and litters were accepted inside the city, but no carts except for this very specific reason. It had been an attempt from Barth under Jaehaerys the Conciliator to reduce congestion inside the city. The idea wasn’t as foolish as it may seem as first sight. Barth had forbidden carts in the city during the day, but at night they were free to travel. Shops and taverns, the Red Keep and great houses with large households had to bring their merchandises and unload them at night. It was an astute solution, though one that may not have been necessary had the city been conceived otherwise. The legislation was still in place two hundred years after his instigator died and the streets were still crowded. In many other cities in the Seven Kingdoms, like in Oldtown, a similar law was adopted to reduce daily traffic, but with modifications. In Lannisport, some carts were allowed to circulate inside the city during the day but had to pay an additional fee at the moment they passed through the city gates. They were only allowed to circulate in certain streets, and the system was enforced by the City Watch. Lord Tyrion had introduced new changes after he arrived, charging different amounts depending of the day of the week and the time of the day the carts entered the city, and granting special exemptions to some products. For example, a large paved road existed specifically to allow goods to travel between one of the city gates and the harbor of Lannisport, speeding the movement of goods leaving and entering the harbor. In the wake of the Trade Agreement of Old Oak, Lord Tyrion negotiated with the Lannisters of Lannisport to reduce the fees for goods using this passage, boosting trade further.

Lannisport and Oldtown were able to implement such treatments because the cities developed at a slower pace, allowing the houses ruling them for a better planification. The capital of the Seven Kingdoms was only three hundred years-old and didn’t have this opportunity. Despite the efforts of a few kings, the city developed following the paths of chaos and anarchy. King’s Landing had become a fair representation of the state of the entire Realm, where every kingdoms were at each other’s throat. Aegon Targaryen, by uniting all the kingdoms into one realm, from the ice of the Wall to the sandy shores of Dorne, from the volcanic islands of the Narrow Sea to the stony home of the Ironmen, reduced the number of wars, but increased their scale. Peace followed war, and war followed peace in a cycle that never ended, alternating like summers and winters did.

“Are you alright, my lady?” Ser Lyonel asked her.

“Yes.” Mira had been lost in her thoughts, not realizing that they now stood before the gates of the Red Keep. “I am.”

“Don’t worry too much about Lord Tyrion’s reaction. It was very likely the Starks would reject his offer of peace.”

It was true, but Mira wasn’t worried about Lord Tyrion’s reaction to the mission’s failure. What she dreaded the most was his reaction when she would tell him the truth. All the truth.

The portcullis was raised and Mira rode inside with the men who escorted her. A few minutes later, she stood before the door of the Hand’s solar. Tywin Frey, his personal squire, let her in.

The Lord of Casterly Rock was sitting at his desk, writing a letter. Mira waited patiently for him to be done as his squire closed the door behind her. Apparently, Tywin Lannister used similar tactics when it came to talk to people, making them feel unimportant to him. His son followed the tradition, but Mira hoped that maybe it was just an important letter and he needed to end it before he could talk to her. Indeed, once he stamped his seal, he looked.

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

“You too, my lord.”
“I suppose I don’t have to ask you if Robb Stark refused or accepted my terms. You’re probably aware of the latest developments in the war.”

“I am, my lord.” She had heard about the Battle of the Kingsroad. She still didn’t know whether she should rejoice or mourn over the battle. She didn’t even know if her father and brother came out of it alive. “A scouting party of Ser Kevan’s army reached us while we rode back to the capital. He told us what happened. He also told us the army was coming back to King’s Landing.”

“It is true. I gave the order. We need our men here. I also wrote to Lord Tyrell.”

“If I may, my lord, why call back the men? Won’t it give Robb Stark a free way to the capital?”

“Maybe, but not entirely. Some river lords are still on our side, and we’re leaving a strong garrison at Harrenhal. Anyway, we need more men here. I’m sorry to tell you this, Lady Mira, but I’m afraid you came back to the capital right when it could be under siege.”

“What do you mean, my lord?”

He took a small piece of paper, the kind that could be carried by raven, and gave it to her. The raven was sent from a small keep in the Stormlands.

Renly Baratheon dead. Circumstances unknown. Assassin unknown. Rumors that his kingsguards, Stannis, Lady Stark, even Lady Lannister did it. Lady Lannister’s location unknown. Most of the stormlords bent the knee before Stannis. Preparation for war.

Mira felt her heart rise into her throat as she read the short message that contained vital information for the war. “Lady Margaery? We don’t know where she is?”

“Not for now. But there’s been no word of her being captured. I think we would have heard about it if she had. Stannis wouldn’t let it go under silence. She’s probably riding back to King’s Landing as we speak, trying to cover her tracks.”

Mira noticed he tried to sound optimistic, but that he was as worried if not more than she was.

“Now you understand why I need men here. Our garrison inside the city will likely be enough, but I would rather take no chance. Anyway, I think Robb Stark will have his own problems with the siege of Riverrun.” He didn’t miss the shocked expression on Mira’s face. “I see you’re not completely up to date in the news, my lady. Robb Stark may have won on the Kingsroad, but his grandfather lost at the Golden Tooth, and now his mother’s house is in disarray. Not to mention that he must deal with the invasion of the North.” He kept explaining further when Mira frowned again. “The Ironborn. It seems that Balon Greyjoy decided to take his chance again. The men of the Iron Islands occupy Moat Cailin, Torrhen’s Square and Winterfell, and they are raiding all the villages along the northern coast.”

“Winterfell?”

He nodded. Mira was speechless. It was way worse than she imagined.

“I told you, my lady. This war doesn’t bode well for the North.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Winterfell taken by the Ironmen, Riverrun under siege. At least, Rodrik and her father were with the army that won a battle, so the odds that they survived were higher. It was what Mira dreaded, a complete defeat for the North. The Tyrells didn’t need to step into the battle for that to happen, and now that Lord Renly was dead, nothing kept them from fighting alongside House Lannister.
“There’s also something else you should know. For now, we can’t know for sure, but there are words of fighting at Deepwood Motte. It seems the Ironmen are trying to take the castle.”

“Deepwood Motte? But Ironrath is close. Are they…?”

“We don’t know, my lady. Our informants remain silent on Ironrath and anything else than Deepwood. If anything comes about your home and your family, I assure you will be the first to know. But I’m afraid there’s nothing both of us can do about it for now. Robb Stark left the North with most of its forces, and Greyjoy saw an opportunity. And since now he holds Moat Cailin, it will be difficult for the Lord of Winterfell to go back into his kingdom. I’m afraid that for now, the Warden of the North is losing the North.”

Mira knew Lord Tyrion enough to know he didn’t mean it cruelly. Tyrion Lannister made japes all the time, even in the most inappropriate circumstances. They were clumsy attempts to lighten the mood, but she knew there was no evil intended. Still, it didn’t help to hear jokes of this sort when her homeland and her family were in danger. Her mother, Ethan, Talia and Ryon may no longer be safe at Ironrath.

“I’m sorry to bring bad tidings. I don’t control what happens during wars. I wish I could. Now, although I suspect what might have happened with Robb Stark, I’d like a complete report.”

Mira straightened herself and pushed her worries aside as much as she could. She had to focus on the present.

“I presented your terms, my lord, but Lord Stark refused them. I think we both expected it.”

“Yes, we did, but we had to try all the same.”

“I also left him the bones of his father and of all the Northerners who died in King’s Landing like you instructed me. I brought back the sword Ice with me since he didn’t accept the terms.”

The Lord of Casterly Rock nodded, expecting all this and not at all surprised. He would be for what was coming.

“And I gave them Arya Stark.”

At that, Tyrion Lannister frowned. He did nothing more. He only frowned, and a very long and heavy silence followed. Mira stood still, waiting for his reply, fearing it.

“Did I mishear what you just said, Lady Mira?”

Lord Tyrion’s voice wasn’t threatening, but there was a certain edge in it. It told her that she should be very careful about what she would say next. It was better to tell the truth. She owed it to him and Lady Margaery.

“No, my lord. You didn’t.”

“From what we know, Arya Stark was last seen the day her father was arrested, and ever since we have no news of her.”

He was waiting for explanations. She provided them. “I found her at Harrenhal, my lord.”

“Harrenhal?”

“Yes. She was hiding among the people working for Ser Kevan’s army there, posing as a servant.
She wore boy’s clothes, had her hair cut short, and she was covered with dirt. From what she told me when I found her, she managed to escape the Red Keep the day Lord Eddard Stark was arrested and lived in Flea Bottom until the day of his execution. Then she was smuggled out of the city by a recruiter of the Night’s Watch named Yoren.”

“Yoren? I know him. We met at Castle Black. So he brought Arya Stark out of the city, you say?”

“Yes, my lord. They followed the Kingsroad until they were ambushed by a patrol of your army led by Ser Armory Lorch. If we are to rely on Lady Arya’s word, Ser Armory killed some of them and took the others prisoners, and they were brought to Harrenhal. Arya Stark hid there for some time, until I recognized her when I stopped there.”

“And you brought her back to her brother?”

“Yes, my lord.”

For now, the Lord of Casterly Rock didn’t seem particularly angry at her, but she knew he was at least upset and that covered anger was more dangerous than an unleashed one. He stared at her, examining her, his gaze showing clearly that her actions were taken very seriously.

“You’re lucky I’m not Joffrey. If he was to learn about that, you would probably share Eddard Stark’s fate. So you better explain why you brought Arya Stark back to her family instead of bringing her here.”

“It’s quite simple. I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“The right thing to do?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Enlighten me. How would you say this was the right thing to do for the Crown?”

“My lord, before you sent me with terms of peace for Robb Stark, you told me it was in everyone’s interest, the north like the south, to end this war as quickly as possible. I believed you, and I still believe you, but we both knew that it was almost certain that Robb Stark would refuse your offer. You already have Sansa and I didn’t believe it would give you more leverage to have two Starks. I knew that Robb Stark wouldn’t sue for peace even if you had both his sisters. So I decided to bring her back, thinking it might bring Lord Stark to better consider your offer. It seemed a better gesture of good faith than his father’s ashes.”

“Is that all?”

“I thought it would be useless to give Joffrey another toy.”

He examined for some time again. “I agree with you on that point. To make things clear, this conversation will not leave this room. Did you tell Ser Kevan or anyone else that you found the Stark girl?”

“No, my lord. And don’t blame Ser Lyonel and his men, they didn’t know who she was. I made them believe she was a boy they sent to serve me on the way to Robb Stark’s camp.”

“I would find it strange had Lyonel agreed with your decision.”

“I did what I thought was right, my lord,” she repeated. “I have no other explanations to give you. I knew I had no chance to convince Robb Stark to stop the fighting. I had an opportunity with Arya,
an opportunity I couldn’t let go. You had very little to gain by having her as a hostage like Sansa, but there was a small chance, even if it was a very small chance, that bringing her back to Lord Stark could persuade him to accept your terms. You sent me in the hope to put an end to this war, and I was hoping for the same. I tried to convince Robb Stark and his bannermen to bend the knee. I went as far as to tell them they had no chance to defeat the Lannisters and the Tyrells. I hid from them that Highgarden made no movement since the beginning of this war. I failed, it’s true, but I tried. If we try nothing, we accomplish nothing.”

The Lord of Casterly Rock looked carefully at her for a very long time. Her heartbeat kept accelerating, and she could feel some sweat on the back of her neck. “I suppose I better understand now why Margaery likes you. You’re bold, especially for a handmaiden. Maybe too bold for your own good. I appreciate the efforts you made, especially since I sent you only with the task to deliver an offer of peace, and instead you tried to talk the Lord of Winterfell into accepting it. However, the decision you took concerning Arya Stark wasn’t yours to make, Lady Mira.”

“With all the respect I owe you, my lord, your terms explicitly stated you would give Arya Stark back to her family.”

“If they accepted to make peace. Did they?” She shook her head. “Did bringing Arya Stark back to her brother helped to make peace with the Starks?”

“No, my lord. Robb Stark refused your terms. He only made a counter-offer, but I doubt you will accept his conditions.” She took a scroll hidden inside her gown and gave it to Lord Tyrion. “The conditions include the death of Joffrey.”

He considered the scroll in his hands for a moment. “Robb Stark read my offer?”

“Yes, my lord, he did.”

“A Lannister always pays his debts.” He broke the seal and read. “You’re right, Lady Mira, I cannot, and I will not accept this.” He carefully placed the parchment on his desk. “So it seems your plan to use Arya Stark as bargain to make peace failed. How do you justify your choice now?”

Maybe she was being suicidal, but if she was she didn’t care about it right now. “If I had told you that I found Arya Stark, my lord, would you have done things differently?”

“Maybe not,” he conceded, “but this wasn’t your call. You could have left Arya Stark at Harrenhal while you went to talk with Robb Stark, then promise him to free her immediately if he accepted the terms. If you had, we would have two Starks to trade as we speak. Two may not be as good as three, but it’s better than one. And if you were concerned about her safety, I could have sent her to Casterly Rock instead of King’s Landing. Don’t you think I would have done it?”

She didn’t reply. She had to admit she didn’t think about this possibility. Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery did what they could to protect the Lady Sansa from Joffrey, and they would certainly have done the same for Arya.

“My wife trusts you, Lady Mira. She sees you more as a friend than a handmaiden. You took freedoms you shouldn’t have in times of war. If Cersei or Joffrey, or even the small council heard of this, the best you could hope for is to end like Sansa, a prisoner of Joffrey. Who is aware of what you did?”

“Only you, Robb Stark and his main advisors.”

“No one else?”
“No one else, my lord.”

“Is there anything else I should know?”

She gulped. “Yes, my lord.”

She hoped he didn’t perceive her hesitation. She couldn’t tell him about the Braavosi coin, not until she had proofs. She couldn’t find this Jaqen H’ghar at Harrenhal. He had disappeared. The men she questioned said he certainly took an opportunity to run away. She doubted Lord Tyrion would believe a story about an assassin who could change his appearance. Instead, she produced something else she hid in her gown. It was a letter.

“When we left Casterly Rock, Jon Snow gave me three letters, one for his lord father and two for his sisters. I gave Arya the one he wrote to her when I met her, and I gave him back the one for his father when I saw him on the Kingsroad. This is the letter he wrote for Sansa. I didn’t have the opportunity to give it to her.”

Lord Tyrion took the letter she offered him. After considering it for a moment, he opened it and read it. “Nothing to worry about,” he said after he was done. “Only comforting words and the promise everything will be fine and that Margaery and I will make sure they are all reunited soon.” He sighed and threw the letter in the fire that burned nearby. “It wouldn’t give her much comfort now, quite the opposite. Knowing her brother trusted us to save his father, and that we failed.”

There was a lingering heaviness in his voice. He regretted he couldn’t save Eddard Stark, and not only because of the war that followed his death.

“As I said, this conversation will not leave this room,” he resumed. “I will talk with Margaery about what you did when she comes back. You are at her service, not mine. And I suggest you to be careful in the future. King’s Landing is not the North. This city can be a nest of vipers for the uninitiated.” He went back to sit behind his desk. “I also have another mission for you.”

A few minutes later, Mira finally walked out of Lord Tyrion’s solar, exhaling deeply. It could have been worse. For now, she was temporarily free of her movements and had to wait for Lady Margaery to come back. She would decide with her lord husband what to do with her. It wasn’t much worse than what she hoped so far. She was still very lucky to get out of this so well.

She went to another room in the Tower of the Hand where she found Sera. Her friend was very happy to see her again, and Mira was glad to be reunited with her too.

“I’m so relieved to see you, Mira. I was so worried about you.” Her friend embraced her in a very long hug.

“I risked nothing, Sera,” she tried to reassure her. “I had a strong escort with me, and anyway the Northerners would never hurt me. I’m one of them.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re back all the same. With you and Lady Margaery gone, I felt alone. There wasn’t much to do and… I was afraid, with everything going on around here. Can you believe that the king had the Lady Sansa beaten in front of the court, and naked with all that?”

Mira was horrified by the news. “Why did he do such a thing?”

“It’s because of the Battle of the Kingsroad.” Sera started to arrange the bed. Mira went to help as they continued to discuss. When Sera was discussing a delicate matter, she often did something else at the same time, any task at hand. “If Lord Tyrion had not stepped in, I prefer not to imagine what would have happened to her? She was in such a sorry state when I saw her after that.”
Mira shook her head. Joffrey was a monster. Executing someone for trying to overthrow you was something but beating a little girl because her brother defeated you in battle was simply cruel.

“Now Sansa lives in the Tower of the Hand, and Lord Tyrion assigned me to her service until Lady Margaery comes back.”

“I know. He told me.”

They kept talking, or actually Sera did most of the talk, until they were done cleaning and preparing the room for the evening. Mira listened to many gossips, some useful, many useless. She didn’t say much about her journey. Even if she wanted, Sera would barely let her place a word. There wasn’t much Mira wanted to say or could say as a matter of fact. She couldn’t tell her friend about Arya, or about the Braavosi coin she found, and she didn’t want to speak of her failed mission. She had another one now, one she was much more comfortable with, though not entirely. Still, she had to fulfill it if she wanted to avoid the worse consequences of her decision to bring Arya Stark back to her family.

When they were done arranging the room, Mira excused herself and went to the library. It was one of the largest in the Seven Kingdoms, though not as large as the one in Oldtown. Not that she had ever seen the Citadel’s library, but she supposed that when she would be wed to Willas, he might be willing to bring her there one day. Maester Ortengryn once told her father that had she been a man, she would have made a wonderful maester.

Mira had explored the library before. The system of classification was complex, but no more than the one in Casterly Rock or Highgarden and she could easily find her way through the shelves. She managed to find the section that was dedicated to the Free Cities of Essos and headed for the shelves containing the works on Braavos. She wandered her index on the bindings until she found what she was looking for. *The Currencies of the East* by Archmaester Xenophon.

She brought it to a table and began to turn the pages. Coins of all countries and of all times streamed before Mira’s eyes. There were so many different currencies with details about when they were introduced, how their use and their value changed through history, even anecdotes about how some played an important role in the history. She knew that in the last pages, they showed the few coins from Asshai or Yi Ti the maesters had knowledge of. There was even a drawing of a coin that was supposedly being used by the Thenns, wildlings who lived in a mountain valley north of the Wall. She supposed the maester couldn’t resist the envy to put such a rare thing in his work, even though it was being dedicated to the currencies of the east.

She didn’t need to go that far since Braavos was among the first cities whose coins were studied. She came upon the page she was looking for. It was there. She took the coin Arya Stark dropped in her tent so many nights ago. Despite the wear, there was no doubt that it was the same. The inscription, the pattern, everything was so similar that it couldn’t be a coincidence. Mira read the short text under the drawing that she had already read years ago in Highgarden.

*A particular coin, probably the most feared in Braavos. No one dares to speak about it, but rumor has it that when someone presents a Braavosi this coin, he will do everything that person asks of him. It is not used for trade, but most likely as a method of identification. Very few in Westeros have ever set eyes on this coin, and when they are asked about it, they dare not speak. It is hypothesized that it is being used by a secret organization, and logic directs to the only one in Braavos that can cast so much fear: the Faceless Men of the House of Black and White.*

The rest of the text was about the details of the coin and their many possible meanings. The letters obviously stood for Valar Morghulis but the other symbols were indecipherable. According to Xenophon, no attempt to translate the inscriptions around the outline of the coin was conclusive or
worth of note. The few maesters who struggled to understand the other forms couldn’t make any sense of them either. The mystery remained complete.

This wasn’t of much help. She already knew or suspected most of what was written there. She had to find more information. She went back to the shelves and came back with several books. In every one of them on Braavos, the Faceless Men were mentioned, but that was the problem. They were only mentioned. All she could get were details. Some theorized the Faceless Men came to Braavos at the same time than the slaves who fled Valyria, for example, but there was never any proof. Everything related to them was at best rumors, or legends, or myths. There were stories of some of the assassinations they supposedly conducted, but again there were no proofs. No murder had ever been officially attributed to the Faceless Men. A thick veil was covering the mystery of this group of assassins, and Mira was unable to penetrate it.

She was reading an account of the unsolved crimes of Braavos, stumbling on some that may be the work of Faceless Men, when a voice surprised her from behind.

“My lady, you’re still here?”

She looked over her shoulder to see the septon who was responsible of the Red Keep’s library, a candle at the hand. “Yes, why?”

“It’s very late, my lady. We are in the middle of the night.”

Mira looked around. She realized when she looked through the small windows that darkness had fallen. She didn’t realize how quickly time had gone while she was buried in her search.

“You should go to sleep, my lady. This is not good to stay awake all night.”

Indeed. She wondered how Lord Tyrion could do this sometimes, because she knew he did. Lady Margaery told her and Sera more than once that she would wake up in the middle of the night and find her lord husband reading.

“You’re right. I should go,” she said.

“I’ll take care of these books. Go and get some sleep, my child.”

“Thank you.”

She verified that the coin was safely placed inside her gown before she left. Truth be told, she wasn’t very tired. She came back from a long journey but didn’t feel exhausted at all. She didn’t feel like she could sleep if she went back to her room right away. Instead, she proceeded to another place of the Red Keep where she would be alone.

Maybe fifteen minutes later, she knelt before the weirwood tree of the godswood of King’s Landing. She didn’t have the opportunity to pray much on their way back from the Riverlands. Despite the darkness, Mira wasn’t afraid. Back home, she often went to the godswood of Ironrath in the middle of the night. She would pray, and whatever bothered her, she would always feel better after talking to the Old Gods.

She also felt better after she prayed to the Seven. Her lord father following the Old Gods and her lady mother the New Gods, Mira was raised in both faiths and was taught to worship both. She didn’t really favor any over the others. She respected both gods, but after she left Ironrath, she had turned more towards her father’s gods. They were her bond to the North and to her family, and with the war going on and the house she served fighting the one she came from, she felt she needed to pray to them more than ever.
She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, calming herself after the long hours of frenetic search she went through. She talked to the Old Gods, asked them questions, questions she tried to answer herself, hoping they would give her an answer. She asked them what she should do, wondered if she was truly doing the right thing. She asked them to end this war, to protect her family and the people she loved, for the winter to come to be short. She prayed for her father, her mother, for Rodrik and Asher, for Talia, Ethan and Ryon, for Sera, for Jon, for Willas, for Lady Margaery, for Lord Tyrion, and for all the people she cared about.

The leaves rustled. Again. Lately, it had happened more often than ever. The first time was at Old Oak, during the signature of the Trade Agreement. She had thought it was her imagination, but the first time she prayed at Casterly Rock when they came back from the Reach, she heard it again. Then it had happened twice or thrice afterwards before they left for the North. She heard it again on her first day at Ironrath when she visited her family, and the day she left for Winterfell. At the seat of House Stark, the same thing happened again the day she arrived and the day she left. At their return at Casterly Rock, she couldn’t deny it anymore. It was now almost every time she went to pray. And she was sure it wasn’t Jon. He was often praying with her and that wasn’t his voice, and whenever she heard it and looked at him, there was absolutely no sign showing he said or heard something. Even when they didn’t pray together she heard it.

“Why?” she asked.

No answer, like always. She went back to her prayers, begging for answers. What was she supposed to do? It troubled her, to hear the same thing every time and to not be able to understand what it meant.

She missed the godswood of her home, and she missed the godswood of Casterly Rock. She had spent years in the Westerlands, so much time that it almost became a second home. It would never occupy the same place in her heart as the place where she grew up, but she had very good memories of her time there, and she wasn’t eager to leave it, to leave Sera, to leave Lady Margaery, to leave the friends she made there and all her memories behind. It felt… wrong. It felt like it wasn’t the right thing to do.

“What are you doing here?”

For the second time tonight, Mira was taken by surprise by someone who stood behind her. Only this time, it was a female voice. Dawn was coming at the horizon, so she could see well enough the face of the intruder when she opened her eyes and looked behind her. The girl was younger than her, though she was almost as tall as Mira already. Unless she was wrong, Sansa Stark had grown up in her short absence. She wore a gown of a dark color. Mira stood up and faced her.

“I’m praying, my lady.”

Jon’s sister looked confused. “I’m the only one who prays here.”

“Well, not really. I was raised in both faiths, just like you.”

“Who are you?”

“Mira Forrester.”

Sansa’s eyes widened and her mouth opened in shock. That reminded her of her first meeting with Jon last year. He and Sansa might look very different, but their reaction was very similar.

“You’re Sera’s friend?”
“Yes, Sera is my friend.”

Sansa Stark may not remember, but they had met before. Not when she arrived in King’s Landing after Lord Stark’s death. Mira had only seen Sansa from afar back then. Neither when Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery visited Winterfell. Mira had been gone to Ironrath and joined her lady only after Sansa left for the south. It was when Mira journeyed south for the first time and she and her father stopped by Winterfell. Sansa was much younger back then, barely ten-years-old. Mira was older than her, but they exchanged a few words. However, it had been very brief, briefer than with Jon Snow, and he could hardly remember her when they met again years later.

“We met, four years ago,” Sansa said. Mira was surprised. “You were with your father, Lord Gregor Forrester. He said you were going to Highgarden. You were wearing a blue dress made of cotton, and you had your hair arranged just like today.”

“My lady has a good memory,” Mira replied. She had to confess she was impressed. Mira had braided her hair in a more northern fashion while she was travelling in the Riverlands. She would need to go back to her previous hairstyle.

“I should have known when Sera told me. She even said you were from House Forrester. I should have remembered right away.”

“Don’t worry, my lady. Your brother needed much more help to remember me.”

“You’ve met Robb?”

“No, I was talking about Jon Snow. But I’ve seen both of them recently.”

Sansa approached. “Are they alright? Is everything fine for them?”

“Yes, they’re alive, and well. They’re trying to save you.”

All of a sudden, Sansa’s expression changed from excitement to know about her brother to a close face that let nothing show off. “My brothers are traitors. In time, Joffrey will defeat them and I only hope he can show them a mercy they do not deserve.”

It was Mira’s turn to be confused but only for a very short time. Lord Tyrion was right about Jon’s half-sister. She was really terrified. She should have asked Jon to write her another letter while she was in Robb Stark’s camp. *Only to see Lord Tyrion burn it as well?*

“Sansa, I know this is not easy, believe me. I am in a position very similar to yours. I have a brother and a father who are fighting Joffrey, and I have family back in the North too, and they are in danger.” She didn’t mention directly the threat of the Ironmen. Who knew what happened to Sansa’s youngest brothers? She wondered how Jon was feeling right now. She prayed for Brandon and Rickon Stark to be alive. “However, treason or not, history shows us that the Starks survived when they bent the knee to Aegon Targaryen, just like the Mad King died after killing two Starks in the throne room.”

She hoped she conveyed the appropriate message and that Sansa understood it. “Yes, it’s true.”

Mira nodded. “I suppose you came to pray. Does it bother you if I stay? I haven’t prayed to the Old Gods in a long time, and at Casterly Rock I got used to pray with Jon. I’d like to pray with someone again.”

“Yes, of course.”
Sansa knelt down and Mira followed her example. She closed her eyes and started to pray again, for Sansa this time. The girl needed it. From time to time, Mira would discreetly open her eyes and look at the eldest daughter of Eddard Stark. If Arya looked a lot like Jon, Sansa was more like her mother, just like Robb Stark. Mira had met Lady Stark on one occasion, and to be true, she had found her behavior in front of Jon highly inappropriate. She had been cold towards him, without reason. She had told her so before she left the inn, in a gentle manner, but she told her all the same. She could understand that Jon wasn’t her son, but that was no reason to be so cold or indifferent to him. Bastards didn’t choose their parents, whether they were girls from the Reach or boys from the North.

Right now, Sansa didn’t look at all like Catelyn Stark. She seemed at peace, calm, something she wasn’t before when she entered the godswood. Mira understood that she chose to come here to pray. There was nothing better to soothe yourself. The sun rose up in the skies, warming her skin. Mira hadn’t slept of the whole night, but she felt invigorated, revived. It was always like this when she prayed. She remembered the good time she spent at her home in the godswood, whether it was alone or with her brothers and sister. Sometimes at Highgarden, especially in the beginning, Lady Margaery or Sera would walk with her around the many weirwoods. And at Casterly Rock, there had been Jon to share this time with. She felt better when he came with her than when she prayed alone.

Mira was done praying after some time, but she remained there, to be with Sansa. She needed help, that was beyond any doubt. Hours later, Jon’s sister finally stood up.

“I will go,” she said.

“I'll accompany you,” Mira said. Sansa didn’t object and Mira followed her.

After some time walking in silence, Sansa broke it. “You know Jon, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. He’s a very good friend.”

“Sera told me you invited him to your wedding.”

“Yes, I did. It should take place soon.” Once the war would be over, probably.

“You… you’ve spent time in Casterly Rock, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. The last three years.”

“Can you tell me more about it? The godswood, for example?”

Mira began to tell Sansa everything she knew about the seat of House Lannister.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you don't find the long description of the streets of King's Landing too long at the beginning of the chapter. I think it is important to understand the world of Game of Thrones outside of courts and big castles to see how people live, and Mira's traveling through the streets gave me an opportunity to show it. By the way, regulations allowing carts to move in the streets only at night, except for those dedicated to construction, truly existed in antic and medieval cities. In Rome, this law was specifically designed by Julius Caesar.
It may seem that Tyrion was quite tolerant with Mira in this chapter. After all, giving Arya to Robb is no small action, even if it could be justified from the perspective of negotiations, up to a certain point. Mira's origins and nationality makes her situation even more precarious in light of her decision. However, like Tyrion said, he's not Joffrey. That doesn't mean he will forget about it, or that there's no practical reason why he allowed Mira to remain free. There's the other mission he gave her, after all.

For those of you who have read "A Shadow and a Wolf", this will not be the first time you will see a friendship develop between Sansa and Mira. However, the dynamic between the two girls will be different this time, Sansa being much more vulnerable in ARAAL than in ASAAW at the time she meets Mira, and Mira already having met most of Sansa's family.

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
Margaery XIX

Chapter Notes

A very emotional chapter for Margaery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XIX

The water slowly followed the stream in a fluid pattern, seldom bothered by a few big rocks that
forced the current to circle the obstacle before it resumed its path. A sweet breeze whistled through
the leaves of the trees, accompanying a few singing birds that made the scenery similar to that of a
few monasteries Margaery got to visit in the Reach.

The scenery would have been idyllic without her men in red and green armor filling their gourds,
sharpening their swords, boiling stew and discussing between them who reminded her of their
current situation, not to mention Catelyn Stark and Brienne of Tarth who stood alone, away from
her, whispering to each other. But what prevented Margaery from enjoying the moment more than
anything else was the memory of her brother, a sword emerging through his face, then falling back,
his head in ruins, his nose gone, his mouth and eyes barely distinguishable where the point of the
weapon pierced.

As Margaery stared at the current, she remembered a time, long ago, in Highgarden, back when she
was only a child and barely beginning to understand the role she would have to play for the future
for her house and to forge her own place in the world. She was ten. Loras was eight. On a very hot
day, a day that was so hot that her grandmother needed three different people to fan her, she
convinced her father to release Loras from the obligation to train and to accompany her with her
friends and cousins to the Mander, where they would bath.

Margaery had always been a wonderful swimmer, better than most of her friends, but Loras, always
busy training with a sword or with a bow, had never learned to swim. Margaery had brought her
little brother with her to the river. She remembered how afraid he looked, and how reluctant he was
to just place his feet into the water. She almost pushed him in, then took his hands and showed him
how to swim. They had laughed a lot, and what was supposed to be an insufferable day because of
the heat had become one of the most beautiful day of her life, when she got to spend it all with her
little brother.

That little brother was gone now. He had died, right in front of her. She would never see his cocky
smile or hear him laugh again, nor ride a horse in a tourney, and she would never argue with him
again over his stupidity. All that was left was a body with a messed face, a body that her parents
might not be able to recognize if she didn’t tell them he was their son.

A tear rolled on her left cheek. She wiped it with the back of her hand. They couldn’t bring his body
with them. Who knew what they had done of it? Now that Renly was dead, who knew what Stannis
would make of it? Margaery’s family might not even be able to give her brother a proper burial. He
would never rest peacefully in the crypts of Highgarden along with their ancestors.

She heard someone sitting by her side, but she kept looking at the stream of water running in front of
her. A river was alive as long as its current didn’t stop and kept going on. A human was stopped
when the blood stopped running through its veins. Loras’ blood didn’t run anymore. It had stopped, and there was no way to start it again.

“How are you?” Catelyn Stark asked. Margaery didn’t answer. Nothing would change what happened. “We are at the northern edge of the Kingswood…”

“I know.” She knew these lands much better than Catelyn Stark did. She didn’t need the Lady of Winterfell, or former Lady of Winterfell, to tell her where they were. They were in the Crownlands, the lands she and Tyrion controlled.

“Lady Brienne and I will go separate ways. We will avoid King’s Landing and keep heading north until we make it back to my son’s army,” Catelyn told her.

“Very well. Have a safe journey.”

She stared back at the water running. She heard a deep breath from the person sitting next to her. “Margaery, we need to talk about what happened to Bran.”

She knew it was coming. Of course, Catelyn Stark would want to discuss it again before they parted ways. Well, she had no envy to talk about it. She just lost her brother, and she had no wish to listen to filthy accusations against her and Tyrion.

“I know that you believe Lord Tyrion has nothing to do with…”

“Because he has nothing to do with it.” She cut the Lady of Winterfell before she could finish her sentence. “I know my husband, and I’m telling, Lady Stark, he had nothing to do with this. If you want someone to blame for the injuries to your hands, then find someone else.”

Catelyn Stark needed some time before she replied. “My son would be dead if it wasn’t for his wolf. And the dagger…”

“This dagger does not belong to Tyrion.”

“How can you be so sure…”

“And how can you be sure that whoever told you the weapon belonged to Tyrion was honest?”

“I would trust this person with my life.”

“And I trust mine with Tyrion, and he trusts me with his life as well.” She stared back straight in the eyes of Catelyn for the first time. “I’ve been married with him for years. Perhaps it seems a short time for you, but for me it’s not. I know my husband, and no matter what you believe, I know he didn’t send assassin against your son, and I know he would never do that, because he had no reason to kill your son.”

She turned her eyes back to the water. Another moment of silence went on before Catelyn spoke again. “I believe Bran surprised the queen and Ser Jaime together in that tower, that he was pushed, and that when the Lannisters found out it didn’t kill him, they sent a man to finish him.”

Margaery scoffed. “You believe Stannis?”

“My husband believed it too?”

“And it’s reassuring for you to know that your husband believed that a kinslayer, a man who murdered his own brother with dark magic, was the most fit to be king?”
Margaery knew what she saw, and she knew that Lady Brienne and Catelyn knew what they saw too. She saw the shadow, and she saw its face, first in the mirror, and then when it turned toward her. It was the face of Stannis Baratheon. When Renly died by his hand, his kingsguard rushed into the tent, and they instinctively believed that Brienne had killed him. Margaery and Catelyn tried in vain to tell them Brienne didn’t do it, but the knights didn’t listen. While Brienne fought against the two men, another fight took place outside the tent, where the knight accompanying Catelyn and some of Margaery’s men engaged the other kingsguards of Renly. The kingsguards had prevailed, but at a high cost. Loras was the only survivor of the melee, and he entered the tent to find Margaery with Catelyn and Brienne crying over Renly’s body. Loras came to the same conclusion as the other knights and attacked Brienne. Margaery tried to stop him, only to find herself on the ground with Brienne. Loras was about to finish Brienne when Ser Mandon Moore walked in and killed Loras from behind.

The action didn’t stop to come back to Margaery’s mind. The sword piercing her brother’s head from neck to face, erasing the look of pure hatred that had been there the instant before as he was about to kill an innocent woman. Then the sword being quickly removed, and her brother’s now lifeless body slowly falling, first on his knees, then lying face to the ground. And she remembered the horrible mess his face was when she turned the body to look at him, hoping against all odds that Loras was still alive.

Then there was the loud sound of two swords meeting over her head, and then Lady Brienne’s sword slashing across Ser Moore’s neck. Margaery had seen nothing, but Brienne and Catelyn both claimed he was about to kill her. Brienne had deflected the fatal blow before the point of the sword sank into Margaery’s neck.

Catelyn had convinced her they had to escape. Shooting one last look at her brother’s body, Margaery had realized then that they would be blamed for all this and they needed to leave immediately. She thought of nothing else, and she discreetly led Catelyn and Brienne to her men who were ready to leave. Thus they had escaped Renly’s camp. His men now most likely fought under Stannis’s banner. Margaery had allowed Catelyn and the lady knight to follow her without discussion. Catelyn was an ambassador and Brienne now her sworn shield, and as such they were not to be harmed or arrested, but Margaery seldom talked to them during the journey, lost in her thoughts about Loras’ death.

“Lady Margaery,” Catelyn resumed, “I get it. You know your husband, but I knew mine as well, and I had over fifteen years and five children to know him. Believe me when I tell you that he would never have claimed that Joffrey was born of incest had he not been sure of that, and he would never have been sure without having found indisputable proof. As hard as it is to accept and to believe, Cersei and Jaime Lannister are the parents of Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella. And someone tried to kill my son after he fell from a tower, a tower where I found a blond hair on the floor a few days later, and while most of the people had gone hunting. Among the few people who were still inside Winterfell at this moment were the Kingslayer and Cersei. And no one knew where they were when Bran fell. This cannot be a coincidence, not when someone told me the dagger belonged to their brother.”

Margaery heard but didn’t listen. Though despite the fact she wasn’t listening, she heard very clearly all the same and the words made their way into her brain. She found herself wondering where had Cersei and Jaime been that day? She couldn’t remember. Though there was a discussion with Tyrion that came back to her mind, when she asked him questions about how the hunt was.

“Eddard Stark is still going to King’s Landing. I couldn’t talk him out of it. Too bad Jaime wasn’t there. The hunt would have been much funnier with him.”
Jaime Lannister wasn’t with the hunting party. Then he had to be at Winterfell. If he was at Winterfell… She and Tyrion thought that Brandon Stark could have been pushed, even though they couldn’t admit it in public for the repercussions it would have on their houses. They thought he might have surprised a discussion between Cersei and people about Jon Arryn’s death, and that was the reason why the boy was almost killed. Cersei denied it, and Ser Jaime as well, but could they trust them? Cersei tried to kill Tyrion more than once, and Jaime was very close to his sister. Too close? Was it possible after all…

No, that couldn’t be. Tyrion would know about this had his siblings pursued a romantic relationship. This couldn’t go unnoticed, not from Tyrion. They had agents in the capital and were far more observant than Robert Baratheon, who was drunk more often than not. Tyrion knew his family, especially Jaime. He couldn’t have ignored this. Unless he didn’t know his brother and sister as much as he thought. The alternative explanation was simply impossible.

Still, even if that was true, had Bran surprised Cersei and Jaime together during the act, as unlikely and distasteful as it seemed, Jaime Lannister was the kind to defy his enemies in duel to deal with them, to do it public and in the open. He wasn’t the kind of man who sent someone to do his dirty work. Cersei, on the other, was quite capable of sending an assassin to kill a child. But this dagger belonged to Joffrey. Cersei wouldn’t have given such a weapon to a man to murder someone. That would have led directly to her. Cersei was dangerous, rash and ready to do anything, but she wasn’t stupid. Not to this level. Who could be stupid enough to arm an assassin with his own blade?

The answer came immediately. Who was stupid enough to execute a powerful lord and have half of Westeros against him when it could be avoided?

“The dagger does not belong to Tyrion,” she said.

Catelyn didn’t sigh openly, but Margaery she did it in silence. “Lady Margaery…”

“Because I had this dagger made myself.”

When she stared back at Eddard Stark’s widow, an expression of complete incomprehension was on her face.

“This dagger was the gift Tyrion and I gave to Joffrey on his name day. I ordered the blacksmiths of Casterly Rock to forge it. I carried it with me on our way to King’s Landing and I gave it to Joffrey myself. I never saw the dagger again afterwards. And I’m telling you that Tyrion cannot have won back the dagger into a bet because he didn’t make any for the whole tournament. Anyway, Tyrion never bets against his brother, so he could never have won it the way you heard.”

Catelyn was stunned. “The dagger… It is Joffrey’s… Why would he lie to me?”

“I think Joffrey did this. I think he tried to kill Bran.” The words came out of her mouth before she realized it. “He’s the one who did it,” she stated in the end.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Something else came back to her mind, something that happened back at Winterfell. “I heard Robert Baratheon talk to Cersei after your son’s fall. *We kill our horses when they break a leg, and our dogs when they go blind, but we are too weak to give the same mercy to crippled children.* Joffrey was there. He heard.”

“You said it was Joffrey who did it, not Robert.”

“Joffrey is a boy who was hungry for a pat on the head from Robert. You’ve seen Robert, what kind
of king he was. Do you think he was a good father? Do you think he was close to his children? There are stories all around the Red Keep of Joffrey’s cruel attempts to make his father proud of him. He killed a cat that was pregnant and then opened the belly to show the unborn children to Robert. He thought he would impress Robert this way. He executed your husband after he promised to spare him, had his kingsguard beat your daughter because she said things he didn’t like. Do you really think he wouldn’t be cruel or stupid enough to send an assassin after Bran?”

Catelyn Stark was frozen for a very long time. “Joffrey… he did all this.”

“It seems we’re in all this mess because of the stupidity and the cruelty of one spoiled child,” Margaery summarized.

“For how long have you known this?” Catelyn asked on an accusing tone.

“I just pieced all this together. It never came to my mind before that Joffrey could have done this. I should have thought better.”

Catelyn Stark’s breathing had become quick. “Robb will never allow this to pass. Joffrey cannot remain king.”

“And who would you have in his stead? Stannis? He just murdered his brother using dark magic. Do you really think he will make a better king?”

“You cannot say that you will let Joffrey be king after what he did?”

“He is my nephew. What else do you want me to do? What would you do if you were in my place? Would you be ready to kill your husband’s nephews if he had had any?”

“And what if Stannis and Ned were telling the truth about Joffrey? What if he’s really born of an incest?”

Margaery sighed. “Even if that was the case, what other choice do we have? You’ve seen what Stannis is ready to do to take the throne. Is that really the kind of man you want to rule the Seven Kingdoms?”

“He is the rightful king.”

“And so was the Mad King when your families rebelled against him.”

“He murdered the man I was supposed to marry and his father.”

“And Stannis murdered his brother, his own flesh and blood. I don’t see any improvement.”

“It is easy for you to say. You lost no one…”

“I just lost Loras! He died! He died fighting for a pretender. He died because the man he served was killed. If Stannis hadn’t murdered Renly, none of that would have happened. I would still have a brother.”

Catelyn Stark didn’t reply to this at first. Her expression smoothed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what it is to lose a brother. My lady mother had several miscarriages, but I never truly lost one, or saw one dying right in front of me.”

“He was my little brother. The only brother I had.”

Margaery had to fight tears from breaking out.
“Margaery.” She thought it was the first time Catelyn called her only by using her first name. “I know you are in pain. You lost a brother, but I lost a husband. You must understand how I feel about the man who killed him. Joffrey cannot sit on the Iron Throne. I know he is family for you, I know it is not easy, but…”

“You have no idea how it is,” she interrupted Catelyn again. “You have no idea what it is to deal with a spoiled boy who kills for fun every day, to try to keep seven kingdoms from falling apart when the boy in question and his mother do everything to destroy them. To deal with a woman who tried to kill my own husband and who threatened to strangle me in my sleep. Do you have any idea what it is to deal on a daily basis with Cersei Lannister and her son?”

“What?”

“Cersei tried to kill Tyrion. She tried to have him poisoned, and when she failed, she tried to turn his bannermen against him. And I suspect that Ser Mandon Moore was following her orders when he tried to kill me. She’s the one who came up with the idea that he should travel with me to Storm’s End.”

“But… How could she… Lord Tyrion is her brother. How could she try to kill her own brother?” She could see how Catelyn Stark was shocked by the revelations.

“To her, Tyrion is not her brother. She hates him. She’s hated him since the day he was born.”

“Why?”

“Because Lady Joanna Lannister died the day Tyrion was born. Cersei blamed him for her death. Tywin Lannister did the same when he was still alive. He didn’t want Tyrion to succeed him. His will said Casterly Rock was to go to Jaime, but Jaime was a kingsguard and not interested in ruling. So Tyrion became Lord of the Westerlands, but Cersei resents him. She believes she should have Casterly Rock for herself. So, excuse me, but you know nothing, Catelyn Stark.”

Another silence followed. “Margaery, I beg you to consider that Joffrey might be what Stannis claims. The man’s actions don’t mean that he’s wrong. Ned cannot have been certain of that and wrong at the same time. I know that, at least. I’m just asking you to consider the possibility that Joffrey might just be what I think he is.”

Margaery thought about it. She would need to talk with Tyrion when she returned. “I will think about it.”

Catelyn Stark seemed relieved. “Look, my eldest son risks his life every day as we’re at war, Arya is lost and no one knows where she is, Sansa is a prisoner to Joffrey, and my two sons are either dead or hostages to the Ironmen. I beg you, they’re my children.”

“Then you must convince Robb to make peace with Joffrey.”

“He will never do it, not when he hears the truth about Bran. And I cannot blame him.”

“Then prepare to blame someone else when all your children are gone. Because as long as you will be at war with Joffrey, Sansa will remain his prisoner, you will not be able to find Arya, Robb’s life will continue to be at risk, and your armies will not be able to save Bran and Rickon while they are busy fighting in the Riverlands.”

“We cannot make peace with people like Joffrey, Cersei or Jaime.”

“Are their heads more valuable to you than your children?” Catelyn didn’t answer. “Perhaps I was
right after all. You’re not worthy to be a mother.”

Margaery stood up and proceeded to walk. She had enough of this. Loras just died, and she had to argue with people who just didn’t want to listen.

“Margaery.” She turned back to look at Catelyn who now stood as well, and who approached her. “I will do what I can, I promise. I will do everything to convince Robb to make peace with Joffrey, but… I don’t think he will.”

“Make him do. I will continue to watch over Sansa and to look for Arya. I will keep them safe. You cannot reach Joffrey or Cersei or Jaime. I can. Let me deal with them.”

She wouldn’t let them get away with this anyway, with or without promise to Catelyn Stark. If the three of them had something to do with the attempt of murder on the Stark boy, and if Jaime and Cersei truly had an affair like Ned Stark claimed, they would see what the Lady of Casterly Rock was capable of.

Catelyn Stark nodded, but Margaery didn’t allow her to walk back to Brienne. “One thing. Who told you about the dagger?” Her face went blank. She wouldn’t answer. “Very well. Can you give me the dagger in this case? I’ll need it to deal with Joffrey in King’s Landing.”

Reluctantly, she gave it to Margaery. One of her men arrived at this moment.

“My lady, we’re ready to go.”

Margaery nodded. “Just give me one minute, alone.”

She walked away until she was far enough from everyone. As she distanced herself from them, the pain came back, her breathing accelerated. She grabbed the trunk of a tree and sobbed, clutching the dagger from the other hand.

*Loras, you fool! I told you. You should never have followed Renly. Why did you have to be so stupid?* She had managed to avoid her grief while she spoke with Catelyn, but she needed to get this out. Loras was dead. She would never see him again. He was gone. She just wanted him to come back, but she knew it wouldn’t happen. Tears kept falling from her eyes, covering her cheeks and turning her vision into a blur. She felt her legs collapsing. She ended knees and hands on the ground, the dagger still in the right. Loras was dead. Ser Mandon Moore killed him. Cersei Lannister killed him. Joffrey killed him.

**Chapter End Notes**

Okay, I have a great announcement to make. Some of you complained about the fact I follow the canon TV show too closely. I have the great pleasure to tell you this comes to an end with the next chapter. From now on, this fanfiction will make a much different story from the TV show. We are actually talking about the War of the Five Kings taking an entirely different direction and fates of many characters changing drastically. There will be a Battle of Blackwater, but the battle itself and its outcome will be very different. The time for "A Rose and a Lion" telling Game of Thrones with very minor changes is over.

The next update will take place in the middle of August, in four weeks. I know this is a
long waiting, but I will release five chapters at the same time, all taking place within the same day and night, that mark the great change in the story, so that should be worth the wait.

Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

After one month of waiting, here it is, the first of five chapters in five days, marking the moment where this fanfiction truly diverges from canon. I'm not joking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION XIII

“If I understand what happened, you charged Robb Stark with only the vanguard the moment you spotted his banners?”

Tyrion was sitting in his solar in the Tower of the Hand, a cup of wine in hand, his brother across his position, another cup in hand, all muddied and sweating from his journey through the Riverlands and the Crownlands.

“As soon as Addam told me he saw their banners, yes,” Jaime replied. That was indeed a great difference, Tyrion thought sarcastically.

“You should have waited for Kevan and his men.”

“We spent weeks sitting on our asses, doing nothing, waiting for the Stark boy to do something and for you to finally tell us we could go after him. I was tired of waiting.”

“This changes nothing to the fact you should have waited for Kevan. If you had, we may not have lost this battle, and Kevan may not be a prisoner of the Starks with his boys.”

Jaime shook his head and emptied his cup in one swift swallow. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Wait for Kevan to be free, and then you’ll apologize to him, and to his sons.” And to all the men we lost in the battle, all for nothing.

Jaime had just come back from Harrenhal with most of their troops. Of the thirty thousand men who accompanied Kevan in the Riverlands, twenty thousand came back to King’s Landing. Three thousand were left at Harrenhal to hold the fortress and keep what river lords remained on their side. The Battle of the Kingsroad made a few reconsider their recent allegiance to Joffrey, but after news of the defeat of Edmure Tully at the Golden Tooth and the siege of Riverrun reached their ears, the situation came unchanged. Kevan had been captured by Robb Stark, but he left specific instructions to his lieutenants in this eventuality to fall back on Harrenhal and regroup all the men they could so they would block the path of Robb Stark to the capital. Kevan had been very clever to do so. If he had left Jaime to take command of the army, his brother might have been smashing his head against Robb Stark’s host until him and all his men were dead. Then Tyrion would have nothing to stand between Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon and the Iron Throne.

Now that Renly was dead, all the reports Tyrion received pointed toward an imminent attack on the city. Tyrion had been making preparations, ordering Bywater to hurry the training of the gold cloaks, increasing the guard and the defenses on the city walls, and talking the High Septon to talk against Stannis, using the rumors concerning his relationship with the Red Priestess and spreading word that
Stannis would burn the Great Sept of Baelor and all the other septs in the Seven Kingdoms if he seized power. Tyrion used an information that Stannis burned sacred sites in Storm’s End when the castle surrendered the night following Renly’s death. He only omitted to mention that the sacred sites in question were not related to the Seven, but to the Old Gods.

Tyrion tried to not be too harsh on Jaime, but he couldn’t deny his brother’s decision to charge Stark’s rearguard had been stupid and inconsiderate. They were lucky Kevan was careful enough to not risk everything in this battle. Tyrion had come to appreciate his uncle’s help since his father’s death. People could say Kevan Lannister seldom had an idea Tywin Lannister didn’t have first, but even though Tyrion had thought so for a time and still believed there was some truth in it, Kevan proved to be a valuable advisor and officer. He just proved it once again on the Kingsroad. He probably saved the war in the Riverlands by his timely intervention in the battle and prevented their army to be entirely destroyed. Tyrion was glad that Jaime survived, and he would never exchange his brother for Kevan, but he wished Kevan hadn’t been captured.

“You think they’re in danger?” Jaime asked.

“I don’t think so. They’re too valuable to be killed. We have Sansa Stark. Her brother will not risk injuring Kevan or his sons, if only out of fear that his sister might pay the price.”

“You forget about Ned Stark. What’s telling you his son will not avenge his father by killing Kevan?”

Tyrion had thought about it, true, and he feared Robb Stark was certainly tempted to chop Kevan’s head off his body. “If Robb Stark is anything like his father, he won’t. Anyway, he’s after Joffrey, not Kevan. I think he will only keep him a hostage and maybe try to use him as a bargain to get Sansa back.”

What reassured Tyrion was the fact Robb Stark was recently given back his other sister, Arya. It might have tempered his wish to kill all the Lannisters he saw. Mira Forrester may have increased the chances of survival for Kevan when she freed Arya.

“Are you going to trade him for Sansa?” Jaime asked.

“No, I can’t.”

“Of course not.” Jaime took another sip and Tyrion followed. It was strange to think that Jaime might be drinking more than he did. Margaery had a far too good influence on him.

“So, did we make all this way for something, or were we stupid to let Robb Stark go?” Jaime asked.

“Varys says an attack on King’s Landing is imminent. Stannis will use all the might of the Stormlands and Dragonstone. We can expect about twenty thousand men if he fills his ships at their full capacity. He has a considerable fleet to ferry them. I suspect he will attack the Mud Gate. We have twenty thousand men of our own outside the walls, along with two thousand inside the city and four thousand gold cloaks.”

“So we have the advantage of numbers.”

“Yes, if Stannis attacks us quickly, and that’s what I think he will do. However, if the fight lingers, he can bring reinforcements from the Stormlands, about ten thousand men he cannot embark on his ships. Not to mention Robb Stark can turn around if Stannis orders him.”

“What are the Tyrells doing?” Jaime asked. “Their lands are next to the Stormlands. If someone could distract Stannis, it would be them. What are they waiting to help us? Does Mace Tyrell not
Tyrion sighed. “I received a raven from him yesterday. He officially declared for Joffrey and renewed his loyalty unconditionally. He swore that he would know no peace until Stannis’ head was on a spike.”

“Finally! What took him so long? With Renly dead, I expected he would side with you right away. What did he need to change his mind?”

Tyrion shifted his eyes from his cup to Jaime. “His son is dead.”

Jaime was about to drink some more wine. He stopped the movement before the cup reached his lips. “Loras Tyrell?”

“To your knowledge, has Mace Tyrell another son? I know you’re used to say that Cersei thinks herself to be Tywin Lannister with tits, but I hope you don’t see my wife as a man.”

“Calm down. Loras Tyrell is dead?”

“Deader than dead. His body was found next to Renly’s in his own tent.”

“Well, I suppose it won’t surprise many people.”

“Jaime, you’re talking about my brother-in-law,” Tyrion warned him.

“Come on, Tyrion. Don’t tell me you loved him. You said yourself he wanted to kill you the day you married his sister. And he was ready to fight us to put his lover on the throne.”

“He was my brother-in-law, Jaime.”

“Just like Robert Baratheon.”

“How do you think Margaery feels right now?”

The half-amused expression Jaime disappeared immediately. “Oh.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, Tyrion. I didn’t think about that.”

“It’s alright, Jaime.” Tyrion slumped into his chair and took a sip of wine at the same time than his brother.

Jaime was right, Tyrion had never loved Loras. The young knight was always insufferable with him. Margaery was upset as well with her brother’s behavior towards him. She said he didn’t seem to understand she could love him. On that, Tyrion couldn’t entirely blame the brother-in-law, but he thought that after seeing how he treated his sister, the Knight of Flowers would at least become a little civil. He never did. Instead, the fool went to support Renly. He should have known that doing so, he would end up fighting against his sister. Tyrion tried to imagine himself fighting his own family, and it was unconceivable for him. Even with Cersei and Joffrey, although he could lock them in their chambers or maybe exile them so they couldn’t cause problems and so he could rule Westeros, he couldn’t conceive going into war against them. They were family, of the same blood than him. Killing them wasn’t something he could consider seriously. He wouldn’t cry if they died, but he would never be the cause of their death, nor let someone kill them if he could stop it.

Margaery was on her way to King’s Landing. She would be back soon. He received word from her today. She stopped at a castle in the Crownlands and wrote to him, confirming she was still alive. Tyrion had been afraid something might have happened to her. Renly Baratheon had been killed,
and Margaery had gone to see him. Tyrion worried for days. Her raven relieved him like it never happened before.

Her message mentioned the deaths of Renly and Loras. Tyrion wasn’t really mourning his brother-in-law, but he knew how close to her brother Margaery was. Tyrion was very close to Jaime, so he could imagine what his wife was going through right now. In fact, he was mourning for Loras Tyrell, but not for his death. He was mourning because of the pain it inflicted on Margaery.

“What would you do if it was Cersei?” Tyrion asked his brother.

“What I would do? If it was Cersei what?”

“If… if Cersei was going through something difficult like that, what would you do? To help her?”

Jaime seemed lost for a moment. He looked away. He had the expression of someone who just realized something.

“I don’t know.”

This discussion took place three days ago. Since then, Tyrion had been busy all day, working with Vylarr, Jaime, Bywater, Marbrand and all the other officers of the Lannister army to make sure the city was ready for the arrival of Stannis Baratheon. Varys said Stannis would be there within days. Battlements were reinforced, men trained all day, their own fleet was ready. Tyrion also had a little surprise in store for Stannis’ ships. The Guild of Alchemists provided him with a deadly weapon that, if used appropriately, would save the city. He didn’t tell this and other details of his plan to Jaime, in fear he might bring it to Cersei’s ears.

His sister was a renewed source of worry for him. Tyrion had almost convinced Joffrey to send her away to the Shield Islands, in the Reach. It was the day Myrcella left, on the docks, before the riot happened. The only problem was Joffrey started the said riot afterwards, and in a fit of rage, Tyrion slapped him. Sansa Stark managed to escape the angry mob alive, no thanks to the king. As a result, Joffrey had tossed aside the idea of sending his mother away and Cersei remained in the capital. She was a real pain in the ass ever since. Tyrion had to keep her away all time, and every discussion with her was an ordeal. A recent dinner was particularly painful, as Cersei accused him to trying to have her son killed. She said he was trying to have Joffrey killed by having him fight on the battlements. Joffrey was the one who decided to fight. Tyrion didn’t oppose the idea. For the first time, Joffrey might do something useful. His presence would inspire the men, and that wasn’t as if he would lead their army on the battlefield. In fact, Tyrion suspected Joffrey wanted to be on the battlements because he was sure he could assist to Stannis’ defeat from there. His kingsguards would protect him and Tyrion made sure he had the best armor that could be found in the city. His repulsive nephew wouldn’t have to fight.

Tyrion was reading a report about the movements of Robb Stark. Ned Stark’s son was travelling north. By all accounts, he was heading to Riverrun to lift the siege Stafford put in place. This meant Tyrion would only have to deal with Stannis in King’s Landing. An army strong of ten thousand men was also marching on the Reach and Mace Tyrell was moving to intercept it. Tyrion’s father-in-law had only raised one army. He was sending it all to stop the forces of Stannis while he raised other troops. Tyrion would have liked if Highgarden could send them a few men to help them defend King’s Landing, but the Tyrells joined the war too late and now they had no time to send reinforcements. Stannis did well to send an army to invade the Reach. Mace Tyrell wouldn’t let his lands be devastated after his son died. It kept his men occupied and prevented him from sending men to the capital. In the meantime, Stannis would make his attempt to take the city.

Tyrion thought he had a good idea of Stannis’ strategy by now. Stannis was playing his master move
He wanted the Iron Throne and he was moving to obtain a quick victory by taking it. Tyrion had to admit it made sense. Now that the Tyrells were at his side, Stannis knew he didn’t have the means to win a war of attrition. He had fewer men, poorest lands, fewer resources in all domains. He had the upper hand on the western waters, but as soon as the Redwyne fleet would invade the Narrow Sea, he would lose it. His best and only chance of victory was to move quickly and destroy his enemy’s forces now. However, it also meant he couldn’t make any mistake. Any defeat Stannis suffered would inflict irreparable losses upon his forces. The Lannisters and the Tyrells, on the other side, still had the means to levy more men. Stannis had no reserves. All his available forces were engaged and he had fewer than Tyrion even then. Stannis could bring twenty thousand men on the shores at best. Tyrion had more than twenty-five thousand and the advantage of defensive ground. That meant he wasn’t to underestimate Stannis under any circumstances. The man wouldn’t hold anything back, which meant Tyrion wasn’t to hold anything either. They would both throw everything at each other. However, Tyrion had something special to throw to Stannis.

The door opened. Ty announced Mira Forrester. She walked in after Tyrion authorized her. She sat after Tyrion invited her to do so. Tyrion thought she looked a little bit paler than usual, but it was hard to say since she had a very pale skin by nature.

“Lady Mira. How is the Lady Sansa?” he asked.

“Just like you said, my lord. She is terrorized and she trusts no one.”

“Does she trust you?”

“I think she feels more comfortable with me around, but she’s not opening to me.”

“So, no progress?”

“Well, maybe some. There are times, very few times, when she will say that she is afraid, worried…”

“Of course, she is. She is betrothed to Joffrey.”

“But I think she means that she’s afraid about her family. About Bran and Rickon who may be dead, about her mother, and everyone else. She’s not saying it directly to me, but I can read between the lines.”

“She’s not feeling safe enough to confide in you openly,” Tyrion concluded.

“No, my lord. But I can’t blame her for that.”

“Neither do I, but I would like her to not be terrorized anymore. Joffrey didn’t dare to approach her since she moved into the Tower of the Hand.”

“She’s living in the same castle than the boy who had her father killed. Maybe the best way to make her feel safe is to send her away, to Casterly Rock or Highgarden, or anywhere else in the Reach or the Westerlands,” she boldly replied.

“True,” Tyrion acknowledged. This handmaiden was too direct. Maybe that’s why Tyrion liked her. “However, she is Joffrey’s betrothed, and my nephew will not let her go so easily.”

He couldn’t manage to convince Joffrey to send his mother away long enough for him to actually do it. He doubted he could try the same for Sansa Stark and succeed.

“There is one thing Sansa talks about more openly, my lord,” the northern girl said.
“What is it?” Tyrion asked, his mind interested again.

“Lady Margaery. I think Sansa trusts her. She warned her about Joffrey long before anyone else.” *So did I, and of course she didn’t listen.* “Sansa wants to know more about her. It’s something she feels comfortable to talk about. I think Lady Margaery…”

Pounds resonated on the door and Ty’s voice came through it. “My lord, a rider just arrived. Lady Margaery is coming.”

Everything went very quickly afterwards. Tyrion went straight to the portcullis to see his wife arrive. First, he waited in the courtyard, but he ended climbing the steps to the battlements with his short legs and looking through the crenellations to see if Margaery was approaching. Had he not been the Lord of Casterly Rock, one of the guards watching over the portcullis might have asked him either to describe what was going on or find him a box. It didn’t happen, and he examined the horizon, looking for any sign of his wife approaching.

“Where is she?” Tyrion asked to the nearest man, not averting his gaze a moment.

“Who?” the man, whoever he was, answered.

“My wife,” he replied sharply.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“She must have over twenty men with her, with the banners of two powerful houses. You couldn’t have missed her.”

“I’m sorry, my lord. I saw nothing.”

Tyrion had to refrain himself from slapping this idiot. His wife had been absent for weeks. He was worried that something might have happened to her after Renly Baratheon died. During a conversation he had with Cersei during that period of uncertainty, before he received his wife’s raven saying that she was on her way, his sister had pointed out he might need to find a new wife to warm his bed soon, if he didn’t already welcome whores. Tyrion had immediately retorted that if anything happened to Margaery, he would hold Cersei and Joffrey responsible and make them pay.

“Be careful, little brother. I do not take threats lightly,” she had warned him then.

“I hope you don’t. When I make threats, I have the means to execute them unlike certain people,” he retorted.

He lied to his wife, had his men fight against Robb Stark, and soon he would fight Stannis along the men of Margaery’s father. He did everything to protect his sister and her horrible child, despite everything they did, because they were his family, with the same blood running in their veins. If Cersei had not been his sister and Joffrey his nephew, they would have died long ago. He would help them and see them safe through this war, but they owed him very much for that, and Tyrion would make sure they pay their debts.

A large crowd began to take shape in the paved street leading to the Red Keep. Tyrion knew immediately what it meant. She was already in the city. After one minute or two, he saw the two banners, and the soldiers both red and green advancing. And among them, riding a horse with traveling clothes, was his wife.

He wasn’t sure if she could see him until her escort arrived before the gates. Their eyes met when she gazed at the battlements. From there, Tyrion could see how worn out she was. Dust and sweat had
accumulated during her journey, but it wasn’t her physical appearance that struck him the most. It was her eyes. As soon as the portcullis started to open, he climbed down the stairs. He almost stumbled but managed to get to the courtyard on his feet rather than his face.

She was down from her horse just when he reached her. He didn’t have time to say anything before she threw herself on him, her face into his shoulder. She cried right away. All Tyrion could do was wrap his arms around her head and whisper the first words that came to his mind.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She moved her head so her lips grazed his ear. She had done it before, in very different circumstances. “We need to talk, now. Right now.”

There was a real urge in her voice. It said there was no time to discuss. The woman in his arms may be crying, but she wasn’t lost. The shrewd woman who knew how to handle and move through courts and kingdoms was still there, hidden under the façade of a sister broken by the death of her brother.

“Yes.”

With that simple word, Tyrion led her to the Red Keep. Vylarr had mustered a few of his men to welcome Margaery, and her handmaidens and servants were there as well, but she held them at bay, the right movement of the arm and her bowed head meaning she wanted to be alone with her husband.

Once they were in their private apartments in the Tower of the Hand, Tyrion looked at her more closely. Her eyes were red and her face paler than usual. She was also shaking. But there was also something else, something Tyrion didn’t see when he saw her again first, but now he could see it. He knew his wife better than anyone, and he knew she was angry, even furious. Before he could say anything, she spoke.

“It was Cersei.”

Tyrion blinked. “What?”

“It was Cersei who did this.”

What had his sister done again? “What did she do?”

“She killed Loras.”

Tyrion had his breathing cut short. “What?”

“Mandon Moore.”

It took him one second to understand. “Moore killed Loras?”

“Yes. I was there. I saw everything.”

She wasn’t lying. Tyrion knew his wife wouldn’t lie to him like he lied to her, and certainly not on this. “What happened?”

“I was in Renly’s pavilion, trying to convince him to stop fighting Joffrey.” Tyrion noticed a scorn in his wife’s voice when she said the name of his nephew. Lately, the same scorn was seldom absent of his own voice when he talked about Joffrey. “Catelyn Stark was there too, and Brienne of Tarth.”
“Catelyn Stark? She was in the Stormlands?” The rumors were true.

“Yes. She had gone to Dragonstone to see Stannis Baratheon and make an alliance with him. She was trying to convince Renly to bend the knee before his brother.”

“Poor Renly, spending his last hours with women trying to make him kneel. If it wasn’t for his personal preferences, he might have enjoyed it.” He went on another subject as soon as he saw the disapproval in Margaery’s eyes. “And you say Brienne of Tarth was there too? Isn’t she the daughter of Selwyn Tarth, the Lord of Tarth.”

“Yes, she was Renly’s kingsguard, helping him to prepare for battle.”

“Well, that is something new.” There had been women on the small council in the past, a queen for a short time during the Dance of the Dragons, and of course female dragon riders but never had the Kingsguard included women. “Some words that reached us pretended she killed Renly.”

“No, she didn’t. It was a shadow.” Tyrion wasn’t sure if he heard well. “A shadow with the face of Stannis Baratheon.”

It didn’t make any more sense. “A shadow?” he asked, doubtful.

“I saw it, Tyrion. I was there. Catelyn Stark and Brienne of Tarth saw it too. The other kingsguards entered the tent when they heard screams and saw Renly on the floor, in a pool of his blood. They assumed it was Brienne who killed him since she was kneeling over him. But I know what truly happened, I was there.”

“Are you sure that it is what you saw? A shadow?”

“Yes.”

Tyrion wouldn’t have believed anyone else, but with Margaery it was different. Was it possible she was so troubled by her brother’s death that she imagined this? He didn’t think so. His wife seemed in perfect control of herself. She wasn’t mad.

“So, a shadow with the face of Stannis Baratheon somehow managed to enter Renly’s tent and to kill him. You, Lady Stark and Brienne of Tarth all saw it, but no one else did and they assumed one of you killed him,” he summarized, expecting a confirmation of this unlikely tale.

“Yes,” Margaery confirmed.

“What happened next?”

“The kingsguards who were outside ran in, they found Brienne over Lord Renly’s body and they attacked her. She dealt with them. And then Loras came in. He thought the same as the others and he attacked her. There was a fight. I tried to intervene, to stop him, and then…”

She sat down and covered her face with one hand as she began to sob. Her strength was gone in an instant. Tyrion felt powerless. Her brother was dead and here she was, the woman he loved, crying, and he didn’t know what to do. He slowly approached her and, after some hesitation, he placed a hand he hoped to be comforting on his wife’s hand that remained on her knees. She gripped it and removed the tears from her cheeks.

“Mandon Moore.” She looked at him, her steely stare back. “He killed Loras. He just walked in and he killed him.” Another tear fell from her right eye.
"I’m sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say.

“Cersei did this. It’s all because of her.”

“Wait.” He placed his other hand below hers, holding it with both his hands now. “I know you’ve been through a lot. You just lost your brother, but you said you tried to stop him from fighting. Moore probably just believed you were in danger and tried to protect you. Have you talked about it with him?”

“No, because he’s dead. After he tried to kill me too.”

Time seemed to stop. “Moore tried to kill you?”

“Right after he killed Loras, he was about to stab me in the back. Lady Brienne saved me. If it wasn’t for her, I would be dead right now.”

Tyrion looked down at her hand he was holding, understanding something he suspected from the beginning but that he hoped to be untrue. “That’s why Cersei suggested he go with you.”

“Of course. Why else would she suggest that I be accompanied by a kingsguard?”

Jaime said Mandon Moore was the most dangerous knight in the Kingsguard, for his eyes never told what he was about to do. There was no better man for an assassination job. Cersei wouldn’t have sent Boros or Meryn. They were not clever enough for this. As for Clegane, he was needed to follow her son everywhere like a dog. Moore was without any doubt the best choice if she wanted someone to be killed. The victim would only realize it the moment she was about to die.

As he thought about that, Tyrion felt the anger rising in him. He had warned Cersei. She could try anything against him. He would certainly not forgive her, but he wouldn’t forget she was his sister either. This time, however, she tried to kill Margaery. She was the only one in King’s Landing with a motive to kill her, and she suggested that Ser Mandon Moore should accompany Margaery in the Stormlands. Tyrion wished the kingsguard was still alive so he could have him tortured until the man begged to be killed, after he gave Tyrion all the information he could gather. Instead, he would deal with Cersei, and he would deal with her now.

His feet turned, beginning the movement to walk outside the room, gather his men and start to make his sister’s life such a living hell that she would beg for death and he would refuse it to her, but he was held back by his wife.

“Tyrion, there’s something else. We should stop Joffrey.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m keeping him far away from any situation where he might exercise his power. With his latest decisions…”

“No, Tyrion. Joffrey cannot be king. We have to get rid of him.”

Tyrion was stunned. He tried to see any sign that Margaery was joking, but there were none. Her eyes told him she was more serious than she had ever been.

“You can’t mean it. He’s my nephew.”

She took something in her gown and laid it on the table next to her. It was a dagger. “When I met Catelyn Stark at Storm’s End, she gave me this. It belongs to Joffrey. It’s the dagger we gave him for his name day last year.”
Tyrion turned his attention towards the dagger. He released his wife’s hand and unsheathed the blade. “You’re right. It’s this one.” He recognized the handle in silver and the green stone. He looked at her, something dawning on him. “What was Catelyn Stark doing with this?”

“You remember the assassination attempt on Brandon Stark? The assassin used this.”

Tyrion looked at the dagger, then to Margaery. “How did Joffrey’s dagger end in the hands of a common footpad?”

“What sort of imbecile arms an assassin with his own blade?” Margaery asked.

It didn’t take long for Tyrion to know this was a rhetorical question. They both knew the answer to this. Cersei wasn’t foolish enough to send an assassin after Bran, but Joffrey… *Send a dog to kill a wolf.* On a cold morning, when he was climbing the steps to the library of Winterfell, he heard Joffrey jesting with the Hound about killing wolves. Of course, only Joffrey could do this. He must have found the fool to perform this task amongst the freeriders and merchants following Robert, some lackwit ready to risk his life for a few coins and the favor of the prince.

“Joffrey did this,” Tyrion said, clenching the dagger in his hand.

All this war, everything that happened since Winterfell, was because of the stupid cruelty and the cruel stupidity of a spoiled boy that his sister brought into the world. Had Joffrey and Cersei been there in this moment, he would have strangled them to death. Nothing could have stopped him until he drained every breath of life out of them.

“Tyrion, we cannot support a king like Joffrey. He’s a monster.”

“Yes, he is.” It had been a long time since he knew that, but he protected the boy all the same.

“Tyrion, I believe Joffrey is not Robert’s son.” He looked back immediately to Margaery, so quickly that his neck might have snapped. “I spoke with Catelyn Stark, and I had a lot of time to think about it. We know that Eddard Stark wouldn’t believe that Joffrey was a bastard unless he had proofs of it, and he wouldn’t declare it to the world if he wasn’t sure of it. We haven’t found a single clue as to who might have made him believe that and how proofs would have been created. Eddard Stark wouldn’t just believe Stannis Baratheon’s word. He found something. I don’t believe he was wrong.”

Cold water was running into his veins as Margaery looked at him, a sorry expression on her face. “Tyrion, I know you think you know Jaime and Cersei, and I think you do know them, but I also know you, and I know you crave for the love of your siblings, even after everything they did. I think you’re somehow lying to yourself, or that you refuse to consider this. I understand why you do this, and I don’t blame you. But I think Joffrey is probably their son.”

He couldn’t detach his eyes from her. Fear grew in his mind as his heartbeat quickened.

“Truth be told, I believe Joffrey is their son. I’m almost certain of that. Look at him. He’s a monster.”

Their eyes were locked for a very long time. His face had to show complete stupor. Margaery probably believed he couldn’t believe what he just heard. She was looking at him with an expression of pity, believing it was something very hard to believe for him. She believed he knew nothing. She believed it because he lied to her, because he hid the truth to her, so that he could have her father’s armies with him in this war. He lied to her in order to protect a nephew he despised and a sister who tried to kill him, and who now just tried to kill her. He protected this woman, and Margaery believed him. She never seriously questioned everything he told her until now. But she
wasn’t questioning him. She was questioning what she thought he believed. She believed he had been fooled like everyone else.

He shook his head and turned away, unable to hold her gaze, unable to look at her any longer.

“Tyrion.”

Her voice was so beautiful. She wasn’t a fantastic singer, but she sang decently, and Tyrion always revelled at the beauty of her voice. She was perfect. Tyrion had fallen in love with her, coming to a point where he didn’t only mean the words he said before the altar with his mind, but also with his heart. She was the dearest thing to him in this world. Not only did he love her, she loved him.

“Tyrion, you don’t know Jaime and Cersei well enough. You’re blinded by your wish to have them love you. You don’t see them for who they really are.”

He gripped the edges of a table he reached, his back turned to Margaery.

“You’re wrong,” he said. He heard her sigh. She was pitying him. It hurt. It was a pity he didn’t deserve.

“Tyrion…”

“I know Jaime and Cersei very well, better than anyone. Maybe better than themselves.”

He heard her approach. He wished she would stay away.

“Tyrion, I wish you could just consider the possibility…”

He cut her short. “I don’t need to consider anything.” She sighed again. He heard her steps back to her chair.

“I don’t need to consider something I already know,” he said before she could sit. He heard her stop in her motion. “I don’t know when they began. Maybe it started before I was even born. All I know is that it lasted for many years, even before Robert married Cersei, and it continues today.”

He slowly turned around. When he met the gaze of his wife, her expression was entirely different. “What did you say?”

For now, there was no anger in her voice. She was surprised and taken aback like she thought Tyrion had been only a moment ago. The words poured out of his mouth.

“Stannis is telling the truth. Robert Baratheon had no children. Joffrey, Myrcella, Tommen, they’re all Jaime’s.”

For a time that looked like an eternity, they just stared at each other. Finally, the moment Tyrion dreaded the most came when Margaery spoke.

“You knew it all along?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Yes,” he replied with a very low voice.

“Why? Why did you hide this to me?” He didn’t answer. He couldn’t find a right way to answer. He just looked away, unable to bear the gaze of the women he loved. “I… I supported you, I helped you, I believed you. Why did you lie to me about this?”

Again, he didn’t answer. She scoffed.
“I don’t get it. Cersei tried to murder you, by the Seven! She’s tried to overthrow you, she tried to have me killed, and yet you defend her?!”

“I’m not defending Cersei,” he said.

“You’re protecting her, just like you protect Joffrey. He’s a monster. You despise him. I heard stories on my way here. I heard he’s shooting people with a crossbow for fun.”

“Yes, he also started a riot because someone pitched him some dirt and he had Sansa Stark beaten in front of the whole court,” he added bitterly.

His wife scoffed again. His last words didn’t make things better. “I cannot understand.”

“They are my family,” he offered as an explanation.

“A family who’s tried to kill you. A family who made your life miserable. You told me about this. Unless you lied to me about it as well.”

“No, everything I told you about my relationships with Cersei and Jaime is true. I only lied about their relationship.”

“How can you protect them? They never did anything for you. They never behaved like they were your brother and sister.”

“That’s not true!” His tone rose and he looked back to Margaery. “Cersei was always horrible and insufferable with me, it’s true. She always hated me, but not Jaime. He’s the only one in my family who was ever close to me, the only one who really loved me.”

“And yet he hired a whore for you and then let your father have her raped by his guards after you married her.”

That hurt. The memory of his first wife rushed back. The image of her being raped appeared more lively than ever.

“How could you lie to me?” she asked again.

“I’m sorry,” she said weakly.

“You’re sorry?” Before he could realize what was going on, she was next to him, taking his chin with one hand and slapping him across the cheek with the other.

He massaged the place she hit. It was painful. When he looked back to her, she was trembling, but still angry. She had every right to be. “I probably deserved this,” he said.

“You deserve much more than that. Loras is dead!”

“I never wanted this.”

“He’s dead! Because of this war. Because of you. He would still be alive if you hadn’t protected Joffrey.” She was close to tears again. Margaery turned away. “Leave. I don’t want to see you.”

“Margaery…”

“Leave!”

She cut him short. He wanted to say something, anything, but there was nothing he could do. So he
obeyed her and walked away, grabbing Joffrey’s blade on the way. Once he was on the other side of
the door, he looked at it. He heard his wife sobbing on the other side. He wanted to go back, do
something, anything, to make things right, but there was nothing he could do. Her brother was dead,
and he died fighting a war Tyrion’s nephew started. He had hurt her in the worst possible way.

He looked at the blade. It was this weapon that started the whole war, and Joffrey’s stupid decision
to have a boy of ten killed. He looked back at the door, still hearing the cries of his wife, and he felt a
rage he rarely felt invading him. He walked away quickly and went to the barracks where he found
Vylarr.

“Assemble your twenty best men. We have work to do.”

They headed for the White Sword Tower.

Chapter End Notes

I think we can agree this was inevitable. The truth was going to come out sooner or
later. No secret can be held indefinitely.

Please review

Next chapter (tomorrow): Jaime
Jaime VI

Chapter Notes

The first repercussions of Margaery learning the truth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JAIME VI

He fell on his back, breathing heavily, the exertion caused by the effort he just made taking its toll over him. Sweat covered his body, sticking the bed’s sheets to his body. He turned on his side, inhaling and exhaling air at an accelerated pace. His breathing came to a steadier rate as he rolled over to the other side, coming to face with the back of the beautiful woman that laid in bed with him. Seven Hells, he missed her. They used the last few days to make out for the lost time, and still they couldn’t get enough. They both needed this.

Cersei sat on the sheets, her lustful golden hair falling on her back. Jaime sat as well and brought his hands around her belly, kissing the side of her neck, savoring the scent of her hair and skin. Nothing smelled better.

He sensed the rigidity in Cersei’s body. She wasn’t falling back into his arms and remained still, sitting there without moving. Jaime wished she would relax. He was disappointed in his hopes as the woman he loved spoke.

“We have to do something. We need to prepare.”

He brought his right hand to her shoulder, massaging it. “Everything will be fine. We have more men than Stannis, and the city walls are strong. He doesn’t stand a chance against us.”

She didn’t show any sign of calming. “It is not Stannis who is worrying me. The real enemy is inside.”

Jaime sighed. “Cersei, if you’re worried about Tyrion…”

“Of course, I’m worried,” she snapped, freeing herself from his embrace. “He holds all the power here. He put his men in key positions and removed those loyal to Joffrey.” That meant he removed the men loyal to Cersei. “He controls everything in the Red Keep. The whole small council is on his side. He could order my son’s death any time and no one would lift a finger to stop him.”

“Tyrion would never do that,” Jaime tried to tell her.

“He could. He hates Joffrey. He could have him killed discreetly and have Tommen on the throne. He’s much easier to control than Joffrey. Joffrey and I are all that stand between him and the throne.”

Jaime scoffed. His sister was paranoid sometimes. “Tyrion would never do such a thing.”

“You don’t know what he is capable of. He slapped Joffrey across the face. He struck his king.”

“Well, that happened a few times before.”
“Joffrey is king! If someone can slap him, what image does it give of him? How can people fear him when someone can hit him and get away with this?”

“It was only a smack on the cheek.”

“And what could it be next? He’s always walking around the Red Keep as if he owned the place.”

“He’s the Hand of the King.”

“Because you let him be.”

Jaime sighed once more. He was fed up with this. “I know you and Tyrion have your issues. I know you despise each other, but he would never harm one of your children. He loves Tommen and Myrcella.”

“He doesn’t love Joffrey.”

“Joffrey doesn’t make it easy for people to love him,” Jaime pointed out, which earned him a poisonous glare from his sister.

Despite this, he wouldn’t back away. Joffrey was indeed very difficult. Cersei said he even was difficult as he came out of her belly. Cersei, despite all the motherly love she had for her firstborn, was afraid of him from time to time. There were even moments he frightened Jaime, though he was more often than not disgusted by the boy. Apparently, he shot people asking for bread with his crossbow. Some of them might have been among those Jaime saved when he stabbed Aerys in the back.

“Look, Cersei, it is true, Tyrion doesn’t love Joffrey, but he’s not going to kill him. Your son is still his nephew. Can you really imagine Tyrion killing Joffrey, or anyone of our family?”

“You have a very short memory, Jaime. Have you already forgotten what happened to Mother?”

Jaime rolled his eyes and raised his hands. “I’m not going to talk about this again. This is madness. Tyrion is as likely to murder your son as the White Walkers to come back.”

“Then that means you’re an idiot,” she spat.

“Fine, I’ll go then. Unless you appreciate the company of idiots. Wait, you do. You like it when Joffrey is close to you.”

A good smack landed on his cheek, and Jaime laughed. “Well, that’s a side of you I like more.”

He jumped on his sister. After some initial reluctance, she gave into her passion just like he did. That was until the door of Cersei’s apartment slammed open with a thundering noise, strong enough to wake up the entire castle had it been asleep.

Jaime got out of Cersei as quickly as he had entered her. His clothes were scattered all around the floor. His cloak was in the adjacent room, where the door had opened. He tried to put sheets around his waist, but Cersei was gripping them to keep her covered as well. Then Tyrion walked in… with about ten men behind him. Jaime recognized Vylarr and at least five other men, all red cloaks. They were all their men, and they all looked at him and Cersei with an expression of complete surprise. All safe for Tyrion.

“You could have waited for the night,” was all their brother said. Jaime had to admit Tyrion was right, but he had been away from Cersei for so long that he didn’t care much for caution since he
came back. He visited her early in the evening, and they were still at that time of day.

His little brother turned to his men. “Vylarr, wait outside with your men. Don’t let anyone in.”

The red cloaks obeyed, not before they threw a few glances towards Jaime and Cersei.

“Are you mad?!” Cersei yelled to their brother as soon as they heard the door close. “Entering into my rooms in the middle of the night. They saw us! What is going to happen…”

Cersei didn’t have time to say more, for within an instant Tyrion was on her, seizing her arm, then…

SMACK!

Jaime didn’t see the slap coming. Cersei cried as the palm roughly met her cheek. Tyrion dragged her on the floor, then did something Jaime never expected he would do. His boots met Cersei’s belly once, then twice.

“You hateful bitch! I’m going to kill you! I protected you and that’s how you thank me?!?”

At the third kick, Jaime intervened. He seized Tyrion’s arms from behind and dragged him away from their sister, yelping on the floor. Jaime had all the difficulties in the world to control his brother. Tyrion was struggling like a demon.

“Tyrion, calm down! What are you doing?”

Tyrion then did something Jaime expected even less. He stopped struggling. As Jaime loosened his grip, his little brother turned around. This time, Jaime was the one to earn a slap.

Gods, that was painful. He now understood why Joffrey hated Tyrion. If Tyrion slapped him as strong as this only even once, the boy ought to hate him for years. When Jaime stared back at his brother, he met green eyes that were filled with hatred and rage. Not the cold rage he often witnessed in his father and that Tyrion mimicked. That was the rage of a fury, more similar to the rage Cersei displayed when she was very very upset about something. Only it seemed worse with Tyrion.

His brother pointed an accusing finger to him, only a few inches from Jaime’s face. “I told you to stay away from her.”

Jaime heard grunts that brought his attention back to his sister. She slowly straightened back. He could see the bruises on her body, the result of Tyrion’s assault. How could his little brother have done this? He looked back to Tyrion, only to meet the same angry expression, and Jaime didn’t dare to do anything. Tyrion turned to look at Cersei. Somehow, Tyrion was more threatening than he ever remembered their father being.

“You are lucky that Jaime is here,” Tyrion told her. “Or else I would have killed you. And if you were not my sister and we didn’t share the same parents, your head would already be decorating a spike on the Red Keep’s battlements. That would make a fitting justice for Ned Stark.”

“You’re going to pay for this,” Cersei said, hatred filling her voice, but it wasn’t as convincing as it was with Tyrion.

“Oh no, you’re the one who’s going to pay, Cersei. You owe me a lot.” He made a pause. “I know what you did. I warned you.”

Tyrion took the dagger at his side. Jaime still struggled to proceed all the events that happened during the last minute, but he feared for a moment Tyrion would stab Cersei with the knife. Instead, he just
roughly put it on the nearby table, so hard that the sound of steel meeting wood echoed through all the apartment.

“Do you know what this is?” He looked at Jaime. “I’m asking a question to both of you,” he added before their lack of response.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, Tyrion, but I will not stand this,” Cersei, now standing. She went from a sitting to a standing position quickly, and Jaime noticed the wince, despite her efforts to hide it. “I am the queen…”

“Any woman who must say I am the queen is not true queen. And according to facts, you are no queen. You forfeited that title the day you had Robert killed.”

“They saw us! Vylarr and the others. They saw us together!”

“She’s right,” Jaime said. “We have to do something. If they tell the other red cloaks, the whole city might know by tomorrow.”

“Come on, Jaime, everyone already knows about you. Stannis made sure of it,” Tyrion mocked. “Vylarr and his men just saw something they knew, and they will tell everyone what everyone knows.”

“We have to stop them.”

“How? You’re going to throw them from a tower like they were ten-years-old boys?” The things I do for love. The memory of the Stark boy falling came back to haunt him. “And maybe if this fails to end them someone will try to finish the job while they’re asleep.”

“We didn’t do this.” It wasn’t the first time Jaime said this. He might have done many horrible things in his life, but he didn’t send someone to kill that boy.

“You and Cersei? Maybe not. I think Margaery may have been wrong about you. Only, you see, she just came back and while she was in the Stormlands she met someone. You’ll never guess. Catelyn Stark.”

“How is that important?” Cersei asked. “Stannis is close to the city, and now Vylarr and his men…”

“Don’t worry about Vylarr and his men, dear sister. Tomorrow, they will be gone and you will never see them again,” Tyrion acidly replied. That seemed to calm down Cersei a little. “Now, Lady Stark showed something to Margaery when they met. The weapon that the assassin used. A very costly dagger, far too costly for a common footpad. Look at it. I think you’ll find it familiar.”

Jaime looked at it, and for the first time he noticed indeed that this was no dagger meant to kill. Well, it could kill, but it was obviously crafted to be a piece of collection and for ornamentation more than anything else. The handle was made of silver. And there was a green gem. It only took him a few seconds to remember where he saw it for the first time.

“Cersei, that’s the dagger Tyrion and Margaery gave to Joffrey last year.”

Cersei looked at it from afar. “If you say so. What of it?”

“Well, your son’s blade ended in the hand of an assassin who tried to put an end to Brandon Stark’s life,” Tyrion stated. He first looked at Cersei, who seemed unsettled by this. Then Tyrion stared at Jaime, who realized what this meant.
“Tyrion, I swear to you, we have nothing to do…”

“I know, Jaime. Cersei is not stupid enough to risk this, and you wouldn’t let someone do your dirty work for you. Your son, however, it’s another matter.”

It was strange for Jaime to hear someone call Joffrey his son. He needed a moment to fully understand who Tyrion was talking about when he said his son. In his eyes, Joffrey had only been his seed, not his son. Cersei never wanted him to get involved in her children’s education. Apart from being present for their births, Jaime was never a father to them.

“What do you mean, my son?” Cersei asked.

“Joffrey is stupid enough to execute the Warden of the North, stupid enough to start a riot, and stupid enough to shoot on people asking for beard with a crossbow. Do you really think he wouldn’t be stupid enough to send an assassin after Brandon Stark with his own blade?”

The air in the room was frozen for a long moment. And then Jaime remembered something that happened while they were in Winterfell. We kill our horses when they break a leg, and our dogs when they go blind, but we are too weak to give the same mercy to crippled children. The king had said it while he was drunk. Cersei was there, and her children too. Joffrey was there. He knew immediately what had happened.

“Joffrey has no love for Robb Stark, but the younger boy was nothing to him. And considering the Ironmen have probably killed him by now, it is a pity the assassin didn’t finish the work. It would have been painless to the boy to die in his sleep. You can be sure the Greyjoys made him suffer,” Cersei mocked.

“I heard a conversation between Joffrey and Clegane while we were at Winterfell. He was jesting about sending a dog to kill a wolf,” Tyrion said.

“And you believe that makes Joffrey the man who sent the assassin?” Cersei mocked again.

“No, but I just questioned Clegane. He confirmed that Joffrey asked him to find a man who wasn’t afraid to dirty his hands. Clegane did so and gave the man a generous pouch of silver. He doesn’t know what Joffrey asked of the man, but I think it is quite obvious.”

So, Joffrey had been the one. It confirmed what Jaime had already deduced. The assassin who tried to end the days of the Stark boy after Jaime failed was sent by Joffrey, who was hoping to impress Robert.

For a moment, Cersei said nothing. Then, her face hardened again. “I don’t care. You deal with Vylarr and his men. The rest doesn’t matter to me.”

Tyrion made a few steps towards her, very slowly, in a way that was nothing short of threatening. “I’m done with helping you, Cersei. I protected you and your son despite everything you did. Now this is over. I warned you to not touch her. I told you I would turn your life into a living hell if you tried anything on her. Well, I never make empty threats. Your life turns to hell tonight.”

He walked away, and as he closed the door, telling his men they were done here, Jaime looked at Cersei. She seemed terrified.

“What did he mean? Your life is turning to hell tonight?” Jaime asked.

She slowly looked at him. “That means he’s going to kill me.”
“Kill you? Come on, Cersei…”

“You saw what he just did.” She removed the sheets covering her body, showing the bruises he left. “You really still think he’s not capable of that?” Jaime remained speechless. “He’s going to kill me, then he’s going to kill Joffrey and all our children, until there’s no one left, and he can seize the Iron Throne for himself and that bitch from Highgarden.”

“Cersei…” Jaime tried on a soothing tone, only to be cut short.

“Kill him.” The two words came out of her beautiful lips like two sharp blades. “Kill Tyrion.”

He looked at his sister as if they never met before. She wasn’t joking. He gathered his clothes, dressed up and left quickly, running through the corridors until he reached the person he wanted to talk to.

“Tyrion.” The red cloaks turned, their hand on the hilt of their swords.

“It’s alright, men. Leave us alone. Stand guard by the ends of the corridor. I need a private discussion with my brother, anyway,” his brother said.

The red cloaks, some who he knew very well, took position far away from them, casting suspicious glances at him as they moved away, until Jaime was alone in the middle of the long corridor with Tyrion. He had his sword at his belt. If he wanted to do what Cersei asked him to, he would have no problem.

“It’s over, Jaime. I’m done with Cersei and Joffrey. I protected them because they were my family, but now I’m done with them.”

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Jaime asked his brother. Everything had gone so quickly. How could his brother beat his sister and reveal that Joffrey sent an assassin after Bran Stark within less than half-an-hour? This didn’t look like Tyrion. “Why did you tell Cersei you would turn her life into a living hell?”

“Because I warned her a long time ago that if she tried anything on my wife, I would do it. If you ever dare to touch Margaery, if you ever dare to hurt her in any way, or if you ever threaten her again, I will turn your life into a living hell. I was very clear and yet, our dear sister decided to try to kill her all the same.”

“What?”

“Mandon Moore. He followed Margaery in the Stormlands. He didn’t come back. He killed Loras Tyrell, and then he tried to kill Margaery.”

“Moore? Why would Moore try to kill your wife?”

“There are only two people in King’s Landing who can give an order to a kingsguard. Joffrey has no grudge against Margaery. Cersei, on the other hand…”

“Are you sure that Cersei tried to kill her?” Jaime asked, having a hard time believing it.

“I’m not sure. I know it. She’s the one who suggested Ser Mandon Moore should follow her. And don’t come and tell me it would be the first time Moore would do something for Cersei.”

No, it wasn’t. Jaime was well aware that three kingsguards, Meryn Trant, Boros Blount and Mandon Moore, were all licking Cersei’s boots. Moore was the most discreet of the three, but he followed
Cersei’s orders much more than he followed Robert’s. But could Cersei order the death of Margaery’s wife? Well, she just asked him to kill his brother.

“You know that she tried to kill me, Jaime. She tried to have me poisoned not long after Father died. We arrested the people who were guilty, and they confessed everything. And later she tried to turn the lords of the Westerlands against me. Leo Lefford was in league with her, that’s why I removed him and placed his daughter Alysanne at the head of the Golden Tooth. And he’s only one of the few lords she contacted. She even plotted with the Florents in the Reach so that they would rebel against Margaery’s father.”

Strangely enough, that didn’t surprise Jaime. “She just asked me to kill you,” he confessed.

Tyrion showed no surprise. “So, should I turn around and close my eyes?”

“Are you really asking if I’d kill my brother?”

“I take it as a no.”

“Depends. Cersei told me you would kill her and her children.”

“You’re really asking if I’d kill my sister and your children?”

Of course not. Jaime wasn’t really asking it, or so he thought. He was no longer sure of anything.

“Margaery knows. I told her everything.”

Jaime nodded.

“Or, actually, she discovered the truth, or at least was sure this was the truth, and I confirmed her suspicions.”

“How is she?” Jaime asked.

A shadow crept upon Tyrion’s face. “How do you think? Her brother just died because of this war, a war that Cersei and Joffrey started. I protected them, and I lied to her. She knows it now. How do you think she feels?”

Again, Jaime nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Tyrion nodded as well to acknowledge Jaime’s apologies. “I’ve made my choice, Jaime. I’m done protecting and helping people who hate me and don’t deserve my help. They would see me dead at the first opportunity. You know I already lost a wife. I cannot lose another.”

No, indeed, he couldn’t. Tyrion didn’t need to remind Jaime of that tragedy anymore than Jaime needed to remind Tyrion of it. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m done with Cersei and Joffrey. I’m done with protecting them and a chair. I will not stand in Stannis’ way. Margaery is my wife. She is my family.” He stared straight into his brother’s eyes. “You know what I’m going to do Jaime. I suggest you don’t try to stop me.”

Yes, Jaime knew what Tyrion would do. Tyrion told him a long time ago. He never liked to be here for Cersei and Joffrey. “The things we do for love.”

“Yes.”

Jaime exhaled. “Good luck, little brother.”
They shook hands, and they remained entwined for a very long time. Before they parted ways, Tyrion looked at him. “I made my choice, Jaime. It’s time for you to make yours.”

And with that, they went separate ways. Jaime headed for the Tower of the Hand. There was someone he needed to talk with.

Chapter End Notes

This was the second part of the revelations. We'll discover what Tyrion intends to do soon enough.

Please review

Next chapter (tomorrow): Margaery
Margaery XX

Chapter Notes

I apologize to everyone for being so late. This chapter was supposed to be published three days ago. I was so busy these last few days that I couldn't find time to go on my computer, re-read the chapter and upload it.

Here it is, and if nothing goes wrong, the two chapters should follow in the next two days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XX

Mira was putting some order in the room. She was very silent, and Margaery was glad of it. It was a chance that it wasn’t Sera who was there tonight. Mira was much more respectful of Margaery’s privacy than Sera, waiting for Margaery to speak first more often than not. And right now, silence suited Margaery very well, for she had no envy to talk to anybody.

I know Jaime and Cersei very well, better than anyone. I don’t know when they began. Maybe it started before I was even born. All I know is that it lasted for many years, even before Robert married Cersei, and it continues today.

She wished she had been wrong. She wished all this was a lie, just like Tyrion told her on the road, and just like he kept telling her until she came back from the Stormlands. She wished… she just wished what Tyrion told her first had been the truth all along.

Loras was dead. Her little brother was dead, killed by the will of Cersei Lannister, a woman Tyrion protected, a woman he lied for, a woman who slept with her own brother, committed the incest, murdered babies and had her own husband assassinated. It wasn’t enough for Cersei to sleep with her cousin. She also slept with her twin brother, and she did so for years, maybe before Tyrion was born, according to him.

How could he lie to her? She trusted Tyrion. She believed him when he said Cersei and Jaime didn’t sleep together. She had never thought he could be hiding something like that. Not long after he told her about Tysha, she had stopped to doubt about him. Maybe there had been a few moments when she wondered if he was telling the truth, but she has brushed aside the possibility of lying. She thought he ignored about his brother and sister, not that he was actually protecting them and hiding this secret. Maybe she should have known. It wasn’t the first time he hid something from her. He didn’t tell her about Cersei’s attempt of murder. However, if he did hide the truth from her, he had never lied to her like he did when she questioned him about his family.

She came back to King’s Landing with the intent to convince her husband they had to deal with Cersei and Joffrey once and for all. It was no longer the time for long-term plans, to erode their power and to wait for the right moment to send them in exile somewhere they couldn’t cause any trouble. She believed she may need a few days to convince Tyrion that Stannis Baratheon was probably telling the truth. She didn’t expect it to be easy. Joffrey was Tyrion’s nephew, and Cersei was his sister. She knew it was very difficult to turn on your family, especially to the extent Margaery was considering. However, she never considered the possibility that her husband might
reveal to her that he had known about his siblings for years.

Loras was dead, and Tyrion betrayed her. It was betrayal. She ruled the Westerlands and to some extent all the Seven Kingdoms with him for three years. They shared the same bed. She even gave him the one thing she thought she would never give to a man. Her heart. She had fallen in love with him, something she never thought would happen, something she didn’t want to happen. And yet he lied to her about this, hid the truth about Cersei. This woman had tried to kill her. Loras was dead, murdered by the kingsguard she sent with her. She felt that she had lost not only her brother, but also the man she loved. And it hurt, it hurt almost more than the loss of Loras.

“Do you need anything, my lady?” Mira had finished to prepare the bed. Margaery had been longing for a night in this bed while she was one the road, but now rest was the last thing on her mind.

“No, Mira. You may leave. I wish to be alone.”

“Yes, my lady.”

From where she sat on the couch, she didn’t see Mira’s face. She looked at the floor. Her friend lingered behind for a moment, but then she left hastily. Margaery was now alone, but although this was what she wanted, she didn’t feel any better.

Mira had lit up the candles before she left. Outside, darkness was falling over the city and its five hundred thousand inhabitants. She recalled the children who died when the City Watch slaughtered Robert’s bastards. She remembered the despair in the mothers’ eyes as she visited them, offering condolences that couldn’t bring their children back. Jon Arryn, Robert Baratheon, Eddard Stark, his household, the children of King’s Landing, Loras, the list of people Cersei and Joffrey had killed kept growing, and that was without accounting for the people they tried to kill, like Brandon Stark. Children, innocent people, good men who only wanted to live peacefully. And everything their deaths achieved was to start a war that could only end with the deaths of many more people. The worse was that Tyrion had been an accomplice in all this.

One of her personal guards, a man sworn to her father and Highgarden, walked in. “My lady, Ser Jaime Lannister wishes to speak with you.”

“Tell the Kingslayer he can go and fuck himself,” she replied. She never spoke that way usually, it was more in Tyrion’s style, but she couldn’t care less. She would say what was on her mind. The knight looked surprised, but he didn’t leave.

“He says it’s urgent. He says it might be the last time he can speak to you.”

“You can tell him to go to hell.”

“He says this is about Lord Tyrion, my lady.”

She didn’t reply for a moment. Finally, she sighed. “Let him in, but make sure he has no weapons on him.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

A moment later, Ser Jaime Lannister was walking in and standing right before her. She didn’t leave the couch and looked away, as if he wasn’t there.

“So, you know the truth?” he asked.

“What truth? There are many things I know now that I wasn’t aware of a few hours ago, and all of
them make me despise you, your sister, and your son.”

He didn’t deny it. “Yes, Tyrion is quite angry at me too.”

She lightly scoffed. “What a change.” She looked straight at him. “I will never understand Tyrion on that. I don’t understand how he can love a brother like you, after everything you’ve done to him. You don’t deserve to be his brother. You were no better with him than Cersei was.”

She hated Tyrion right now, but she hated Ser Jaime, and Cersei, and Joffrey even more, and not only for the things they did, but also for the things they did to her husband, and only for the fact they hated him.

“I always loved him more than I loved Cersei,” the knight declared.

She laughed. “Hiring a whore for him, making him believe she loves him, and then standing by while she is raped by dozens of men. That doesn’t seem like love to me.”

She stood up and walked in the balcony’s direction, though she didn’t go out. She just stared at the darkness of the night.

“I never hired a whore for him,” he said from her behind her.

“There’s no need for lies. Tyrion told me everything. I know what happened. Keep your lies for people who don’t know who you truly are.”

“I’m not lying. I’m telling you the truth.”

“Then we have a very different view of the truth, for this is not what Tyrion told me.”

“It’s because he doesn’t know the truth. It’s because I lied to him.” That brought a frown to her face and she turned to face her brother-in-law. “I never hired this girl. The first time I saw her was on the road when she ran to us with two men on her heels. And then the next morning Tyrion was wed to her. That’s when I learned her name was Tysha. I don’t know who she was, probably who she pretended to be. But when our father learned that Tyrion married her, he was furious. He told me the girl was only after Tyrion because he was a Lannister, and she hoped she would live in a castle. He thought she was in love with his gold, not with him. So he forced me to tell this whole story of a whore I would have hired and to tell Tyrion about it. I didn’t know he was going to have her raped by half the garrison of the Rock. I wasn’t there when it happened. I only heard about it after it occurred.”

For a long moment, she stared at the knight before she spoke. “Tyrion doesn’t know about this?”

“No, he doesn’t. For him, I’m still the big brother who allowed him to be happy for two weeks with a girl he thought who was in love with him. The truth is… she was truly in love with him. I found her in the streets of Lannisport the same day. She buried a knife into her throat.”

A heavy silence took place between them. The memory of her broken husband as he told her the story of his first wife was still fresh in her mind, years after he told her. What she just heard was worse than she imagined. Anger flared inside her, and she didn’t know if it was because she was thinking about the husband who betrayed, or about what his brother did to him.

“I wonder how Tyrion would think of you if he knew the truth,” she said.

“He would hate me. It would destroy him,” he said with a contrite expression. Like always, Margaery noticed all the feelings and emotions that went through the knight’s face, like she always
noticed on people’s face. He was broken, but she didn’t care.

“He’s already been destroyed by what you did. Do you have any idea how it haunts him? He was still regularly dreaming of her when we met.”

“If you’re worried that he may go back to her, there’s no reason. She’s dead.”

“You think that’s what I care about? Tyrion protected you, more than you deserved, and yet for about ten years you lied to him and he loved you like a brother because of this lie? What kind of brother are you? What kind of man does this to his brother? You deserve all the titles you have. Man without honor, Oathbreaker, Sisterfucker, Father to a Monster, Kingslayer. Can you name me one vow you didn’t break? Can you name me one person whose trust you never betrayed? Can you name me one good thing you made in your life?”

Jaime Lannister was stunned into silence. The proud man who was always smirking was now completely silent, unable to answer her. She hated him, she hated Cersei, she hated their child. Stannis was right to have rebelled against them. Anyone who rebelled against them was right. She should have joined Loras in the Stormlands. She wanted to kill Tyrion right now for taking their side.

“Yes, I killed my king,” he finally answered.

Margaery scoffed. “You are proud that you killed the man you swore to serve?”

“I’m not proud of it, but it’s probably the one good thing I did in my life.”

“Why? Because your father ordered you to kill him? Everyone knows he despised Aerys. Like father, like son, both trying to kill the king they swore to serve and torturing their family.”

“Tell me, Margaery, you know that when you become a knight, you swear to defend the innocents. When I joined the Kingsguard, I also swore to protect the king and to obey him. What should I do if the king murders innocents?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you could ask the Starks. It seems they were all innocents, and yet you allowed two kings to kill three of them in your presence. Did you defend the innocents or obey your king back then?”

He was silent for another long moment, then words came out of his mouth like a stream. “The Mad King wanted to burn King’s Landing. After the Trident, he stocked wildfire all over the city. Beneath the Sept of Baelor and the slums of Flea Bottom. Under houses, stables, taverns. Even beneath the Red Keep itself. He said, let Robert Baratheon be the king of the ashes. But my father arrived in King’s Landing before Robert. He claimed he was here to defend the city against the rebels. I warned the Mad King to not trust him. My father would never have picked the losing side. I urged Aerys to surrender peacefully, but he didn’t listen to me. He wouldn’t listen to Varys who tried to warn him. It was the one time when he should have listened to him. Instead, he listened to Pycelle. You can trust the Lannisters, he said. So the gates were opened and my father sacked the city. I went back to the king and begged him to surrender once more. He ordered me to bring him my father’s head. Then he turned to his pyromancer and said Burn them all. Burn them in their homes. Burn them in their beds. So I killed the pyromancer, and then I stabbed Aerys and made sure he would never come back. That’s why I killed him. Tell me, if your brother had been a kingsguard and done the same thing, would you have called him Kingslayer?”

He stared at her defiantly, the first time he did so since he came in. Slowly, she approached him, and like she did with his brother, she slapped him across the cheek. The difference was that she slapped him a second time across the other cheek.
“Do not talk about my brother!”

“I never wanted him to die.”

“Well, he’s dead, because of you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. All this started with you. You made the monster who killed Ned Stark. You pushed Bran Stark from the top of a tower. You stood by and did nothing while Joffrey had the Warden of the North executed. You may feel better about killing the Mad King, but this is only further proof that you are a coward. You served the Mad King until the end, and when you had nothing to lose by turning on him and everything to lose by serving him, you killed him. If you really cared about the innocents and the people, you would have killed him long before. You disgust me. You are no knight. My brother was a knight, but not you.”

She turned away and walked to the balcony. “Leave, and never come back.” She didn’t look at him. She didn’t want to have anything to do with him anymore. The more she learned about Jaime Lannister, the more she wanted to kill him.

“You know that I saved your brother. At the tournament…”

“Leave.” She wouldn’t hear anymore from him. She knew more than enough. She didn’t need to listen to more ugly truths or to hear more lies. She was done with Jaime Lannister.

He sighed. When he spoke again, his tone was entirely different. He was begging. “Blame me for your brother’s death and for everything else if you want. Blame Cersei, blame Joffrey, blame all the Seven Kingdoms if you want, I don’t care, but don’t blame Tyrion. He only tried to protect people who he thought were better than they really are. You’re the best thing that ever happened to him. He loves you, more than anyone else he’s ever loved. He’s made his choice. He chose you. And I’ve made my choice me too.”

He left her apartment. She heard his boots echoing in the corridor as he walked away.

She looked into the night. The moon was nowhere to be seen. It was hidden by clouds, for its light didn’t bath the night with its white glint. Everything, alive or not, was plunged into darkness. Anything that would happen in the city tonight would remain unknown until the morrow, when the sun would cast its light upon the Crownlands. The only major source of light that was visible to the eye were the many torches of the Lannister camp, outside the city walls. There, thousands of men were sleeping, waiting to fight Stannis for a false king.

She still didn’t think about what she would do. She should write to her father, tell him everything so that he wouldn’t engage their men into the war. She also had to decide whether she should leave, and if she did, where she would go. Would Tyrion stop her? And more important, why would he stop her? Would he do it because he loved her or, and that’s what she feared the most, would he stop her because he needed hers and her father’s support? Their marriage had been like that at the beginning, a political union out of a need for both their families to strengthen their power. This purpose still existed, but their marriage had grown into something much deeper. She couldn’t suffer her marriage to be purely political. Not if she was married with Tyrion. As much as she hated him, she also loved him.

The door of her chamber opened, and she met the eyes of the man she loved and hated at the same time.
That makes a lot of truths revealed in one single day for Margaery.

I hope Margaery doesn't seem apathetic to you. She just discovered Tyrion lied to her for a very long time about Cersei, and still under the shock of the revelation. Plus she has very conflicting feelings fighting inside of her right now, so this is no surprise that she needs some time, if only a few hours, before she reacts to the information she just got and takes action. At the end of the chapter, she seems ready to go back into action, and then Tyrion walks in.

Please review

Next chapter: Cersei
Chapter Notes

Here comes the Mad Queen again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI IV

“It must be done tonight.”

“It is quite unexpected, your Grace. I thought we were supposed to take our time, make sure we had enough men on our side,” Littlefinger replied.

“We cannot wait anymore. We must act now. In the morning it might be too late.”

The queen was in Lord Baelish’s rooms. It was a chance that he was in the Red Keep tonight. She heard he spent most of his nights in his brothel, watching his whores, certainly doing more than watching.

“If we do this now, failure is more than possible,” he said.

“You had months to bring the City Watch back in my hands. Don’t tell me it wasn’t enough.”

“It’s not as easy as it used to be in the time of Janos Slynt. Ser Jacelyn Bywater removed most of the officers of the City Watch and replaced them, sometimes with men Lord Tyrion brought with him from the Westerlands. The new officers are not as corrupted as the former, and not so easily bribed. They are loyal to their lord.”

“They should be loyal to their king.” *And their queen.*

“Alas, things are seldom as they should be. The only justice in this world is the one we make.”

In that, she couldn’t agree more. Cersei had been a victim of injustice all her life, all that because she wasn’t born with the right parts between her legs.

“Well, maybe it’s time we make justice happen. You want Harrenhal, Lord Baelish?”

“As it was promised to me by Lady Lannister.”

She grinded her teeth. She hated to hear that bitch being called the way her mother was called before. “As it was falsely promised by her. However, unlike our little rose, a Lannister always pays his debts.”

“I expect nothing less.”

“Then, tomorrow in the morning, and Harrenhal is yours.”

“You are quite persuasive, your Grace. However, of the twelve officers who take their orders directly from Ser Jacelyn, I was only able to bribe three. I’m approaching three more as we speak, but it will take me some time to get them on our side.”
“You have the night.”

“That may not be enough.”

“Then make sure it will be.”

The Master of Coin smiled. She hated that smile. He had tried to threaten her about her children’s father once, and he regretted it. She had an irresistible desire to repeat the experience she led back then, but she had to relent since she needed this man. She hated needing him.

“Even if I manage it, we will only have half the City Watch by our side. Two thousand men. Lord Tyrion will have twice that number, and many more outside the walls,” he explained.

“Do we need two thousand men to kill him?”

“No. Only one man could be enough.”

“Once my brother is dead, his men will rally to their king.” And to me.

“I wouldn’t be so optimistic about it, your Grace. Many will look at his death and find it suspicious.”

“We will make everyone believe Stannis was behind this. It wouldn’t be the first time one of his opponents got killed before a battle,” she said, referring to Renly.

“Maybe, but some will wonder if you had anything to do with his death.”

“I will deal with them. For now, all that matter is that my wretched brother must be dead by tomorrow. And his wife too.”

She wouldn’t let him hurt her children. She knew what he was going to do. He was going to take them away from her, and that she couldn’t allow. She would never allow it. She was their mother, the queen, and no one would get in her way. She would protect them and kill the valonqar.

“Killing Lady Margaery might weaken our alliance with the Reach.”

“I don’t care. She must die. He must die. They must die, both of them.” She could have kept the Tyrell girl a hostage, but she had become too dangerous. She would seek revenge for her dead brother.

Ser Mandon Moore was supposed to kill her, not Ser Loras. She wouldn’t have minded if he had killed both Margaery and Ser Loras before he died, but instead he killed the brother and let the sister live. Were there no people you could rely on in this world. Even Jaime wasn’t strong enough to protect their children. He preferred to follow the orders of his younger brother, when he should be giving orders.

“I will have them dead in the morning,” Littlefinger said.

“Good. Harrenhal and the Riverlands will be yours by the morning.”

“However, I cannot guarantee what will happen after Lord Tyrion and his wife are dead.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle it.”

Her father’s men wouldn’t miss Tyrion. That little creature was only lord because Jaime didn’t want to be and because the stupid laws of the Seven Kingdoms wouldn’t allow a woman to seize power as long as there would be a man standing in her way. The soldiers of the Westerlands were certainly not
thrilled to serve a dwarf. Well, maybe they were less upset than she was, since she had to obey a man and a dwarf, and only the latter bothered men, while a woman was bothered by both. Still, obeying Tyrion was still bothering enough for them to be relieved when he would be gone. They would follow Joffrey and Jaime more eagerly. Cersei only had to maneuver them carefully. Joffrey was unpredictable since he got the crown on his head, but she still had some leverage on Jaime. As long as she had him on her side, she could succeed. Joffrey and Jaime were both parts of her, and with a part of her as king, and another part of her as Lord of Casterly Rock, she would be unstoppable.

“Well, I should get to work,” the Master of Coin said, standing up and walking immediately to the door. He wasn’t wearing nightclothes.

“Don’t forget, Lord Baelish. Without me, you’ll never get Harrenhal. And if I fall, you fall with me.”

“I won’t forget.”

He was gone, and Cersei left his rooms soon after. The castle was very silent. Most of the men were in the fields or on the battlements or in the streets, preparing for the inevitable attack. It was only a matter of days before Stannis arrived. When she arrived into her own room, she found Jaime waiting for her, sitting on her bed. The sheets were still a complete mess.

“So, did you do it?” she asked him immediately.

“If you’re asking if I killed Tyrion like you asked me to, then no, I didn’t.”

“Well, it seems you still have work to do then.”

“Do you really expect me to kill my brother?”

“I expect you to do everything necessary to protect our children.”

“And I did. You saw me push the boy.”

“I didn’t ask you to do it.”

“And yet I did it. The boy was a threat. Tyrion is not.”

“The way you pity him makes you blind.”

“Your hatred of Tyrion blinds you too. It stops you from realizing that he’s your best chance to survive, to you and to your children.”

She walked past him. She wouldn’t talk about it any longer. Talk wouldn’t convince her brother.

“Why do you hate so much? What has Tyrion ever done to deserve your hatred?” he asked.

“He killed our mother. That’s enough.”

Jaime’s arms dropped on the bed, then he stood up, shaking his head. “I’m not going to argue about this again.”

“He will kill us all as soon as he sees it fit,” she stated.

“Without Tyrion, Joffrey would be nothing. He would have no one to support him.”

“He would have me.”
“How many men can you bring to fight for him?”

“I would have Tyrion’s men, had you accepted the path Father traced for you.”

“Tyrion did more for House Lannister in three years than I could have done in twenty. We are more powerful with him than we ever were when Father lived.”

“How?”

“We have the Reach, and now even Dorne. Your son is the king. It wasn’t under Father’s rule that it happened.”

“It would have happened under his rule as well. Only he wouldn’t have sold us out to the Tyrells.”

“I doubt about it. We never had an alliance with any of the Seven Kingdoms when he was alive.”

“Because he knew we could only rely on ourselves.”

“Well, maybe that explains why he hid under Casterly Rock during Robert’s war and only showed up at the end, to be sure he wouldn’t pick the losing side.”

“And you think this was such a bad idea? Our son wouldn’t be king if he had done otherwise.”

She had poured a glass of wine and drank from it, the taste in her mouth refreshing her. She felt better, much better. Tomorrow she would be the queen for more than in name. She would get rid of her little brother and his spiteful wife, and she could rule over the Seven Kingdoms like she should always have.

Jaime stood right in front of her. “Father used to say that the family name lives on, that it was all that lived on. He said we were Lannisters, and that we must make sure the Lannisters live forever. He said every Lannister added some strength to the family name and that we should rely on us and only on us. Tyrion is a Lannister. We need him.”

She wanted to punch him for what he just said, but instead she kissed him, and when she stepped away, she looked straight into his eyes. “We’re the only Lannisters, the only ones who count.”

And then she kissed him again. At first, she felt some resistance from him, but he gave in and kissed her as fiercely as she did. They did it once, twice, thrice, and at some point, they fell asleep.

She walked in the gardens of the Rock. Snow covered the ground and she was wearing boots and thick robes and furs. Her septa was followed her from afar. She was raised to be a perfect little lady. Sometimes she didn’t understand why she couldn’t fight with a sword in the yard like Jaime did. They were so alike, sometimes the servants couldn’t distinguish one from the other. Only Mother could always tell who was standing right before her.

And there she was, her lady mother, Joanna Lannister, Lady of Casterly Rock. She had a big belly. Cersei didn’t quite understand why her mother was big. Her septa told her it was because she was about to have another child, but Cersei didn’t understand that either. Why would Mother want another child? Were she and Jaime not enough?

She was sitting on a bench, playing with a red rose in one hand and a blue rose in the other. People said Cersei looked very much like her mother, and she heard her mother say to Aunt Genna that she would grow to be far more beautiful than she would ever be.

“Mother.”
She smiled at her when she heard Cersei call her. She always smiled at her. It was a different smile from the one her father had for her. She liked her mother’s smile better.

“Hi, my sweet girl.” She raised her hands, showing the flowers to Cersei. “You see this red rose?”

“She’s beautiful.”

“We are in the middle of winter.” She brandished the blue rose. “This is a winter rose. It is said they are the most beautiful of flowers at the end of winter, and the longer the winter the more beautiful they will get when it ends. This red rose can survive winter, though she doesn’t always survive. When she does, she is a miracle of life, a proof that winter cannot erase beauty, that life is more powerful than anything. Together, these two flowers prove that life can survive and flourish through winter, that life is more powerful than death, and that something good can get through every ordeal.”

She laid the two roses on her swelling belly. She made a small sound with her throat, and for a moment her eyes were closed, as if she was doing some kind of effort.

“Are you well, Mother?” Cersei asked.

“Yes, I am.” She smiled. “Don’t worry. I had it harder with you and your brother. I think this time there will only be one.”

“Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?”

“I don’t know, but I hope it will be a boy.”

“Why? You don’t like girls.”

“No, quite the opposite. I probably love them more than boys, but I think this is a boy our family needs.”

“Why?”

She looked straight before her at the flowers that winter didn’t manage to kill yet. “When you and Jaime were born, your lord father and I were so proud. You were our two golden babies.” Cersei felt her smile growing as she listened to the tale of her birth. “We told each other that our son would be a great knight, and our daughter a beautiful queen, and that they would be so tall, so handsome, so brave that no one would dare to oppose them. However… I may be wrong. It is my mother’s intuition, and it is sometimes wrong, but I feel your little brother, or your little sister, will be called to greater things than you and Jaime one day. That’s why I think it must be a boy. We need a great man for great achievements.”

Cersei looked at the two flowers still resting on her mother’s belly. For no reason at all, she wanted to throw them into the fire, but she didn’t dare since her mother was here.

And then a fire started not far from her. And in that fire, she saw a shadow, a blackened shape. An arm was raised, and a dagger with a silver handle and a green pearl at its end. The outcry that came out of the stabbed shadow was heartbreaking. She recognized this voice. The face of Jaime came out of the fire as he stumbled on the floor, falling face first, the blade dug in his back. She knelt and rolled him over only to discover that it was Joffrey. She called her mother to help, only to find ashes flying all around when she looked behind, her mother and the septa gone. When she cast her eyes on her son’s body, it was the face of Myrcella she met.

No, not her. Not my sweet and good Myrcella. She was the best thing to come out of her, the best thing she ever made. She took her face between her arms and cradled her. She closed her eyes as
tears began to roll. When she opened them again, it was Tommen she was holding.

_You will have three. Gold will be their crowns. Gold their shrouds. And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you._

The dream ended before the rest of the prophecy came to be true. Someone was pounding on the door.

“Your Grace! Your Grace!”

“Wait!”

She was still with Jaime. She couldn’t allow anyone to see her with him. She quickly dressed, put on a nightgown, before she answered to a livid handmaiden.

“Your Grace, something terrible happened!”

She didn’t hide her smile. The nightmare was gone. Reality was back. Finally, her time had come. The sunlight managed to make its way through the curtains. The night was over, morning had come, and with it the dawn of her reign. Tyrion and Margaery were dead.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Sansa, and the conclusion of the turning point of this story.
Sansa IX

Chapter Notes

Fifth and last part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**SANSA IX**

She always went to the godswood late in the evening. During the day, she tried to stay in her chambers as much as possible. This way, she had fewer chances to come upon Joffrey. The Lannisters may keep the king away from the Tower of the Hand where she now lived, but they didn’t keep him away from her elsewhere in the castle. As a result, she left her rooms when it was dark, and Joffrey was most likely sleeping. The Red Keep wasn’t as busy as during the day.

Even though she was well settled into the Tower of the Hand, she was still afraid of Joffrey. Lady Margaery’s refusal to see her had also left her worried, not only for the lady’s state but also for her own safety. When she heard the Lady of Casterly Rock had come back, she tried to see her. She wanted to offer her condolences, and also to talk with her, but the man who announced Sansa came back saying that Lady Lannister didn’t wish to see anybody.

Sansa couldn’t believe Ser Loras was dead. The word had gotten around the Red Keep a few days ago. Sansa had thought she would marry him, or at least she thought this was what Lord Tyrion had tried to tell her. Now the Knight of Flowers was gone, and she was still Joffrey’s betrothed. All the people she loved were dying.

The corridors were almost empty. She didn’t meet anyone on her way to the godswood. It happened often. She had learned to go through passages and ways that were used by few people. This night, however, she felt something was different. The silence that reigned everywhere was heavier than usual, as if something was about to happen. Maybe it was the coming of Stannis. People were afraid of what would happen if the Red Keep fell. Sansa hoped Stannis would win the battle. She would be free of Joffrey. Stannis Baratheon couldn’t be any worse than his supposed nephew and her family was fighting for him. She would be free.

Her steps echoed on the walls, the roofs and the floors of the castle. She tried to make as little noise as she could, like always, but there seemed to be no point to it. The sound travelled from one end of the Red Keep to the other, she was sure of it. She feared that Joffrey might hide behind any corner.

Luckily enough, she met no human being before she arrived to her destination, and she had no surprise when she saw who was waiting for her. Right before the entrance of the godswood, Mira was standing, a troch in hand like every evening. The two girls always met outside the godswood then walked in to pray together.

“Lady Sansa.”

“Lady Mira.”

“Are you well tonight?”
“Yes, I am. What about you?”

“I’m well.”

Mira inhaled sharply before she answered. The skies were filled with clouds that prevented the moon from casting its light upon the world. As they progressed through the godswood, Mira’s torch was the only source of light and heat. Despite the yellow glow, Sansa thought Mira was paler than usual.

“How is Lady Margaery?” Sansa asked. “I tried to see her today, but she wouldn’t receive me.”

“She’s not receiving anyone. She was there this evening when I prepared her bed for the night, and she didn’t say a word. She had a huge fight with Lord Tyrion earlier today,” she added after a moment.

“I didn’t know.”

“Her brother just died. It’s very hard for her,” Mira explained.

Sansa had lost her father, so she understood that Lady Margaery would want to be alone. She hadn’t been much better after her father’s death. She thought of Bran and Rickon, and a chill went down her spine. They had no news from them. All she knew was that a small army had gathered around Winterfell and laid siege on her home and Theon’s men, but their fate still remained unknown.

“I will pray for her,” Sansa said. “Is there anything I can do for Lady Margaery?”

“I don’t know. I feel powerless. She and Lord Tyrion never had a quarrel like this before. I never saw her in such a state.”

“She was close to Ser Loras?”

“Very close. Ser Loras was her only brother. She didn’t have other siblings. It’s already difficult to lose a brother or a sister, but when you lose the only one you have… I can’t imagine what she’s going through.”

“I met Ser Loras once. During the tourney. He was very kind.” He gave me a red rose while he gave white roses to all the other ladies.

“Yes, he was,” Mira confirmed.

“Did you know him well?” Sansa was curious to know more about the handsome knight she might have married.

“Not very much, truth be told. Lady Margaery often talked about him, but we seldom spoke. He wasn’t among the people I spent time with in Highgarden.”

“Why? You are Lady Margaery’s handmaiden.”

“Well, that’s the point. Loras Tyrell spent his time training in the yards of Highgarden with the other knights and squires. He wasn’t speaking much with his sister’s servants, less with me than with the others.”

“Why is that?”

“Let’s just say that I didn’t appreciate Ser Loras as much as I like Lady Margaery. I spent more time with Willas.”
Sansa could understand. Willas Tyrell was Lady Mira’s betrothed. It was normal that she spent most of her time with him when she wasn’t attending Lady Margaery.

“Still, I can’t believe he’s gone,” Mira said.

“Me neither.” She had hoped and dreamed about marrying Ser Loras. She whispered his name at night. He was the man who would free her from Joffrey. Then the news of his death came, and all her hopes were crushed.

“We never know when someone could die. It always catches us by surprise at the moment we expect it the least. Lady Margaery is completely destroyed. She always has a pleasant behaviour. She smiles to everyone, is kind to everyone, asks about their family and their friends and their health. Even when she doesn’t feel well, she keeps her face straight and happy, to not worry the others and to not indispose them. Now she just hides in her rooms and she doesn’t talk to anybody. She closes herself to the world. It never happened before.”

They walked together for a moment and nothing was said. Sansa broke the silence. “I know what it feels like. You have the impression that the world is collapsing all around you, that nothing is worth living anymore. You just want to disappear, melt into the floor or drop yourself from the top of the tower. You want the person you love to come back or join her. You would give anything to get him back to you. All you want is for the pain to stop, but it won’t. You can’t stop it. All you can do is learn to live with it, to bear it on your shoulders every day.”

“Do you miss him?” Mira asked.

“Yes, I do.” She wished… she no longer knew what she should wish for. They had arrived before the weirwood tree.

“Sansa, do you feel sometimes that we shouldn’t be here?”

“Why? Is it inappropriate to pray to the Old Gods?”

“No, not at all. I meant, here, in King’s Landing. Sometimes I think I shouldn’t have left my home. I wonder how things would be if I had stayed at Ironrath. Do you ever think about it?”

“It’s useless to think about it,” Sansa replied after a moment. “We cannot go back in the past.”

Sometimes, Sansa would picture herself back to Winterfell, before the king visited, and she wished she could scream to herself, beg herself to not leave. Her life had been good at Winterfell. She was happy, surrounded by the people she loved. Why did she want to leave at all?

She looked at the weirwood tree. A light breeze caused the leaves to rustle, as if they wanted to tell her something. For a short time, she even imagined they were telling her something with Bran’s voice, but Mira was the only person to speak to her right now.

“Sansa, I know you’re afraid. I’m afraid me too.”

“No one is going to hurt you here, Mira,” she tried to reassure her.

“You really believe it?”

Sansa looked down. “No.”

She knew very well no one was safe here, not with Joffrey. Mira was a Northerner. Not long ago, all the Northerners in King’s Landing had been assassinated and their heads put on spikes. Joffrey
forced her to look at each of them. Sansa didn’t want this to arrive to Mira. Since she was a handmaiden of the Lady of Casterly Rock, Sansa supposed she was safe for the time being, but she knew better than to believe anyone was safe in this place.

Mira moved to stand before her and took her hands in hers. “Sansa, I know this is not easy, and I cannot assure you it will get better. We are at war. Who knows what might happen tomorrow, or next week, or next month. This war might last for years. I don’t believe that’s the kind of war that will be resolved in one battle. It could go wrong any time. I want you to know that if you ever need something, you only have to ask.”

“Thank you, Mira.”

“You can trust me, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

The truth was that Sansa couldn’t trust anybody. She liked Mira and enjoyed her time with her, but she was still working for Lady Margaery, and Lady Margaery was a Lannister. In a place like King’s Landing, you couldn’t trust anybody.

Mira disappeared from her vision as well as the godswood. A strong hand was tackled against her mouth when she was going to yell for help. Another arm seized her by the hips.

“Everything will be fine, Sansa. Trust me.”

Mira’s voice pierced through the bag that was placed on her head. Whoever seized her was dragging her away. Sansa tried to get free but struggling quickly appeared to be futile. The man who took hold of her was too strong and wouldn’t let her go. She tried to bite his hand, hoping this would allow her to shout, but the bag on her head and gloves were standing between her teeth and her captor’s flesh.

Again, there was nothing she could do. The hand stifled any sound she tried to make. She was a prisoner. Joffrey must have heard of her conversations with Mira. Maybe she reported to him. She had been careful to never talk against him, to never complain about the king, but she expressed some feelings about her family that wouldn’t please him.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. What would happen to her now? She should have been more careful, never said anything to Mira except for the courtesies Septa Mordane taught her. What was she thinking about? Did she think that only because she was a Northerner, she wouldn’t report to Joffrey everything Sansa would tell her? She was his aunt’s handmaiden.

Sansa allowed tears to fall as she was being carried away to Joffrey’s chamber or the Throne Room. At some point, they went down stairs, which she found odd considering you only needed to climb stairs to leave the godswood and go to wherever she was expected. A familiar scent came to her nostrils, something she smelted when Princess Myrcella left King’s Landing and they went to the harbor to see her leave. They had gone down quite a lot of stairs.

“That’s her?” a voice asked.

“Yes,” another voice, sweeter, close to her ear replied.

The bag on her head was roughly removed. A man wearing a full helmet and armor was looking at her. “It’s her.”

He put back the bag on her head and her world was surrounded by darkness once again. She felt herself being passed from one pair of arms to another.
“Come here. Don’t say a word,” a new voice said.

Her feet left the ground. Yes, it was a ground, not a floor. It wasn’t marble or stone under her, but earth and rocks, judging by the sound it made, more similar to the ground in the courtyard of Winterfell than to the paved floors of the Red Keep.

She was positioned without ceremony on something that seemed to be a horse. She felt another weight behind her an instant later, and a new hand came again on her mouth. She hadn’t dared to say anything, to make a single noise while she had been freed from the human gag. Now it was back, and it didn’t make much difference. She heard several voices around her commanding their horses to move, and the mount on which she sat moved forward.

She found it strange that she was being brought somewhere out of the Red Keep. She had to be outside of it. There was no place in the castle like this, where you could ride horses on the ground.

Ever since her father died, she could never leave Maegor’s Holfast except for a few special occasions like the princess’ departure. Anyway, that wasn’t as if Sansa would try to escape. She had nowhere to go, no matter where she was in King’s Landing. Joffrey probably found a new way to make her miserable, something that involved getting her outside the Red Keep. Maybe he feared his uncle too much and wanted to give her a lesson somewhere he couldn’t intervene.

They rode for a short time. Soon, Sansa heard other noises around her apart from the hooves of the horses. The people around her travelled in relative silence, without speaking. She heard voices, heavy things being moved, what seemed like other horses neighing. The silence of the night was no longer there. Had Joffrey gathered a crowd to humiliate her?

They stopped abruptly, and Sansa was taken down her horse. No hand gagged her anymore, but the bag was still in place. She was led by a somewhat gentler hand. Something was ruffled ahead of her.

“She’s here, my lord.”

Sansa steeled herself for what was to come. Whatever Joffrey prepared for her, she would face it. She wouldn’t cry this time. The more she cried, the worse it got, for it encouraged him to torture her further.

“Maybe you could remove whatever it is you put on her head.”

The voice puzzled her. It wasn’t Joffrey’s. The bag was pulled away and she found herself face to face with Tyrion Lannister.

“Lady Sansa, please forgive me for the unusual way in which you were brought here. I know this is no way to get an audience with a lady.” He sighed. “We don’t have much time, so I will be brief, my lady. We’re leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“Yes. To tell you a short version of the story, when Lady Margaery went to the Stormlands to speak with Renly Baratheon, she was accompanied by Ser Mandon Moore on the suggestion of my sister, the Queen Regent. There he killed my brother-in-law right in front of my wife, and a few seconds later he tried to do the same with her. He got killed before he could complete the work. Either Moore received the order from Cersei to kill Margaery, in this case I refuse to serve a king who was raised and prepared for the throne by her, either Joffrey gave the order and I refuse to serve someone who tried to have my wife murdered. So we’re leaving.”

Sansa was speechless. That was the last thing she expected. Before she could articulate any word in
reply, before she could even think about something to reply, the Lord of Casterly Rock called someone named Ty.

“Ty, escort the Lady Sansa to her guards. They will make sure she is under heavy protection during our journey.”

The young boy muttered a *my lady*. She was about to follow him when she found something to ask Lord Lannister. “Why are we leaving?”

He looked back straight at her. “It’s quite simple, my lady. Joffrey and Cersei want the Iron Throne for themselves. Well, I leave it to them with joy, for whatever short time they will be able to keep it. As for me, I go back to Casterly Rock. And you’re coming with us.”

She followed Ty afterwards, still struggling to understand what was going on. She was led to a horse surrounded by many others mounted by Lannister knights, safe for one. He was mounted by a small boy with blond hair, struggling to hold onto his saddle. He was the boy who Sansa had reflected after her father’s death that she wouldn’t mind marrying him. Sansa climbed on the horse right next to Prince Tommen’s mount. On her left stood the city walls. All around her, she realized, tents were being disassembled, carts were being loaded and men in red armor placed luggage on their horses before they climbed on it. She had seen the tents from a balcony recently, a large camp that hosted the army that would fight Stannis within a few days. Sansa understood they wouldn’t fight Stannis anytime soon.

She was leaving King’s Landing. Somehow, things changed.

Chapter End Notes

And now everything changes. The fanfiction will definitely stop to follow the canon of the show. All that will happen from now on will be very different.

I must warn you that there won't be a new chapter before some time. My other fanfiction, "A Shadow and a Wolf", is almost over and I want to give one last push to write the last chapters in a roll. "A Rose and a Lion" will be back as soon as this is done. It should take about a month.

Please review

Next chapter : Cersei
Cersei V

Chapter Notes

"A Rose and a Lion" is back. I must admit I didn't realize it's been three months since I uploaded a chapter for this fanfiction. I apologize for all the people who were waiting, but with the final chapters of "A Shadow and a Wolf" and new writing projects, it was hard to find time to devote to ARAAL.

I'll do my best to upload a new chapter at least every two weeks, though I can't promise anything with my original works in progress that I'm working on at the same time. I can make you one promise though: I will never abandon ARAAL. The writing might be slower than for ASAAW, but I will never give up on this fanfiction. Never.

Three months ago, the story reached a turning point when Margaery finally discovered the truth about Jaime and Cersei, and also that Tyrion hid this from her. With the death of Loras, this revelation will strain the relationship between the Lord and the Lady of Casterly Rock.

In reaction to the death of his brother-in-law, the discoveries of Joffrey's participation into the attempt of murder on Brandon Stark and of Cersei's attempt to have Margaery murdered, and the "break-up" he experienced with his wifeafter he revealed the truth about Jaime and Cersei, Tyrion decided to leave the capital with Margaery and his army, leaving Joffrey, Cersei and Jaime to fare for themselves in King's Landing. Tyrion also brought with him Tommen Baratheon, Joffrey's little brother and heir, and Sansa Stark, Joffrey's betrothed, a ward to the Crown. They're heading back to Casterly Rock.

In the meantime, Stannis took back the Stormlands from Renly and is sailing for King's Landing, determined to take the city and the Iron Throne. The Tyrells and the Martells, who remained neutral so far, might change their position due to recent events. While Lysa Arryn remained entranced in the Vale and the Starks and the Tullys fought the Lannisters and their allies in the Riverlands, Riverrun was placed under siege and the North, left without defenses, was invaded by the Ironmen who seized Winterfell, Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte. In the meantime, Daenerys Targaryen still lives on the other side of the Narrow Sea, and like so many, she only has one goal in mind: take the Iron Throne.

The die is cast. No one can remain neutral anymore. All is set for a war that will be everything but short. With Tyrion abandoning King's Landing, the War of the Five Kings will take an unexpected direction.

We are the night following Tyrion's departure and things don't look well for Cersei and Joffrey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI V

Gold will be their crowns. Gold their shrouds.
His crown was gold. His shroud was gold.

The golden hair used to shine. Now it was dull. No brilliance, no shine, no glow. Nothing to see with the sun, or the gold. It looked like sand. Not the sand that flew between your toes and caressed the back of your feet. It was dirty sand, the kind that was to be seen on the coasts of Dragonstone, littered with small stone, brown, soiled. Were they all destined to this? Was this her fate, a body deprived of life, slowly turning to ashes?

*And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.*

She was crying. She cried the whole night. Because she couldn't cry for her dead son during the day, she did it in the night. And yet, despite the fact she drowned in her tears, the valonqar never came. He was away, with her other son.

She placed a comforting hand on the head of her beloved child.

*Your Grace, something terrible happened!*

Indeed, something terrible. Joffrey was dead. He was assassinated in the middle of the night. The gash was still visible were the collar's slit allowed to see his neck, right under his Adam's apple. a very small red line, only a part of the large scar left by the dagger that opened her son's throat. According to Fenken, who replaced Pycelle for the time being, he was in bed when it happened, probably asleep. The assassin attacked him from behind. He drowned in his own blood.

Her boy. Her sweet little boy, the first she held into her arms, the first to come out of her, the first she bore. He looked so much like Jaime. She caressed his hair, deprived of its luster, deprived of life. Her hand wandered on his cheek. It was cold. Only one day that he was dead, and it was already cold. The stones showed two green eyes staring at the ceiling. She removed one, only to meet eyelids that were shut. No longer would she see the green of his real eyes. All that was left were stones. Her hand followed her journey to his neck. Below the rich fabric of his clothes, she could feel the gash that was left by the traitorous dagger. As her fingers travelled on his body, she could feel the muscles. She stopped to the level where his cock was, then withdrew her hand to his arm. Small holes of water made their appearance on his clothes, showing the tears that her face left on her trail.

She closed her eyelids as a whine escaped her throat and tears fell in numbers from her eyes. He was her son, her small boy, and he was dead.

Tyrion killed him. He killed him just before he left with her army. Who knew what he had done to Tommen? Jaime might think the Imp brought him to Casterly Rock to protect him, Cersei knew the truth. At best, Tyrion kidnapped her other son and brought him to the Rock so he could control him and rule the Seven Kingdoms in her stead. Tommen would be easier to control than Joffrey. He would do as Tyrion and his whore said. The mere thought of it made her squeeze Joffrey's arm.

She had been stunned by the declaration of the guard. *The King is dead!* She thought it was some sort of bad joke. It was Tyrion and Margaery who died, not Joffrey. Everything was arranged. She didn't believe this man when he insisted. He was lying. But Jaime dragged her from her bedchamber to their son's rooms where they found his body. His eyes were wide open, frozen into an expression of utter terror as he knew he was living his last moments. The blood had time to dry up, stains covered the bedsheets and the nightclothes the king wore. Ser Barristan, the Hound and Lancel all stood next to him.

She didn't remember the rest. All she knew was that she ordered Frenken to examine him, to not move his body, and she called a meeting of the small council.
"I want my brother's head. I want him dead."

That was the first thing she told the council. A council that was limited to Jaime and Ser Barristan Selmy, two men discussing in low voices when she entered. She just had time to get her maids to arrange her hair and a decent attire before she stormed into the room.

"Your Grace, I know you are grieving, but before you take any rash decision…" the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard started.

"Rash decision? My son is dead. He was murdered! I demand that the assassin be brought to me immediately."

"Cersei, our men are already searching every corner of the castle," Jaime said. "We'll find the man who did this."

"We all know who did this. It was Tyrion. And his wife. They're behind this. They killed my son. Bring them here."

He exchanged a look with Ser Barristan. "That's not possible."

"Why?"

"Because Tyrion and Margaery are gone, with all their army. They left in the night. All the soldiers of the Westerlands. They're gone."

The anger that was growing in her belly flared to her head. "Then order them to come back!"

"Why would they obey me? I'm not the Lord of Casterly Rock."

"You would be if only you seized the opportunity when you could."

"Your Grace, Lord Tyrion has King Tommen with him," Ser Barristan revealed. It was as if cold water was suddenly poured into her veins. "He left this message in his solar, with the badge of Hand."

Cersei snatched the parchment from the old man's hands.

To his Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the First Men, and the Rhoynar, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms,

I took the liberty to escort your brother, Prince Tommen, and your dear betrothed, Sansa Stark, to Casterly Rock for their safety. Stannis is closing on King's Landing and I am sure your Grace will agree that they will be safer in the Westerlands. I'm sorry to have taken that decision without consulting you first, but since your Grace entrusted me with the daily administration of the Realm and delegated most of his responsibilities to me, I considered you wouldn't mind me not bothering you with that matter.

I am sure your Grace will also agree that the prince and the Lady Sansa require a strong protection, which explains why I decided to accompany him with my troops. Your Grace will find great solace in the fact that the Lady Sansa and Prince Tommen are in good hands and protected from your enemies. If the city should fall and your Grace perish, you will have the consolation to know that your brother will be there to resume the fight you started, and your betrothed protected from any danger.

Yours respectfully,
Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Lord of the Westerlands, and Warden of the West.

As soon as she was done, Cersei tore it apart and let the pieces fall on the floor. "He did it. He killed my son."

"He didn't." Jaime said it in a whisper, but Cersei heard it nonetheless.

"He didn't? He didn't? How can you say that when he condemns himself with his own words?"

"I wouldn't say that, your Grace," Ser Barristan intervened. "I've come to know Lord Tyrion quite well since he became Hand of the King, and he doesn't strike me as a murderer. And this note proves he thought the king was still alive. I don't believe King Joffrey's death is his doing."

"Varys and Littlefinger." Jaime looked at her, his eyes mirroring a strange gleam. Something like excitement. Or was it hope? "We cannot find them. They're not in their apartments and they haven't answered to the call for the small council. They're nowhere to be found. They must have disappeared. It must be some conspiration from Stannis. They must be working for him…"

"Shut up you two," Cersei ordered. "Tyrion must be brought back here, and answer for his crimes."

The silence that followed proved to be very long. Cersei didn't spare any attention for Ser Barristan.
He was old, unfit for anything. Her eyes were locked on Jaime who was staring away, his gaze hollow. She was waiting for him to do something. Their son was dead. He had to do something. He couldn't stand there and do nothing. Slowly, he turned and looked at her. Then he turned again and looked at Barristan Selmy.

"Ser Barristan, you should leave. You should leave King's Landing."

"Ser Jaime?" He looked skeptical.

"Joffrey is dead. Tommen is our king now. Your king. A king you swore to serve and to protect. You cannot protect him here. You must leave King's Landing and join the Lannister army that is heading for Casterly Rock. You must be at Tommen's side."

The old knight was looking at Jaime as if it was the first time he saw him, and Cersei's actions were no different right now.

"I understand your concerns, Ser Jaime. Tommen is our king, you're right. However, even I must admit that Lord Tyrion's behavior is unusual. He's abandoning the capital, leaving with the king's brother and heir the very night he is assassinated. I'm not sure…"

"Tyrion has nothing to do with that. I can swear it to you with everything I have. Tyrion would never kill someone of his own blood. In fact, it's probably the reason why he left."

"What do you mean?"

"Cersei tried to kill Lady Margaery." Before Cersei could react, Jaime went on. "She ordered Ser Mandon Moore to kill her during their journey in the Stormlands. That's why he never came back. He was stopped, and someone killed him before he could do the job. Joffrey sent an assassin to murder Brandon Stark. A man tried to kill him…"

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"Cersei sent Mandon Moore with Lady Margaery so he could have the opportunity to kill her. She
tried to kill Tyrion's wife. And Joffrey was mad, and stupid. He sent someone to kill Brandon Stark. You can ask Clegane. He's the one who hired the assassin."

Both Cersei and Ser Barristan were stunned by Jaime's words.

"Jaime… What… What…" She couldn't find the words to say.

"Tyrion could not continue to be the Hand of Joffrey, and he couldn't continue to stay here with Cersei. That's why he left. Because had he stayed, one way or another, he would have ended killing them both. He couldn't do that because they were his own blood. He left so he wouldn't have to kill them."

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard turned to her. "Is it true?"

She couldn't answer. She didn't understand what was going on here. The old knight's stare wandered from her to Jaime. Their eyes locked.

"Jon Arryn?" Ser Barristan asked.

After a moment, Jaime answered. "Cersei killed him. She wanted me to be Hand of the King. She also murdered Robert. I helped her, and so did Ser Lancel by getting him drunk."

Not a sound could be heard. Slowly, Ser Barristan's stare changed from incredulity to scorn. His hand gripped the handle of his sword. Jaime gripped his own.

"I think you should leave, Ser Barristan. Your king needs you. I will stay in King's Landing with Ser Lancel and Clegane to defend the city from Stannis. You and Ser Preston should join King Tommen and ensure his security."

For some time, the two men faced each other. Then Ser Barristan walked away and left the room, pushing the door so strongly that they rammed into the wall. For a long time, they stood alone, brother and sister, saying nothing. Managing to recover from what just happened, Cersei finally spoke.

"What have you done?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago," he replied.

"You just told that man…"

"That you tried to kill the Lady of Casterly Rock and succeeded to kill your husband the king, and that your son the king tried to kill a boy of ten, the son of the Warden of the North. Did I forget something? Yes, I forgot. I also told him that you killed Jon Arryn."

"Are you mad?"

"Mad? Did you look at you? Or at your son? I'd say if someone is mad in the family, it's you both."

"Don't you dare say it. I am the queen."

"Yes, you are the queen. So have me executed. Then you'll find yourself alone when Stannis comes. Is that really what you want?"

"You're not the only one who follows me?"

"Really? Tyrion is gone, along with his armies and his wife, which means the Westerlands and the
Reach turned their back on us, and Ser Barristan just abandoned you. If you get rid of me, who will lead your armies?"

"That doesn't concern a kingsguard." She would find someone to lead her armies later.

"Strange. Not long ago, you wanted this kingsguard to be your son's Hand."

"One of my greatest mistake. The king is dead." Her voice shivered. "My son is dead. Our son… is dead." Her voice broke.

"Yes, he's dead, and he's dead because of us."

"No, he's not. We're not responsible."

"He was our son. You just said it. We made him together. And he was a monster."

"No, he wasn't!" She shouted this time.

"Yes, he was. Just like I am, and you too. He tried to kill the Stark boy. We would have done it if we could."

"We were trying to protect the family."

"No. We were trying to protect ourselves. That's not a family."

"We are the Lannisters. We are a family."

"What about Tyrion?!" This time Jaime's voice raised as well. "What about Margaery?"

"Don't talk about her…"

"She was his wife and you tried to kill her. She's a Lannister too."

"She is not. She is a whore who fell into our brother's bed."

"She's his wife, and he loves her, just like I love you. I would never have allowed that Tyrion tried to kill you. I would have split his head if he had? Would you think that I would tolerate that you try to kill my sister-in-law?"

"She's taking away what is ours."

"So you tried to kill her?"

"I did what no one else dared to do."

"Yes, and because of that Tyrion is gone. And your son is dead. By the gods, you tried to kill his wife. What were you expecting? That he would thank you for that?"

"No. And that's why he killed our son."

Jaime's mouth was shut for a moment before he replied. "He didn't do it, Cersei."

"He'd kill us all if he could."

"Who could blame him?"

Her brother's words were like a slap. "You would forgive everything he does."
"Since we forgive each other everything we do, I don't see why it would be any different with Tyrion."

Jaime kept walking around while Cersei looked at him with more contempt than she would have if she looked at a beggar.

"You remember," Jaime began. "Father used to tell us that the family name is all that lives on. Well, in this case, we're both going to disappear. We cannot carry on the family name. I'm a kingsguard, you're a woman. Only Tyrion can carry it. So it's probably better that we take the blame for everything. For the Stark boy, for Jon Arryn, for Eddard Stark. This way the Lannisters will not disappear. Wouldn't Father be proud of us? Sacrificing our lives so the family name may live on, so that his grandchildren can rule over Casterly Rock."

Her brother was mad, there was no doubt about it.

"You are just a fool," she said.

"Maybe, but I'm a fool who's going to protect you. The last one who's willing to. Stannis will be there within days. I'll organize the defense of the city. We still have the gold cloaks and some bannermen loyal to us in the Crownlands. We may be able to hold the walls with some luck."

He walked away but Cersei stopped him. "I didn't allow you to leave."

"And how are you going to stop me? There's no one left to obey you, Cersei. You're the queen of nothing. Just a queen."

She found herself alone. The small council table was surrounded by empty chairs. Slowly, Cersei walked to the place where she usually took place, where Joffrey should have sat had he been present to the meetings of the small council. Next to it was the chair where Tyrion used to sit. She should have killed him, put something in his wine so he would die. He drank at every meeting. Had she done this, her son would still be alive.

Jaime didn't understand that. On her side, she didn't understand how she could love such a fool. She believed at the right moment, he would stand by her side, but he didn't. He chose that little man he called a brother instead of her, the woman who came with him into the world, who preceded him in this world. She came first out of their mother's belly. He was her little brother. She was the elder, and yet he opposed her. If only she was a man.

Frenken came in at this moment. "Your Grace, I was told you were here."

"What do you want?" Cersei had no time to lose. She wanted to come to the point right away.

"I finished my examination of the king's body, your Grace. I thought you would like to know what I discovered."

"Go on."

"Well, my examination confirmed that the death was caused by the opening of the veins in the neck with a cutting object, most probably a blade. We couldn't find the weapon. The assassin must have left with it."

"Of course. Tyrion is not a fool. He wouldn't have left the dagger behind."

The maester frowned. "Your Grace believes Lord Tyrion killed the king?"
"I know he did."

The maester said nothing for some time. "I doubt it, your Grace."

"You don't know my brother. You don't know what he's capable of."

"Maybe, but I know what he's incapable of, your Grace, and Lord Tyrion couldn't have dragged the king to his bed, then forced him down on his back before he slit his throat."

"What do you mean?"

"There were marks on the body of the king, and the position and the state of his body when he died shows he wasn't sleeping. From what I can say, the king fought with his assassin, and some of the fighting happened while he was on his feet. The marks he left suggest he fought with someone wearing an armor, just like the torn bedsheets. His assailant seized him and gagged him, then dragged him to his bed where he slit his throat. This means the assassin was strong and tall enough to do it, and Lord Tyrion doesn't have the physical condition to do this."

Cersei barely listened to him. "He must have sent one of his men to do the job."

"It's too early to determine who did this, but I asked questions to the servants and the guards. Apparently, the red cloaks abandoned their station during the night. That must have been the moment when the assassin attacked. He used the deserted corridors and the confusion caused by the departure of the army to commit his crime."

"You're dismissed, maester."

"Excuse me, your Grace, but I thought you would like to know…"

"I told you to leave me alone."

She looked at him in a way to make him understand he should leave if he cared for his life. He seemed to understand as he walked away with the usual courtesies.

She left the room as well not long after and went to the Throne Room, that was empty as well. There was no one to sit on the Iron Throne. He was free. So she took it and sat in her rightful place for the first time.

That was who she was during the day. She was a queen. No, she was the queen. But for the night, she was the mother with her son, caressing his once shining hair, holding his hand, mourning him. She refused to let someone move his body. She had him bathed and dressed by the Silent Sisters, but she forbade them from doing anything more. She wouldn't have him moved into a crypt. He would stay by her side. Joffrey belonged to her, and he would stay with her. He was all that was left to her.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not going to tell you who killed Joffrey, before anyone asks. All I can tell you is that the answer to your possible question lies in the previous chapters of ARAAL.

As I said, I cannot guarantee you another chapter in two weeks, as I didn't even start to write the next one. I'm trying to finish a first original short story before, but as soon as a new chapter is ready for ARAAL, it will be uploaded.
Please review

Next chapter: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

While the army is on the move, Tyrion plans for new diplomatic moves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION XIV

"My lord, I fail to understand why we abandon the city."

"We’re not abandoning the city, Ser Addam. We are abandoning the king."

"You are my liege lord, but we all swore fealty to the king. Abandoning him in such a crucial hour is nothing less than treason. Not to mention abandoning Ser Jaime and the queen."

The mention of Cersei and Jaime was not to make Tyrion more amiable with one of his generals.

"Jaime and Cersei chose to remain with the king. He is a kingsguard and she is his mother. I couldn’t force them to abandon him." He could have, but he didn’t want to. "The king tried to kill my wife. Would you continue to serve a king who tried to murder the Lady of Casterly Rock?"

That was the story Tyrion told the officers of his army before they left tonight. It wasn’t far from the truth. Joffrey was modeled and raised by Cersei. She was the one who put him on the throne. Joffrey was as responsible for the attempt of murder on Margaery than Cersei was of Ned Stark’s death. He was done with both of them, and for good.

"Of course not, my lord. I still think we shouldn’t have left the city. We leave it open for Stannis and Robb Stark to take it."

"What would you have me do, Ser Addam? Imprison the king and my own sister? Overthrow the king like Ned Stark tried? Remember what happened to him. I don’t intend to end the same way. Anyway, Joffrey is my nephew. I cannot kill him. I won’t be branded a kinslayer."

Let Stannis do the job for us.

"I still believe it is a mistake to let Stannis seize the Iron Throne. To lose the capital is not good for the war."

"You’re a man of war, Ser Addam. I am a man of peace, without meaning any offense. Stannis will seize King’s Landing, it’s true, and he will sit on the Iron Throne, it is true as well. But he will be alone. No one supports him. His only true ally is Robb Stark and his kingdom was invaded by the Greyjoys. Robb Stark won’t stay in the south for long, and without him, Stannis can only expect support from the Riverlands, and their forces were deeply reduced at the Battle of the Golden Tooth. Against the Reach and the Westerlands, he won’t stand a chance, especially if he must protect both the capital and the Stormlands."

"We are giving him the advantage of moving, my lord. He’s the one who will choose the next battles."
"Believe me, he won’t. You never get to choose your battles when you’re alone and surrounded by enemies, unless you can turn some of your enemies into friends, something Stannis is incapable of."

"My lord..."

"I made my decision, ser. We cannot kill our king, but we’re not going to fight for him. We will deal with Stannis when the time is right, and that time has not come yet. We’re heading back to the Westerlands and we will prepare a new strategy with the Tyrells. They will fight with us now. You’re dismissed."

As Addam Marbrand left Tyrion alone in the command tent, he thought of the consequences of the decisions he took in the last hours. He abandoned half of his family to their death. He knew it. They had no chance to survive Stannis’s assault on the capital, not without his men.

Strategically speaking, it was indeed a terrible decision to abandon the city and let Stannis take the Iron Throne. However, Tyrion didn’t see what else he could do. He couldn’t kill members of his family. The only option for him was to leave. He owed it to Margaery.

It’s probably the best decision you’ve made for the past year.

That was the last words she told him. When he went to her, after paying a visit to the Hound, then to his beloved brother while he fucked their sister, he told her they were leaving King’s Landing, and that was all she said. Ever since, she didn’t speak to him further.

Tyrion had tried to talk to her today, when the army stopped in the middle of the day. He only met a cold silence. He ended up holding a monologue about the orders he sent and what the Lannister army would do. He informed her of the raven he sent to Stafford who was still besieging Riverrun. Robb Stark was still heading in that direction, if he wasn’t already there, fighting Tyrion’s men. His men, who fought for Joffrey.

Tyrion had wanted Margaery to write to her father, but when he came to the moment to ask her, he couldn’t. He didn’t feel like he could ask her anything right now. He used her and her family. He used her to protect the very people who tried to kill her, who killed her brother, and who tried to have Tyrion himself murdered. Why did he place Cersei and Joffrey before his wife?

Because they are family.

It seemed so logical for an answer, and yet so absurd. Only Jaime was worth fighting for, and even then Tyrion couldn’t find a way how he could justify his actions to his wife.

And here he was, in the command tent, while Margaery remained in her own pavilion, away from him. Their reunion after her mission in the Stormlands didn’t turn like he thought it would, far from it.

Ty came in. "My lord, Ser Barristan Selmy wishes to speak with you."

Tyrion frowned. "Ser Barristan?"

"Yes, my lord, he’s here with Ser Preston Greenfield."

How strange. Tyrion expected Cersei to send people after him, but Selmy and Greenfield? If she wanted someone to assassinate him, it was a very odd choice. Barristan Selmy would never murder a man, and Greenfield was in no way loyal to Cersei. His family was from the Westerlands, loyal to House Lannister, and the information Tyrion gathered showed he was in no way more loyal to Cersei than to him. Still, they didn’t suspect Moore much either. Then why send Selmy with him? To
reduce Tyrion’s suspicions? To stab him in the back when he expected it the least? Or could Ser Barristan have changed overnight in such a way that he could condone the assassination of the Lord of Casterly Rock? And if Joffrey gave him the order to kill him, would the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard obey?

So many questions, and Tyrion couldn’t answer them with certainty. He ordered Ty to bring them here, and to fetch its personal guard. When the two kingsguards came, Tyrion had twelve men all around the place.

Barristan Selmy looked all around the inside of the tent before he set his eyes on Tyrion. His gaze was severe. Preston Greenfield looked more uneasy.

"Lord Tyrion."

"Ser Barristan. Ser Preston."

"Your leaving surprised us all, my lord."

"You’re the one who says it." Tyrion thought of the reaction Cersei and Joffrey must have had when they saw they had no army to protect them anymore. That was a small consolation to find in all this affair.

"King Joffrey is dead."

He felt nothing. Nothing at all. For a long moment, Tyrion just stood there, motionless, feeling nothing and doing nothing. It took him some time to realize how his men were reacting. Most exchanged gazes, but others whispered among themselves.

"Can you... repeat, Ser Barristan?" Tyrion needed to be sure that he didn't mishear.

"King Joffrey is dead." Before a thousand scenarios could run wild in his head about the circumstances of his nephew’s death, Barristan Selmy enlightened him. "He was assassinated."

Silence lingered in the command tent. "Leave me alone with Ser Barristan."

It was a risk, but he had to take it. Soon, his men would start to suspect him. The king who dies the night his Hand resigns and leaves him. Few people would believe it was only a coincidence. The world might be a better place now that Joffrey was gone, but he didn't choose the best moment to die for Tyrion.

Tyrion found himself alone with the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, a Lord Commander who certainly believed he was the one behind the death of his king. He only had a dagger on him. Ser Barristan had a sword and was twice his height. He could kill Tyrion anytime. Tyrion could only count on the knight's honor to not execute him for a crime he didn't commit.

The old knight kept looking at him. His eyes showed suspicion, but also something else. Sadness? Disappointment? Regrets?

"Did you kill Joffrey?" he asked.

"No. Gods, no. I had no love for Joffrey and he had none for me. In fact, we despised each other, but he was of my blood. I would never kill someone of my family."

"Why did you really leave the capital?"
"Joffrey tried to have Lady Margaery killed. Ser Mandon Moore. He killed Ser Loras Tyrell and then tried to assassinate my wife. That's why I left. I couldn't continue to serve a king who tried to murder my wife, but I couldn't kill a member of my own family either. So I left."

Ser Barristan frowned and took a moment before he talked again. "According to what Ser Jaime told me, it was your sister who gave the order to Moore."

For a second time, Tyrion was taken by surprise tonight. "Jaime told you this?"

"Yes, and many other things."

Tyrion waved his hand to show it didn't matter. "Joffrey was raised by Cersei, and if Cersei did this, it was either with Joffrey's consent, or Joffrey didn't know but would have approved had Cersei told him. I don't see the difference. Anyway, do you think Joffrey would have done something about what Cersei did? She's his mother."

Tyrion didn't stop there. "Anyway, that's not the only reason. My wife met Catelyn Stark in the Stormlands and she found evidence that Joffrey sent an assassin to murder Brandon Stark while he visited Winterfell. This whole war is because of that cruel and stupid boy. I discovered it last night as well."

Ser Barristan seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Who found the assassin for Joffrey?"

"Sandor Clegane. See, two kingsguards involved in attempts of murder, one against my wife, the other one leading up to the actual war. All the more reason to leave the city."

Better to give him specific but well chosen information. Jaime told him about Mandon Moore, and about many other things, like the knight said. Better not to deceive Ser Barristan. Maybe Tyrion could turn him against Cersei. Maybe he already was against her, but it was better to be sure.

"Did you know that your sister killed Jon Arryn and King Robert?"

Jaime told him this as well? His brother had decided to say a lot of things to his Lord Commander after all. How much did he say? How did Jaime involve him in all this? Did he reveal how much Tyrion knew?

"I asked her if she killed Jon Arryn after Ned Stark's death. She swore it wasn't her doing. As for Robert, I raised the possibility that she could have something to do with it, but she claimed he died during the hunt because he drank too much."

He didn't lie. He didn't tell everything, but he didn't lie either.

The old knight sighed. "May I take the freedom to ask for a seat, my lord?"

"Take the one you want."

He let himself fall on the first chair he drew. He looked very tired and Tyrion suspected it was not only because of his age and the journey he made to reach them.

"I want to believe you, but I don't know who I can trust anymore."

"Then trust no one. I don't even trust myself." It might be unwise to say this, but it seemed appropriate on the moment.

"Your cousin, Ser Lancel Lannister, another of my sworn brothers, got Robert drunk so that he
would die during the hunt. And your sister did kill Jon Arryn." Why didn't it surprise Tyrion? "How could I let that happen?"

"How do you think I feel? I allowed my own wife to travel with a man that my sister sent to assassinate her, and now her brother is dead."

Ser Barristan remained in his seat for some time, then he stood up and took a determined and solemn expression. "I'm here to serve and protect King Tommen, and so does Ser Preston Greenfield."

"It's appreciated."

"Just tell me you didn't know Joffrey was going to die."

"I didn't know he was going to die that night. I expected Stannis to take the city, and I didn't expect Joffrey to have the odds in his favor, but I didn't kill him, and I sent no one to kill him."

The old knight nodded. "It's in line with your brother's words."

He wanted to ask if Jaime said anything else, but he stopped himself before it was too late. It could give ideas to the knight, and Ser Barristan may be less willing to serve him if he suspected something else could be hidden, like the identity of Tommen's real father. He may already be aware of that, but Tyrion didn't want to feed any suspicion.

"May I ask why you brought the prince with you?"

"As I told you, I didn't have much hope for Joffrey when he would face Stannis. Joffrey may be a monster, but Tommen is not. I tried to save the people in my family who could be saved." He also brought Sansa with them. She was a valuable hostage. He didn't want to see her fall in the hands of Stannis. Or Joffrey to keep playing with her.

"Do you suspect I had something to do with the attempt of murder against Lady Lannister?"

There was no malice in the gaze of Ser Barristan. Tyrion concluded that the step of suspicion was over and that now Ser Barristan wanted to convince Tyrion he had no part in this. Tyrion had known Barristan Selmy for a long time, by reputation but also by seeing him regularly in King's Landing. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was too honorable. It couldn't be an act. Wasn't it?

Tyrion tried to reconsider his previous assessment of Ser Barristan and came to the conclusion that the knight probably couldn't change within one night to the point he could become a schemer.

"I learned in the previous night that a kingsguard tried to murder the woman I love and that another participated to an attempt of assassination on a boy of ten. Now you're telling me another kingsguard, my cousin furthermore, plotted to kill the king. I'm afraid it will take some time before I can trust someone with certainty."

"I understand." He truly believed what Tyrion was saying. He was on his side.

"Let the king sleep for tonight. We'll tell him the news tomorrow in the morning. I would like you to be present when I'll talk to him."

"Of course, my lord."

Tyrion called back all the officers of his army and told them what happened with the help of Barristan Selmy. The old knight was known for his virtue and his honor. To have him by his side while he announced the news that Tommen was their new king would reduce the suspicions his men
might have that he killed Joffrey, and he could give more details about the circumstances of Joffrey's death than Tyrion could. The whole army would be informed tomorrow.

Tyrion spent some time writing messages to the most powerful houses in the Seven Kingdoms afterwards. The fact he was the one writing the letters might give the impression he was involved in Joffrey's death, but he couldn't let other people spread the news before him. His messages implicitly suggested Stannis had a hand in Joffrey's death and that Tommen would keep fighting the usurpers. Tyrion was very careful to not specify that Joffrey's enemies were fighting Joffrey. He needed to put some space between Joffrey and Tommen in people's minds. They were to understand that now they were not fighting Joffrey, the stupid Mad King, but Tommen, who was only a boy, but a boy with all the power of the Westerlands and the Reach behind him, along with the alliance of Dorne.

He then went to see someone. Someone he dreaded to visit.

He came upon Mira Forrester when he approached the tent and asked her to announce him to his wife. She looked uneasy when she told him she would. At the last minute, he added something.

"Tell her Joffrey is dead."

She had begun to walk towards the tent. The northern lady froze in movement and looked back at him. Tyrion made her understand with a simple gaze that he was serious. She recovered the best she could and entered Margaery's pavilion. He heard nothing of what was said inside. After a moment that looked like an eternity for him, she came back.

"She wants to see you."

He didn't need encouragements and walked in. She was turning her back to him, writing something at her desk. He stood there for a moment, waiting for her to look at him, or maybe he just didn't know what to say all of a sudden.

"Joffrey is dead." That was all he found to say in the end.

"I know." She didn't lift her eyes from the paper she was writing on. Was she using the method he inherited from his father: writing while talking to someone to make him feel he didn't care what that person was talking about? It such was her intent, it worked. Tyrion felt small before her, or behind her in this case, in all senses of the expression.

"We're going to hold a short ceremony tomorrow, some sort of coronation for Tommen. The army will recognize him as king." A silence followed. "Will you be there?" Another silence. "I need you."

"I'll be there," she said after a very long time.

"Thank you."

Once again, a long silence settled between them.

"What do you think of it? Of Joffrey's death?" he asked her.

"Good riddance."

"That's something we can agree on. I wonder who killed him. Probably Stannis. It wouldn't be the first time." He thought of the shadow Margaery told him about, the shadow who murdered Renly. They couldn't find Joffrey's murderer either. Was it possible that...? Then another idea crossed his mind. "You didn't do it?"
He regretted it the moment it came out. His wife stopped writing and turned to look at him. "Do you really think I could order this?"

"No, I was... I'm sorry."

They remained still, both of them. She stared at him, while Tyrion did everything he could to not meet her eyes. He forced himself to look at her.

"Tommen is not a monster. He's not Joffrey, and he's not like his mother."

If only he could explain to her. If only she could understand, but he couldn't blame her for not understanding. Her brother was dead, and he betrayed her. She had no idea how horrible he felt right now.

"I'll be there tomorrow. Leave me now."

He obeyed and walked away, feeling Margaery's gaze on his back.

He walked around the camp, two of his most trusted men following him. He couldn't take any risk, even less now that Joffrey was dead and Cersei certainly wanted him dead more than ever. He was an idiot if he believed there were no people in his army who would be willing to kill him to receive some favor from the queen.

Without realizing it, Tyrion ended before another tent, one he knew. There was a heavy guard all around it. These men were there to protect the occupant as much as to prevent her from escaping. He thought about it and made a decision. A handmaiden warned her of his presence.

Sansa Stark was waiting for him when he walked in.

"My lord."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, my lady."

"No, my lord."

Tyrion found it strange that Sansa Stark was not dressed for the night. Maybe she had trouble sleeping.

"You should sit, Lady Sansa. I have... unsettling news for you." After the girl sat and that Tyrion did the same, he didn't lose time. "Joffrey is dead."

She barely winced at the news. Her eyes betrayed her emotions, but not much else. Tyrion had learned a long time ago that the eyes were the part of the body that were the most difficult to control. Even the most experienced players of the game of thrones gave away their true nature through them. Varys was among the very few people Tyrion met who could manage to not let his eyes betray anything. The Stark girl had learned well, but she was far from being as astute as the Spider. She couldn't either hide the shiver of her lips, the small jump she tried to conceal as redressing.

"My lord. I don't understand. How is that possible?" she stammered.

"Joffrey, the man you were supposed to marry, is dead. I suppose it is quite... unexpected for you."

"Yes, my lord. How did he die?"

"I don't have all the details, but it seems he was assassinated, in his sleep."
"It's a terrible day for the Realm." She didn't believe her own words. And her eyes betrayed her joy. Tyrion wasn't going to blame her. He himself felt some joy and a certain relief at the thought that Joffrey was gone. Margaery wasn't wrong. *Good riddance.*

"Yes, indeed, a terrible day, but we won't have much time to grieve. We're at war, and we have a new king now."

"Long may he reign."

"Yes, long may he reign." He meant it. For Tommen, he meant it. Seeing Joffrey dead left him indifferent somehow, but if Tommen was to die... No, Tyrion wouldn't allow it. "Do you want to go home, my lady?"

She was obviously taken aback by his proposition. "Home?"

"Yes, home. Well, right now it's being surrounded by the Ironborn, but once this conflict is over your family could get it back. I may not have phrased the question well enough. Do you want to go back to your family?"

"My family are traitors," she said with a voice that missed all emotion and color.

"Of course, they are, but do they need to be traitors? Is there a point to it anymore? Let's be serious, my lady. Joffrey killed your father. That's why your brother is fighting us. Joffrey is dead. Is there any reason left for fighting? Does your family have anything against Tommen? Any reason she would want him dead? He's the king now, not Joffrey."

"My family shouldn't fight you."

Tyrion grimaced. She wouldn't say anything that could compromise her. "Lady Sansa, after you left Winterfell, were you aware that someone tried to kill your brother Bran? The assassin was sent by Joffrey. It was the Hound who told me before we left. He hired the assassin for Joffrey. And my dear nephew sent someone to murder my wife as well, a someone who killed Loras Tyrell. We all suffered from Joffrey. Starks, Lannisters, Tyrells, we all suffered because of him. This war is not about my family and yours. It's about Joffrey, who killed your father, and who tried to kill his son. He started this war, and I protected him like a fool because he was my nephew. And because of that, we fought each other, all that for a spoiled boy who believed he could kill whoever he wanted because he had a crown on his head. Don't you think we should end this bloodshed before more people die?"

"I think I don't want anyone to die, and I don't want anyone to rebel against the king."

"Then we agree. So, I ask you again, do you want to go back to your family?"

"If that can help to persuade them to abandon the war, and to swear fealty to King Tommen, then yes, I want to be with them again."

He smiled. The Stark girl learned quickly. She might indeed survive them all.

"I will start negotiations with Robb Stark soon enough. If he can see reason and stop the fighting, I'll send you back to your family. Hopefully, it won't take long. In the meantime, you'll stay at Casterly Rock. I think you'll find the place more pleasant than King's Landing."

"I thank you, my lord. You're very kind."

Yes, he was the soul of kindness. She should ask her opinion to Margaery about it. She would tell
her about his true nature.

"I wish you a good night, my lady."

Tyrion left Sansa Stark and went back to his personal pavilion. He didn't sleep of the night, still trying to see how he could use Joffrey's death in the best possible way. It opened an opportunity to cease hostilities with Robb Stark, but there was still Stannis to deal with. If Tyrion could manage to cut him from his allies, then Stannis wouldn't stand a chance against the Tyrells and the Lannisters. That was if the Tyrells remained at his side. Dorne would probably not step into the conflict. They would wait and see, like always. The Vale was still inactive, and although Lysa Arryn had no reason to fight for Tommen, she had no reason to fight for Stannis either. The Riverlands were weakened and would follow the Starks.

The Starks were the key piece on the board. Without them, Stannis couldn't win this war, at least not in the short term. Stannis was stubborn and determined enough to lead a war for years and years, for sure, and he was among the best military commanders of Westeros, but he could be defeated, even more so if he didn't have allies. Tyrion needed to get the Starks out of Stannis's supporters. and he had to keep the Tyrells among Tommen's supporters. He knew what that meant: keeping Margaery on his side. But this time, he wouldn't use her. He had a new king to defend, a king who deserved to be protected. and he also had a wife who deserved better than what he gave her these last months.

In the morning, she stood by his side while Tommen was presented to the troops. They had no crown, but it didn't matter. All recognized Tommen as their king, with Tyrion as Regent until he came of age and Ser Barristan Selmy as Lord Commander of his Kingsguard. Margaery voiced her fealty as well, though without enthusiasm. She didn't hold Tyrion's hand, but the fact she was present gave hope to Tyrion. All wasn't lost.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, Joffrey's death may have important consequences on the war, but not necessarily those Tyrion hopes for.

Please review

Next chapter: Jon
Chapter Notes

Sorry for being late. I was very busy with the Holidays.

Jon gets in trouble.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON VIII

The sound of clashing swords dominated the fields around him. The gaps of silence were filled with human cries, hooves and neighs of horses. With one last effort, Jon hit his opponent’s hand, making him drop his sword. Another strike and the knight tumbled off his mount to the ground.

All around there was only chaos. Robb’s horsemen fought red knights. These men were suited just like those Jon sparred with in the training grounds of Casterly Rock not long ago. Maybe he patrolled through the Westerlands with some of them.

He didn’t have time to think about it further for he rushed towards another opponent. Their short duel came at a draw for other men from both sides came upon them, forcing the two to change the enemy they engaged. Jon nonetheless had time to notice the long blond hair under his helmet.

Jon fought many men with red armors this day. Some fell to his knees and died, others survived. He couldn’t remember all details of the battle. What he knew is that the losses were heavy on both sides. His brother’s cavalry was forced to fall back when an infantry of red cloaks charged them. Their own infantry arrived just in time to balance the forces, charging the flank of the enemy... only to be charged on the flank as well. The knights of House Lannister stopped Jon and his fellow horsemen from attacking their troops from behind and Jon found himself stuck into another melee of cavalrymen.

Not far away, the Tullys were attempting a sortie from Riverrun, and the sortie failed. The Northerners were repelled. In the end, Robb had no choice but to call the retreat.

As Jon rode away from the battleground, he looked behind just in time to see one of the knights remove his helmet, shaking his head to reveal yellow hair falling on his shoulders and a beard of the same color. Daven Lannister looked at him, raised his sword then rode back to his encampment as well.

It happened a few hours ago. For the second time since the beginning of this war, Jon fought the people he lived with for months. Now he was inside Robb’s command tent, looking outside at the pouring rain that started right after the battle ended. This was not going to make freeing Riverrun easier. Their first attempt had failed, and now that the Lannisters knew they were here, they couldn’t count on the advantage of surprise anymore.

"We’ve lost the element of surprise." Rose Bolton echoed his thoughts. "And with this rain, I don’t expect we will be able to defeat the Lannisters tomorrow. The state of the land will not allow us to launch a decisive assault."
"A little rain will not stop the Northerners," the Greatjon declared.

"Probably not, but it will slow us down enough for the Lannisters to resist any attack, especially now that they are prepared. We should have been more careful in our advance."

"The Lannisters knew we were coming. Our men were harassed all along the way to Riverrun. A large part of the lands were devastated. They knew we would come to Riverrun and they prepared for that. We didn’t move quickly enough," Ser Wylis concluded.

"There’s no point in discussing the past. We must worry about tomorrow and the days that will follow. This battle is not over. I will not give up on Riverrun." Robb declared.

"Our men need rest. Let’s use this rain to our advantage. We can fortify our positions while it lasts then send another assault when the time is ripe and they are ready," the Lord of the Dreadfort suggested.

"What if the Lannisters take Riverrun in the meantime, while we are busy digging trenches and putting up wooden walls?" Lady Mormont asked.

"I doubt they will be able to take Riverrun tomorrow if they couldn’t take it in the previous weeks. Lord Hoster certainly has enough men and provisions to last for years."

"What do you think, Jon? You spent time with the Lannisters. You met Ser Stafford. What do you think his next move will be?"

As soon as his brother said his name, the heads of the most powerful lords in the North turned to him. He fought two battles with their men and earned their respect, although he could still feel the disdain some felt due to his bastard origins, and the hatred Lord Karstark had for him since he freed the man who killed his son in battle.

"It’s not Ser Stafford we must worry about, but his son, Ser Daven. He’s the one commanding their troops for real. I saw him on the battlefield today, leading their cavalry. He’s the one who pushed us back. I don’t know what his plans are, but we can be sure that he’ll be waiting for us. Though I don’t see how he could take Riverrun right now. The Tullys must have damaged some of his siege engines if the Lannisters had any when they made their sortie."

Jon hoped that the Lannisters couldn’t take Riverrun as much as he believed it. Most of the lords seemed satisfied with his answer. It was still difficult for Jon to look into the eyes of these men and speak to them as equals.

"We will not fight tonight, that’s for sure. Lord Bolton is right, our men are tired and many are wounded. Let them rest and heal. Tomorrow we will decide what to do. We cannot allow recent events to urge us into inconsiderate attacks. Today’s events showed the consequences of it. The priority is to free Riverrun, not to free it quickly. You may dispose."

All the lords left them alone at Robb's command. Jon's brother was looking down on the map. Slowly, his hand crawled over the table to the tiny piece of parchment he refused to get rid of since they received it.

"They’ll be free, soon."

Jon didn’t know if he was trying to convince Robb or to convince himself. The only news they had from Winterfell came from Ramsay Snow, Lord Bolton’s natural son. People would soon begin to say that the Lord of Winterfell put all his hopes in the hands of bastards. His bastard brother rode by his side and took part to his war councils, and the bastard son of one of his lords led the siege to free
Winterfell.

When Robb sent a message to Ramsay to spare all the Ironborn if they surrendered peacefully except for Theon, Lord Bolton said he expected Theon’s men to turn on him, maybe even to kill him. Jon wouldn’t be bothered too much if that happened, but Robb wanted Theon to be kept prisoner until he came back in the North and executed him.

Ramsay couldn’t tell them if Bran and Rickon were alive. Ser Rodrik Cassel was dead for sure. They hung his body on the battlements of Winterfell for everyone to see, along with with his head on a spike. Jon wished their father had never taken Theon for a ward. What he did was betrayal, treason. Robb sent him to the Iron Islands to negotiate an alliance with Balon Greyjoy, and Theon came back to seize the castle where he grew up with them, taking Bran and Rickon as hostages in the process. If anything happened to them...

Jon understood Robb for wanting to kill Theon himself. Above all questions of justice, he wanted to kill Theon with his own hands as well.

"Do you think Theon killed them?" Robb asked him.

Jon took a very long time before he managed to answer. "He can’t have done this."

"I’m telling myself the same thing over and over again, Jon. But Theon already betrayed us, and we both know what the Ironmen are capable of."

"He wouldn’t go that far. Wouldn’t he?"

"I wish I could be sure of it."

"Me too," Jon finally replied. He tried to divert the subject. "Any news from Lady Stark?"

"None yet. We know for a certainty she left Dragonstone with King Stannis from her last message. And then there’s this message from Lady Lannister, claiming she’s riding with her and that she’s safe, pretending she will come back as soon as possible. How can we believe her? The Lannisters are very good at lying."

Indeed, they were. A small part of Jon’s mind was telling him they were not all liars. He thought of his discussion with Mira, before the Battle of the Kingsroad. Because of her declarations, some of the men started to claim the Forresters could not be trusted. That was not something Rodrik and Lord Gregor deserved, nor the people who followed them from Ironrath. Mira should have thought about the consequences of her words before she spoke so harshly before the lords of the North.

"Is there anything we can do for her? Is there a way to find Lady Stark?" Jon asked, trying to help. He didn’t care very much for Lady Stark, at least not on a personal level, no more than he cared for Lord Karstark or Lord Glover. He only cared for her as the Lady of Winterfell. But she was Robb’s mother and he didn’t want his brother to face more griefs than he already did.

"No. I’m afraid all we can do is wait. And pray."

Pray, indeed. He remembered the way Mira used to pray, sitting on her knees, the light of torches in the godswood of Casterly Rock making her almost black hair shine. Was she praying for Lady Stark right now, as the night was falling on them, or did she pray for Margaery Lannister? Did she even pray to the Old Gods? Perhaps she was praying to the Seven.

It kept raining. Jon saw the few men daring to fare outside hurrying to find cover or hugging with their comrades in the nearby watching post. Rain was hitting hard, making sounds that mimicked
hammer blows against nails, while a lighting cleared the dark skies and the ground all alike. A few seconds later, thunder burst and echoed through the camp. Why was the sound always following the sight?

"You really think they can’t take Riverrun?"

"I don’t see how they could," Jon said.

Though he had to admit Daven could have a few tricks in his sleeve. After all, he could come to the same conclusions than they did. He could guess they wouldn’t attack again. Their encampment was some distance from his father’s army and he could try to use the darkness and the element of surprise to seize Riverrun. Robb had tried the surprise on the Lannisters, why wouldn’t Daven use it against the Tullys. They may not be expecting an assault on their walls. Their father used to say no fortress was impossible to take. Two Red Kings of the Dreadfort took Winterfell and burned it to the ground, and Winterfell was stronger than Riverrun in some aspects.

They couldn’t take Riverrun. Jon and Robb couldn’t allow it. Arya was there.

They sent her to Riverrun after Mira brought her back and now she was there, imprisoned inside a surrounded castle, and Robb and Jon failed to free her.

Jon supposed he shouldn’t be so dramatic. Arya proved she could look after herself. She survived Harrenhal and escaped, with the sole help of Mira. She had thousands of men standing between her and Daven’s troops. And even if they got to her... Jon hoped he hadn’t been wrong about Daven, and that he would make sure nothing came upon Arya. He wasn’t Joffrey, after all.

Unless of course Arya tried to stick him with the pointy end. That brought a smile back to Jon.

He and Robb remained in the command pavilion, short exchange of words being followed by heavy silences, disrupted by the sound and light of the storm raging outside. The discussion wandered until it came to Teron Hill.

"You shouldn’t have released him," Robb told him.

"Lord Karstark wanted his head."

"I wasn’t going to give it to him."

Jon hesitated before he replied. "Teron is not a bad person. He just happened to be on the wrong side. If he was born in the North, he would have been among your best soldiers."

"Maybe, Jon. I didn’t know him as well as you did, but he was not in our army. He was an enemy, and you let him go."

"I made him swear to not return to the Lannisters."

"Do you think he will keep his promise?" Robb seemed curious more than he was skeptical.

"He’s a friend of mine. He will remain true to his word."

Robb looked down. "Try to explain that to Lord Karstark."

Jon’s shoulders dropped. "I’m sorry. I should have talked about this with you before."

"Yes, you should have. I already get a lot of problems from the Lannisters, Jon. I don’t need my own bannermen to give me problems as well. At least, no more than they already do," Robb said with a
"Do you wish me to speak with Lord Karstark?"

"No. We discussed about it. I told him it was your right to release that knight. He wasn’t pleased, but
he didn’t go farther than words. And like mother says, words are winds."

As he said it, the wind got stronger outside, the flaps of the tent almost opening full.

"I better go. I’m on first patrol tomorrow."

"Have a good night, Jon."

A good night, Jon didn’t have. The storm didn’t calm down. At some point, he was taken out of bed
by a guard who told him they had problems keeping the horses still and the tents planted. As a result,
by the time morning came, Jon and most of the people inside the camp were still working.

By then, the storm receded, but not the rain. It kept pouring at a relentless pace. It was a good thing
that Robb positioned their camp on a hill and not in the valley below, for there were places where
small lakes had formed and climbed to a man’s knee.

The wall erected by the heavy rain prevented them from seeing farther than down the hill. They had
no view on the Lannister camp and couldn’t distinguish Riverrun. Jon led a scouting party. They
needed almost an hour in the water, sliding on wet grass and getting stuck into mud, before they
could glimpse the towers of the Tully castle. As soon as they did, a group of Lannister cavalry fell
upon them. Jon lost two of his men. A little less than an hour was necessary to come back to camp
and report the events. Robb was with Lord Karstark and Lord Bolton, probably the two last men he
wanted to spend time with.

"Seems like you fell into the same trap than we did, boy," Richard Karstark said. "My men and I had
the same problem. We saw the towers of the castle and the next moment Lannisters fell upon us.
They caught one of my men."

"It seems like Ser Stafford and his son are making sure we don’t take them by surprise again," Roose
Bolton noted.

"If they can find us so easily, that means their horsemen are probably all patrolling. I say we send all
our cavalry and give these bastards a lesson."

"What if they set another trap?" Jon intervened. He couldn’t let the northern lords take such a risk. "I
saw Daven set up traps for the bandits who set traps on smallfolk and merchants in the Westerlands.
He’s good at this. If we come with the full cavalry, you can be sure he will be ready. Anyway, we
see nothing with that rain."

"Neither they do. We can set a trap of our own and surround them before they can realize it if we
work carefully."

"Such a plan would be unwise, my lord," Roose Bolton declared. "The Lannisters need to defend
their siege positions near Riverrun’s walls. Setting a trap for them would be a loss of time at best.
They won’t waste resources trying to attack us in this rain. All they do is probably defend their
positions and we cannot take them in our actual state and with this weather. The best use of our time
is to heal our men and fortify our own positions to be ready when the sky will be cleared."

"You are too cautious, Lord Bolton."
"Maybe, but I’m still alive."

"So am I."

"Can the same be told about your son?"

The Lord of the Dreadfort had said it with a placid voice and an indifferent expression, but Rickard Karstark was fuming. Robb stepped in before it went too far.

"We need more information about the Lannisters. Lord Karstark, Lord Bolton, tell your men to keep patrolling. We must watch the Lannisters the best we can. But tell them to be careful and to fall back the moment the Lannisters are falling on them. I don’t want to lose any more men today."

Robb did lose other men on this day, five more before the sun set down, and the rain didn’t quiet down. The following day was no better. The storms were back, and a lighting struck their encampment situated on a hill. Five men died, several more were injured. The patrols kept going out and returning without having been able to see anything of matter, most of the time after spotting Lannister cavalrymen higher in number than they were or after being ambushed by these same cavalrymen. They lost six more men to them.

The third day saw the disappearance of storm, but the rain remained just as strong. During dinner, the lords told each other that winter was indeed coming, for the rains of autumn hit them hard in the face, in all senses of the term. Eight more horsemen were lost that day.

On the fourth day, the rain calmed down. It was still there, but far weaker than during the previous days. You could see more than a few feet ahead of you. Despite the fact you couldn’t get outside without being completely wet, the morale of men got better. The camp’s fortifications were well established now, and Robb increased the patrols. Jon found himself riding next to Torrhen Karstark, the second son of Lord Rickard Karstark and now the heir to Karhold following his brother’s death.

They rode quietly, their mounts advancing slowly but ready to react to any aggression.

"I hope you don’t think I’m going to kill you, bastard."

The remark was unexpected. "I suppose it means you would like to see me dead."

"My father certainly would."

"What about you?"

The heir to Karhold didn’t respond immediately. "You’re a fair warrior, and I know you killed more than your share of Lannisters on the Kingsroad and here. I would rather keep you in our ranks and alive than try to kill you and let you defect to the Lannisters."

"I would never do such a thing."

Torrhen shrugged. "So you say. Maybe, maybe not. I cannot know. Who knows, with bastards? What is stopping you from riding to the other side and laying your sword at Joffrey’s feet, if he was to grant you Winterfell? Quite an improvement from your bastard status, wouldn’t you say?"

"I would never betray Robb. He’s my brother."

"Half-brother. Harrion, on the other hand, was my brother, and you let the man who killed him escape. What’s telling me you didn’t leave him a message for the Lannisters? Our battle plans? Our strategy? Our weaknesses? Maybe that’s how they knew we were coming and how to deal with our
"Are you accusing me of treason?"

Torrhen Karstark looked straight into his eyes. "No, because Lord Stark would never believe it. At least, not without proofs. But it wouldn’t surprise me that you’re a traitor, and if I ever find out anything to prove it, be sure that I’ll kill you and present a traitor’s head to your brother. Consider yourself warned, bastard."

Jon moved his mount away from Torrhen. Did he believe he was a traitor only because he was a bastard? Or would he think anyone who set free a prisoner was a traitor? Was he the only one to think so? Jon discreetly looked around him. The men who followed them didn’t seem to be watching him closely. Still, he felt he would need to be more careful in the future.

The towers of Riverrun became visible very quickly, and they grew as their group moved forward. And then they came, a group of riders.

"Ready, boys!"

All men unsheathed their swords the moment they heard Torrhen’s command, but they realized pretty quickly that something was wrong. The horsemen riding to them were carrying a standard, and this standard was blue. As they approached further, a trout became visible on it.

"Don’t attack. They’re friendly," Jon ordered before they did something they would regret, though he wondered how these men could get out of Riverrun. Did Edmure Tully manage to defeat Ser Stafford’s army?

They were about twenty men, all clad in blue, and they stopped when they arrived at the level of Jon and his comrades.

"You are Lord Stark’s men?"

The heir to Karhold was the one to reply before Jon could. "Aye. My name is Torrhen, of House Karstark. Who are you?"

"Ser Vance, of House Chambers. We have..."

He didn’t have time to complete his sentence for a rain fell upon them. Not a rain of water like before. A rain of arrows. Torrhen took one in his arm, and Jon struggled to keep his horse calm.

They came from the woods, men in rusted armor, a few with swords, but others with lances and maces and slingshots. Jon managed to deflect the lance that came for his horse and to cut his assailant’s hand.

"My lord!"

Over the melee, he heard the cry very distinctly. Jon barely had time to engage another foe before they all fled into the forest, covering their escape with arrows and stones thrown at them from the woods.

When Jon looked back at his companions, he saw that ten were lying on the ground, injured or dead. One of them had three arrows in his body, including one in the neck. He was Torrhen Karstark.

Chapter End Notes
As you can see, problems are beginning for the Stark army.

Please review

Next chapter: Catelyn
Catelyn VI

Chapter Notes

Catelyn tries to hold her end of the bargain with Margaery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CATELYN VI

The gates of Riverrun opened wide for her. Her cloak was drenched and so she was. Brienne rode at her side, now her sworn shield. She didn’t look better. But Catelyn was home, and her home was free.

On their way, they fell upon a patrol near Harrenhal who told them of the siege of Riverrun. And then news came that the castle was saved and the Lannisters were gone. Catelyn rode immediately, escorted by Brienne and a group of men led by a knight in service to House Dustin.

Inside the courtyard, some of the people she cared the most for in this world were waiting for her.

"Hi, Catelyn," Edmure told her at once. "I’m glad to see you. We were beginning to fear the worst."

"The worst is what I always expect now." She turned to Ser Brynden Tully, the Blackfish, her uncle. Despite being old by all standards, he was taller and better built than his nephew, who would soon become Lord of Riverrun. Not that the Blackfish resented Edmure for that. He never wanted to be Lord of Riverrun.

"Why didn’t you tell me?" she asked as they shared a deep embrace.

"It was hard to get a raven to you, and his state got worse all of a sudden."

She withheld her tears. They would be for later, when she would be with her lord father. For now, there were two other people she needed to take care of.

In the little span of time she was away, Robb seemed to have gotten ten years older. The change was not mostly physical. He had scars earned from battles on him now, but above everything else it was his behavior. He looked more like his father than he ever did before. His face was hard, but she soon realized that just like her husband, he needed to look tough in front of his men. His eyes just showed relief to see her again.

"Welcome home, Mother."

She embraced him as well, then turned to the one person that made her arrival to Riverrun in the time of her father’s decline less tragic. Arya threw her arms around her as soon as Robb released her.

When they separated, Catelyn realized that her youngest daughter had grown in her behavior just like Robb, and just like she didn’t only grow up physically. She noticed blisters on her hands, and she had a short sword at her belt. Her face was harder, and there were marks showing that she endured great challenges. Jon Snow was right behind her and he stood where he was. Catelyn looked at him but nothing more.
"We have many things to discuss, Mother," her son started, "but it can wait if you wish to see our grandfather first."

It would be so easy to give in, to just run to her father’s chambers and see him, see how horribly the illness was taking him, to escape the world of war and just focus on family. But war couldn’t be ignored, and her whole family needed her, not just her lord father.

And so they ended up in her brother’s solar, telling each other what happened, Arya about the events of King’s Landing and how she escaped, Catelyn about the events in the Stormlands and her escape from Renly’s encampment and her journey of return. Aside from the tale of the shadow with the face of Stannis Baratheon who killed Lord Renly right in front of her, a tale that Lady Brienne confirmed, the fact that caused the most reactions were Lady Lannister’s revelations about Bran’s attempt of murder.

"So it would be Joffrey who tried to kill Bran?" Robb asked, not looking very surprised.

"Lady Lannister seemed to think so," she replied.

"How do we know she’s not lying to cover her own involvement?" Edmure asked.

"You have a point, uncle," Robb said. "It’s easy to blame the dead."

All seemed to agree.

"What do you mean, the dead?" Catelyn asked.

They all looked at her. "You haven’t heard the news?" her uncle Brynden asked her.

"The raven arrived days ago. We thought you’d hear about it," her brother said.

"Hear what?"

"Joffrey is dead. Tyrion Lannister must have sent ravens through all the Seven Kingdoms about it. Joffrey would have been found dead in his chambers on a morning. They blame Stannis."

As Robb’s words were spoken, a feeling of relief went through Catelyn. Joffrey Baratheon was dead. The boy who had her husband murdered was gone. Everyone advised him to spare Ned Stark, but he didn’t listen. He ordered his execution on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. Justice was done. That monster got what he deserved. That was all she could think as the words of Margaery Lannister resonated within her mind.

"If Joffrey is dead..." She began to whisper, then her voice got strong enough to be heard. "If Joffrey is dead, then your father is avenged."

Her son didn’t react, nor did Jon Snow, but Arya seemed relieved as well, even... satisfied. Proud.

"It’s not over yet," her son declared. "We’ve received word from Stannis. He sent it after the Battle of the Kingsroad, but the message got lost. He wants us to march on King’s Landing and assist him in its taking. He’s not happy that we allowed most of Ser Kevan’s army to retreat to the capital."

"That’s not surprising. He wanted us to keep the Lannisters into the Riverlands so he could seize the Iron Throne, not to send them back to the city where they could defend it," the Blackfish commented.

"We’re heading tomorrow, at forced march. I’ll leave half my men with you, uncle Edmure, to help
you defend the Riverlands. The Lannisters may be retreating to the Golden Tooth, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it is a trap."

"You’re leaving, already?" She knew it was the king’s orders, and they had to obey him, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that it was a mistake, moreover now that Joffrey was gone.

"These are Stannis’ orders," Robb replied grimly. He didn’t seem more enthusiastic than her to the idea of marching on the capital.

"What about Bran and Rickon?"

For a long time, no one dared to speak. "Lord Bolton’s son is taking care of it. Winterfell will be free soon, and so will Bran and Rickon."

Will they? She didn’t dare to ask the question, but she looked into the eyes of her son, then her brother and her uncle. All had the same expression, the one that meant they didn’t know what would happen.

"My lords, if you would allow me..."

Everyone turned to look at Brienne. She had stayed silent the whole meeting, only confirming Catelyn’s story about Lord Renly’s death. She hesitated a moment before the army of eyes pointed on her, then she spoke again.

"I would not obey Stannis Baratheon if I were you."

Robb started at her. "Lady Brienne, you served Renly Baratheon. You were part of his Kingsguard and it is your right to mourn him. You can estimate yourself lucky that you protected my mother and that you are at her service. In other circumstances, I would have put you under arrest for treason. But your fate lies in Stannis’ hands. He is our king. If you hope to live..."

"Lord Stannis murdered his brother."

"Be careful, my lady."

"I know what I saw, my lord."

"Aye, and what do you claim you saw? A shadow! You want me to believe it?"

"I’m not lying."

"Forgive me, Lady Brienne, but it is hard to believe such a tale."

Brienne of Tarth was speechless, but Catelyn didn’t let the silence linger for long.

"I saw it as well, Robb. She’s not lying." She could not let the others believe Brienne was lying. She already went through enough ordeals and faced more than enough problems. Catelyn would not let Robb add more to them.

Her son looked at her with an intense look. "Are you sure? You saw a shadow kill Renly Baratheon?"

"I did. And it did have the face of Stannis," she added.

She wouldn’t have Brienne branded a liar when she was telling the truth, no matter what her own family might think of her.
"I’ve met your father, Lady Brienne, a long time ago. He’s a good man, brave and honorable." Ser Brynden Tully turned to Robb. "I cannot speak for the lady’s honor, my lord, and I cannot claim I trust her. She was present when the king she swore to serve was killed and failed to protect him. She also found herself guilty of treason when she joined Lord Renly against Stannis."

"I did it because I believed in Renly. He was a good man."

"That didn’t give him the right to usurp his brother’s crown, my lady. By all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms, he is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, no matter what you say."

"Renly would have made a better king than Stannis."

"Maybe, but we do not choose our king because we like him or not, nor because he is a good king or a cruel king. Whether we like or not, that’s the way it works. I didn’t like serving under the Mad King, but I did nonetheless, and so should you have. But we’re not here to talk about this." He looked at Catelyn, then to Robb again. "But as much as I mistrust this woman, I trust your mother, and you should trust her too. If she says that a shadow with the face of Stannis killed his brother, then so be it, that’s what happened."

Robb sustained the stare of the Blackfish, then turned to look at an uncertain Edmure. Catelyn’s brother didn’t believe her, it was plain to see. When Robb turned to Arya and Jon, they both nodded, Arya the first. He finally looked back at her.

"I believe you. Both of you. But Stannis is the king. I have to obey him, and his orders are to march on King’s Landing."

"Wait a minute." It was Jon Snow who intervened and who spoke to Brienne. He first looked at Catelyn, but finally it was the tall lady he addressed. "My lady, that shadow who killed Renly Baratheon... you said it just appeared in his command tent, out of nowhere?"

"I don’t know for certain, my lord." She mistook Ned’s boy for a lord, probably for Robb’s legitimate brother. Catelyn would tell her later that the boy was no lord and only a bastard. "It got past the guards and took us all by surprise. The men outside didn’t see it coming. It seemed to have... crept on the ground, unseen."

Jon Snow looked thoughtful. He turned to her son. "Robb, you remember what Lord Tyrion wrote in his message? That Joffrey was assassinated in his sleep, while he was inside the Red Keep."

"You think it was another shadow?" Brienne asked, a look of utter terror on her face. For a moment, Catelyn shared her feelings. She had seen this thing as well, whatever it was. To think that Stannis had used it again... that he might use it again in the future. It sent a chill along her spine.

"The message didn’t say he was killed in the Red Keep, boy," Edmure corrected. "Tyrion Lannister only said his nephew was killed by Stannis while he was sleeping, nothing more."

"If he was sleeping, then he was probably inside the Red Keep. It means that someone managed to enter the Red Keep to kill him," Arya countered.

"Or one of his own men who betrayed him. As far as we know, the Imp could be behind this," Robb supposed.

"Tyrion Lannister would kill his own nephew?" Catelyn asked, not believing this.

Catelyn didn’t imagine the Imp murdering his nephew. Kinslaying was just as horrible as incest. Though his brother and sister laid together, and he defended them. But why assassinate the nephew
he did so much to protect up to now? Unless Lord Tyrion chose to kill Joffrey after he learned of his actions in Winterfell. Perhaps Lady Margaery was right and her husband ignored all of his nephew’s crimes. But then, he protected his own sister despite the fact she tried to have him assassinated. Unless Tyrion Lannister was just like his father and decided Joffrey was too much trouble now.

"Who knows? Maybe he thought Tommen would make a king easier to control."

Robb had just said the words she thought.

"Robb, you don’t believe that for real," his bastard brother said.

"I don’t know what to believe, Jon, but I know who I shouldn’t believe, and I know I must not believe the Imp."

"Stannis murdered his brother," Catelyn heard herself say in a low voice. "What would stop him from killing his nephew?"

"Joffrey is a bastard born of incest," her uncle opposed. "Though I must admit that gives Stannis even more reason to kill Joffrey. I don’t think he would oppose sending an assassin after him, if need be, but we’re not going to believe shadows and magic are behind everyone’s death."

Robb raised his hand. When he spoke it was softly, but with authority. "Enough. No matter how Joffrey is dead, Stannis remains the rightful king. We must help him secure the Iron Throne. That’s our duty."

"Is it?"

All eyes set on Catelyn after she pronounced these short two words. Robb was taken aback.

"Mother?"

She stood up to be at the same level than her son and so he would not look down on her. She had to look straight into his eyes. "We went to war to avenge your father. Joffrey is dead. The man who killed him is gone. Do we really need to continue this war, especially now that the Iron Islands have invaded the North and seized our home?"

She looked deeply into his eyes, begging him. She had already lost her husband to the southern politics. She didn’t want to lose her children.

"The war is not over yet," he replied, gentle but firm like his father. "Stannis still needs us to defeat the Lannisters and their allies."

"What about your family? Sansa is still hostage in King’s Landing."

"We will rescue her when we take the capital."

"What if they kill her before? And what about Bran and Rickon? The Ironmen have them."

"Ramsay Snow is besieging Winterfell as we speak. If they are still alive, he will find them. I know it’s hard, Mother, but we won’t save Bran and Rickon by marching north. Roose Bolton’s son will have dealt with Theon and his friends long before we arrive. As for Sansa, we will not save her by retreating."

"What if you offer the Lannisters a truce against Sansa’s return?"

"They will never accept it."
"Then tell them you will stop fighting them if they give Sansa back."

"I cannot do that, Mother." The son was gone. Robb now spoke and behaved like the Lord of Winterfell. "I have a duty to serve Stannis, to serve the king, to answer his call, to obey him."

"What about your duties to your family?"

She saw that Edmure and their uncle grew uncomfortable, and so did Jon Snow.

"Disobeying Stannis would be high treason."

He wouldn’t be moved. Catelyn’s house words were Family, Duty, Honor. Family came first. But for House Stark, Winter is coming. Robb wouldn’t sacrifice his loyalty to the king, not even if he could save Sansa, Bran and Rickon. His duties of lord were more important right now.

"What about the North? How many castles have fallen to Balon Greyjoy and his son? Will you place Stannis’ interests before those of your countrymen, of your own people?"

"Catelyn, you cannot talk like this. If you go north..."

Her dear uncle was stopped by her son. "I can reply on my own, Ser Brynden. You know I cannot disobey Stannis, Mother. Yes, if I could I would go back in the North, but I can’t. Joffrey is dead, but his family is still alive, and they will want to avenge him. If we abandon Stannis, the Lannisters will defeat him. We are all bound by oath to serve him. He’s our king, Robert’s rightful heir. Stannis is our best hope to deal with the Lannisters once and for all and to make sure they do not seek revenge after us. We need him as much as he needs us. If I go back north now, yes, I will free our home from the Ironmen, but this will give the Lannisters the opportunity to defeat Stannis, and once he’s defeated, they will attack us. Nothing will stop them with Stannis and Renly gone. They could even make an alliance with the Greyjoys for what we know."

"What if Stannis is not the king? What if we’re fighting for the wrong side?"

"Cat, be careful. What you’re talking about is treason," Edmure warned her.

"I think we are all traitors here. We all rebelled against one king or another. Stannis only has the Stormlands by his side, nothing more. He can do nothing against the Greyjoys. Tommen has the fleets of Lannisport, Oldtown and the Arbor with him. He can deal with the Ironborn."

"That’s enough, Mother," Robb said.

"You only have Stannis’ word that Joffrey and his siblings were not Robert’s children. He has no proof. He just killed his own brother. What if you’re fighting for the usurper?"

"I said it was enough."

This time Catelyn felt that this was truly the end. She would not convince him to make peace with the Lannisters, even less to make an alliance with them, even it could free the North from Balon Greyjoy. She failed. Sansa would remain hostage in King’s Landing, and the fate of Bran and Rickon depended on Roose Bolton’s bastard. Robb’s expression told clearly that he would not listen to her anymore.

"Uncle, perhaps you should show Cat to our father’s solar. I suppose she will want to see him."

Catelyn read through her brother’s words. He wanted her to leave.
"Arya, maybe you could accompany Mother," Robb added for her youngest daughter.

"Aye," she replied shortly.

Ser Brynden Tully led his niece out of the room with her daughter and Brienne. They were not a few paces on their way that Arya jumped in the melee.

"You really want Robb to make peace with the Lannisters?"

"You are back with us, Arya. You are safe. But your sister Sansa and your brothers are not. If making peace with our enemies bring back your sister and your brothers, then yes, I would do it."

"Cersei had Father executed," her daughter said. "I was there. She was the one to arrest him."

"I know, Arya. I know."

Arya was obviously angry, and she fell behind where she began to talk with Brienne. Catelyn wished she could explain it better, make her understand why it was necessary to make peace with the people who killed her father, but she didn't see how.

"I understand why you want this war to end, Cat," her uncle said, low enough for Arya and Brienne to not hear them. "But you know we cannot end it, not right now. I know you do."

Of course, she did. Catelyn was not stupid. Despite her attempt, she knew peace was not possible at this moment. Perhaps if the Lannisters were defeated, then the Tyrells would surrender and they could all go back in the North. They did surrender after the Mad King died in Robert’s Rebellion. But then, the Tyrells had no family ties with House Targaryen. Lord Tyrell’s daughter, his only child now and his heir, was the Lady of Casterly Rock, married to the lord of House Lannister. And would Sansa still be alive when the Tyrells and the Lannisters would be defeated?

What if it was Stannis who was defeated? Would Robb bend the knee before Tommen Baratheon? He was the king the Lannisters supported now that Joffrey was gone. Catelyn didn’t have any bad memory concerning the boy. He and Bran played together at Winterfell. It was very unlikely he had any role in the recent events. He was too young. Maybe he would be sensible enough to free Sansa if Robb was accommodating. The problem was to know if Robb would ever consent kneeling before a Lannister king, a boy he saw as a bastard.

Catelyn knew only one thing. The longer the war would last, the greater the danger would grow for her children.

When they met the patrol of Tully knights as they approached Riverrun, Catelyn thought of it as a good omen. The Lannisters had withdrawn from the castle, abandoning the siege. They did so during the heavy rains that followed the arrival of the Northerners. Even the defenders of Riverrun saw nothing. The rain prevented them from seeing the Lannisters were dismantling their positions, just keeping enough men to stop any sortie, while their cavalry made sure the northern scouts did not approach the encampments. As a result, for three days, neither Edmure nor Robb were aware of the Lannisters’ movements. It was only on the fourth day, when rain quieted down, that the men of Riverrun realized what was going on.

Seeing their chance, they went out the castle. The remaining Lannister forces should not have been enough to hold them, but it seemed they had planned everything. Holes and trenches filled with pikes were waiting for the men of Riverrun all around the castle, especially at the gates. Stafford and Daven Lannister didn’t plan to storm the castle. They wanted to keep the Tullys inside. Hence they made it almost impossible to get through the bridges. The first lines of men were pierced by the traps
laid down by the Lannisters, those that followed stumbled on the first. The remaining Lannister forces killed many this day. Edmure lost over a thousand men and had to withdraw inside the walls of Riverrun. In the meantime, Robb’s forces were still being kept away from the surroundings of the castle.

A few hours later, the Lannisters were all gone. Much of their army was already out of reach. Avoiding the traps was much easier now, knowing where they were and without the Lannisters to cause trouble. Even then, the horsemen of the enemy and sellswords they left behind continued to make life difficult to both river lords and Northerners. One such group, probably paid by the Lannisters to cause as much disarray behind them, ambushed Lord Karstark’s son while he headed for Riverrun. They still didn’t know that the castle was free. Fields all around were not. Bandits and sellswords were attacking supply lines, scouting groups and foragers.

Why had the Lannisters withdrawn from Riverrun? Was it a tactical withdrawal? Were they regrouping somewhere, where they thought they might have better chance to defeat Robb and Edmure? Catelyn knew that a siege on Riverrun was very difficult, forcing any assailant to divide his troops in three and making him vulnerable to any outside attack. The Lannisters had been lucky they could repel Robb’s assault on their lines. Still, their positions remained difficult. They could end being surrounded with Riverrun on one side and the northern army on the other one.

Or was the withdrawal caused by other reasons, not a military decision but a political one? Could Lord Tyrion have ordered the retreat of his armies after Joffrey died? Catelyn found it too beautiful to be true. The Lannisters would come back, and if Robb was marching on King’s Landing, even if he left a contingent behind him, the Riverlands would need to be ready for another Lannister incursion.

She decided to change the subject.

"How is he?"

Her uncle sighed. "Not good, I confess. Vyman says he doesn’t have much time left."

"He wrote me his time was counted, but... I never thought it was so dire."

She had not understood, from the letter he sent to her through Lady Margaery back then, how dire his state was. Maybe her lord father had just not wanted to frighten her too much, but now...

"I must warn you. Sometimes, he thinks I am our father, or it is Edmure he mistakes for him. When he saw Arya, he thought she was Lyanna Stark and that he was at Harrenhal."

They had arrived before the door of her father’s chambers.

"Do you want to go in alone, or do you wish me to follow?" her uncle asked.

"Please, come in."

He nodded, a sad expression on his face.

"How is it, between you two?"

"While we could still talk, we somehow... forgave each other, as much as we could. Let’s just say we accepted the situation a long time ago."

She turned her head back to the wooden door. Gathering her courage, she seized the handle, turned it, and opened.
The room looked empty, and to not have been in use for a very long time. In a corner, lying in a bed, covered with sheets, her lord father rested, his eyes closed, his respiration even. Slowly, she approached and sat on a nearby chair, positioned next to his pillow. Her uncle remained standing behind her. Arya was there too, while Brienne remained at the door.

His once brown beard and hair had turned white, and his tall and strong body had grown thin. He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her. It seemed to be taking a heavy toll on him. He looked at her, and then a smile crept on his face.

"Lysa. You’re back. I thought you were still in the Eyrie."

Remembering what her uncle told her before, she forced herself to smile and held back the tears that threatened to fall.

"No. I’m back, Father."

Chapter End Notes

This is the kind of chapter that I think mirrors every time in AGOT, ACOK and ASOS where Catelyn tries to convince men to make peace and they refuse to even consider it. For Catelyn, the goal of this war was always to save her children, and to avenge Ned as well, but first and above everything else to save Sansa and Arya. But like Robb said, "It's more complicated than that".

Please review

Next chapter: Jaime

P.-S.: Sur une autre note, je suis sur le point de publier ma première histoire originale en tant qu’auteur, mais je me cherche des beta-reader pour avoir une opinion avant la parution finale et apporter des améliorations si nécessaires. Si vous êtes intéressés à devenir beta-reader pour des livres de science fiction, contactez-moi en utilisant la messagerie du site Fanfiction.net. Mes livres sont écrits en français.
Jaime VII

Chapter Notes

Part 1 of 3 of the Battle of Blackwater. Stannis has arrived.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME VII

The bells rang all over the city. Stannis had come, at last. On the battlements of King’s Landing, over the Mud Gate, Jaime Lannister waited for the enemy.

Stannis had twenty thousand men and over two hundred ships. They were invisible for now, hidden by the fog. Jaime knew they wouldn’t be for long. He thought he could hear the beating of their drums.

Jaime had about seven thousand men, six of them from the City Watch, the rest being sellswords or contingents brought by the few houses who remained loyal to them in the Crownlands. All men who would run the moment the gates were breached. The same could be said of Ser Lancel Lannister and the Hound, who stood by his side.

He had scorpions, trebuchets, catapults, ballistaes, archers, myriads of pots of wildfire, everything that could repel Stannis from a distance. He had the city walls. If he could just keep Stannis away from the walls, out of the city, then they could hope to prevail. The moment his men breached the walls, the battle would be lost. Ser Jocelyn Bywater, the commander of the City Watch Tyrion chose and left behind when he moved, led the gold cloaks with an iron fist. Without him, Jaime couldn’t have convinced this bunch of drunkards and thieves to stand on the battlements. That was why Bywater would take care of the defenses on the walls, while Jaime would lead troops on the ground.

In the bay, twenty ships to face Stannis’ two hundred. Most of the Royal Fleet that was left deserted after Tyrion’s departure. Many of these ships were made for trade, not battle, and they had no competent commander at their head. At least they would buy Jaime some time.

"You’re going to die, Kingslayer, you know that?"

The Hound’s raspy voice was as enjoyable to hear as the dying screams of a horse.

"As much as you know that you’re going to die, I suppose," Jaime replied.

"Aye. Wish I had some wine."

That’s the kind of answer Tyrion would give.

"What about you, cousin? Ready to die in your first battle?"
Jaime kept looking to the sea, but he felt how Lancel was shaking next to him, and he most certainly noticed the delay in the answer.

"I’m ready to perform my duties as a kingsguard."

A kingsguard without a king to guard. In the last few days, Jaime had tried to convince Cersei to abandon the city, but she would hear none of it. She spent half her days with her son. She had not wanted them to bury Joffrey’s body under the Great Sept of Baelor. What time she didn’t spend with a dead body was spent sitting on the Iron Throne.

Some would say this was treason. Cersei had no authority nor right whatsoever to sit on the Iron Throne. Since Joffrey was dead, Tommen should be king. Only him or his Hand could sit on the throne. To Jaime’s best knowledge, queens were not allowed to sit there. It was something established during a great council that happened at the end of the Old King’s rule, though it didn’t stop a Targaryen queen to sit on the throne during the Dance of the Dragons, though for a very short time.

However, the Red Keep was so empty that no one dared or cared to speak against it. Cersei was almost always alone in the Throne Room while Jaime organized the defense of the city.

He had almost begged Cersei to leave the capital. It was their only chance to survive. He tried everything, from proposing they should just escape to Essos where they could live alone, or ride for Casterly Rock and be there for their son. To the first idea, Cersei replied:

"I shall not leave my children alone in this world."

To the second idea, she replied: "My son is already lost to me."

Jaime had to accept the fact that his sister would remain here, alternating visits to Joffrey’s dead body and long periods sitting on melted swords. She would not move, no matter what he said, no matter what he did. The only option left for him was to defend the city the best he could.

He could have run away, go to Tommen and continue to serve him, but it would mean abandoning Cersei to her fate, and that he couldn’t. He already abandoned one sibling, he couldn’t leave the other behind.

Anyway, Tyrion would probably not want him at Tommen’s side. Margaery probably told him what Jaime revealed about his first wife. Tyrion would want him dead after that, and Jaime couldn’t blame him. That was why he told Ser Barristan to go. Jaime was a kingsguard, and his place was to his king’s side, but he couldn’t be anywhere Tyrion would be, and Tommen was at Tyrion’s side.

Defending the capital for his king, and defending his sister, what could be more honorable? A brave death on the battlefield was probably the best he could hope for. Maybe it would remove the stain of being a kingslayer. He could always dream.

He looked along the battlements, lit with torches, with archers in position and men armed swords and axes below, ready to fight. They might still keep Stannis out. As long as he didn’t come inside, Stannis wouldn’t win. That’s all that mattered, keeping the enemy outside the city walls. He spent days making sure the city was prepared. If only they had more men, but they lost these men the day Cersei decided Margaery Tyrell had to die. Jaime cursed his sister, and he cursed himself for loving her.
"There they are," Lancel said.

He saw them just like his cousin did. The ships were coming. First, he only saw one, then two, four, six. Quickly, they reached over twenty ships and their numbers kept growing. Their fleet was officially outnumbered. They couldn’t hope to defeat this fleet, but they could occupy it. Jaime ordered the signal to be sent. A torch was thrown over the battlements.

Their ships, what was left of King’s Landing maritime forces, sailed forward at great speed. They were already positioned out of range from their ballistaes and trebuchets on the sea side, which were unmanned anyway, and they moved further far away. They were nearing the enemy ships. Soon, firing arrows were exchanged and ships fought at close range.

People might think that battle is an exhilarating experience, full of actions, where you don’t have time to think, where you fight with glory for your king or your lord. Most of the time, the latter is false. As for the exhilarating experience, it is real, but only for a short time. Many battles are quite short. What is long are the time before the battle, the waiting before the two armies meet, and the chase that follows, after the defeated army runs away and the victorious gives chase to the remnants. Most of the killing happens there.

But even during the battle, not all forces are engaged at the same time. There are reserves, and parts of the battlefield where the engagement is delayed. As for sieges, they are worse than anything. The waiting represents most of the siege, with small skirmishes there and there, and rarely a major assault.

Right now, this is what happened. Jaime had to wait while the men on their ships were fighting Stannis’ troops. Battles are exciting for the very short time you’re in, when you are part of the action, indeed, but when you stood aside and look at others doing the fighting in your place, it was boring. All they could see were exchange of flaming arrows. No ship was burning yet, three pairs were hooked together, but they could barely hear the clamoring of the fight.

The good thing was that their ships were blocking the shortest way to the Mud Gate. This would force Stannis to land his boats farther, making his men an easy target for their archers. And that’s exactly what Stannis did.

The boats began to appear. They were swimming far away from the battling ships, getting around slowly.

"Clegane, Ser Lancel, it’s time."

Jaime walked away from the battlements, making a sign to Ser Jocelyn Bywater who returned it. The walls were his. The three kingsguards arrived at the gates, where the best available swords in King’s Landing were waiting. Which meant there were few of them, and they were at best decent swordsmen. Barely thirty knights were among them.

"Men, this is time."

Jaime looked at them. Some of the knights looked proud and ready to do their duty, but almost all the men who were present had the eyes of people who knew their hour had come. Jaime was still on the last steps of the stairs leading to the battlements. He walked the last of them and arrived on the ground. He was at the same level than his men now.

"Listen, men. I know what you’re thinking about right now. I’ve been there me too. You think we have no chance to win, that there’s no way you’re going to survive this. You think you should run
away to safety, desert. Perhaps some of you think it would be dishonorable and you stay here for this reason. Perhaps some of you simply fear to be executed if you’re caught deserting. Perhaps some believe they’ll have a better chance of surviving if they only desert once on the other side of this gate."

"Let me tell you something. Fuck your honor! Fuck your survival! And fuck the king, and his kingdom! You’re not here to fight for your king. Tommen is far away, safe. He abandoned you. Don’t fight for the queen either. She’s hiding in the Red Keep while she sends us to be killed. But think about King’s Landing and its people. You know what happened the last time this city was sacked? Some of you were probably there, and the rest have heard of it. Well, let me tell you something men, this is going to happen again. The moment Stannis walks through this gate, this will all happen again. Your houses will be burned, the people you love will be killed or raped, everything you have will be stolen. We are all that stands in the way of another sack of King’s Landing, and if we run away, Stannis will hunt down, all of us."

"But you know what was different seventeen years ago? The Mad King opened the gates. Tonight, the gates won’t open, and we will be there to defend them. What say you, men? Do you want Stannis to sack your city? Do you want him to kill you?"

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

The answer came from everywhere, stronger and more determined each time.

"Then follow me! For the city!"

Roars and cries followed as Jaime marched among his men to the gate. When it opened, the others followed him outside, most of the knights first, a few remaining behind to make sure all swordsmen would follow.

Outside, the boats carrying Stannis’ troops were arriving on the shores. Their archers began to rain down arrows on them, and catapults, trebuchets, scorpions, ballistaes joined them.

Several men fell, but others survived, and more were coming.

"Everyone here dies with a clean sword, I’ll rape his fucking corpse," shouted the Hound. Jaime immediately felt his men getting readier than ever. It was more effective than his entire speech. Jaime brought his men forward, while maintaining them at safe distance. Then the first of Stannis’ men came and battle began.

Jaime easily cut the head of the first who approached him. The hound plunged his sword in the heart of his first. Lancel took more time to deal with his own, finally slashing across his face.

The men he fought were no great warriors. They were the vanguard, the easier men to sacrifice, arrow fodder. Still, there were many. They would be overrun soon.

They kept the enemy at bay, but soon the battle was a general melee. Jaime entered the fever battle and just killed everyone who happened to stand before him. One swing was enough to disfigure the face of a man, to cut a leg, an arm, a head, the whole body over the belt. He would push his
opponent to the ground and then plunge his sword into his heart. And then green shades started to light the battlefield.

Bywater followed the plan. Their trebuchets and catapults were adjusted carefully to target the shores where the boats arrived, and now they were bombarding them with pots of wildfire. The flames flared, and soon the shores of Blackwater Bay turned into a hell of green flames. Between two fights, Jaime could see Stannis’ boats struggling to find a way to the ground. Some were burning, and men came to the shore already on fire. Water did not quench the fire, and more pots were thrown, increasing the intensity of the flames.

His arm was grabbed. Jaime was about to give the ending blow to the owner of the said arm, but he realized just at the last minute as he turned his head that it was one of Bywater’s boys, a messenger.

"Ser Jaime, Ser Jocelyn needs your help. We’re under attack."

"I know." He shrugged away the arm of the boy and killed the closest opponent.

"Ser, they’re attacking us from behind. They’re in the city."

This time, Jaime turned to the boy." What?"

"They’re inside the city. They’re attacking Ser Jocelyn’s men at the gate."

How? That was the only question that came to Jaime’s mind. How did Stannis’ men got inside? They didn’t let them approach the walls.

But that was irrelevant. What mattered on the battlefield were facts, not their why and how.

On his left, Jaime spotted Clegane.

"Hound!"

Clegane looked at him, and Jaime saw something he never witnessed in the Hound. Fear. His sword was pointed to the ground, his left arm pending lifeless, and he was walking away from the battle.

The next moment a sword went through his chest. Jaime looked all around. They were keeping the enemy at bay, but they couldn’t force them to retreat. Wildfire slowed them down, but more kept coming all the same.

Lancel was fighting not far away. The Red Keep was visible over his head. Cersei was there. If Stannis’ men were inside the city...

"Ser Lancel! Cousin!"

He seized him by the shoulder and forced Lancel to look at him." Stannis is inside the city. We must head back to the Red Keep." Lancel’s eyes were at a loss." COME ON!"

He almost shove his cousin towards the gate to make him understand, and they both ran to the walls. As soon as they went through the gate, they were welcomed by two men who tried to kill them. Dealing with them easily, Jaime found himself in front of a general melee. Behind the gates and on the walls, Stannis’ men were everywhere. And they were winning.
"We need to close the gate," Lancel shouted.

"No, we head to the Red Keep."

"What?"

"You heard me. Stannis is inside the city. The city is lost, but not the Red Keep." Neither Cersei was, for now." We’ll only get killed if we stay here."

Not waiting anymore, Jaime ran through the mob of men, hacking everything on his way. He received a hit on his armor from behind. So much for not taking any before. He turned to face his opponent who brought his sword on his head. Jaime blocked it, but before he could counter-attack and end this, a sword went through the other man’s skull. The one who held it was Lancel, who was revealed by the dead man’s fall.

"Let’s go."

Jaime would thank him later, if he could. He and Lancel made their way through the enemy and allied troops, until they could get away from the spreading battlefield inside the city and run freely to Aegon’s Hill.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter: Davos
Davos I

Davos Seaworth had fought in his life. As he grew up in Flea Bottom, he fought with the other children, and sometimes with the men. Not that he was looking for battle. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He always tried to avoid fighting. He never liked it, and he was also far from being the best when it came to fists. Still, sometimes he had no choice and his fists, or a stick when he could get his hand on one, were his last line of defense.

As he grew up and became a smuggler, he kept the same philosophy. *Only fight when you must.* That’s what his father used to tell him, and it proved very useful as he sailed across the seas, smuggling stolen goods from Braavos to King’s Landing, from Pentos to White Harbor, from Old Wyk to Oldtown, from the Arbor to the Summer Islands, from Lys to Myr, from Lannisport to Gulltown. A smuggler’s best tool was to be subtle and discreet, everything Davos had been ever since the day he was born.

Today his skills at secrecy and keeping a low profile were not of much use. The king had decided they would fight to take King’s Landing. Not that they had much choice. Joffrey and the Lannisters were not going to open the gates and let him take the Iron Throne without a word or a fight if he asked gently. *Only fight when you must.* This time, they must fight.

And so Davos fought.

Leading his men like he led his ship, the *Black Betha,* he brought them towards the *Kingslander.* The tide was for them, but the current was for the enemy. The two ships collided. Davos had to grip the helm to not lose his foot. That was a first time for him. He sailed away from ships usually. He didn’t ram into them. But now he did.

"Board her!"

His crew threw the grappling lines before the *Kingslander*’s crew could. Davos drew his sword and led his men over the ship’s rail.

"For Stannis!"

His men roared together as they jumped on their enemies. Davos flung his sword at the first man he came upon, who blocked it.

He had never been a man of war, and having lost four fingers on the right hand, Davos was never expected to become a man of war. But after Stannis knighted him, it was part of his duties as a landed knight to learn how to fight in a decent manner in the very least. And so for the past seventeen years, Davos worked to be able to fight with his left hand.

Today, it proved helpful. The moment his opponent blocked his blow, he lurched towards Davos
who deflected the sword. Deflecting a blow was easier than blocking it. Matthos thought he was growing old, and he was not wrong. Davos was an old and tired man, and an inexperienced one when it came to fighting.

While the younger lads went forward, driving the enemy away, Davos met a stalemate with his own opponent. He allowed this man to make him back down, until Davos was at the rail. Then the young man he was fighting lurched forward again and Davos just ducked. His opponent hurt the rail, and Davos pushed him overboard, into the space separating the two ships and into the waters of Blackwater.

Davos looked around to see the captain and spotted him near the helm. Stannis’ men were climbing the stairs leading to it. The first couldn’t make it, cut down by Joffrey’s men in an advantageous position over them. Those who followed were more successful. When Davos joined them, it was only to witness the captain being killed by his son, Matthos.

Few in the crew were still fighting. Most yielded. The ship was theirs. He thought the crew of the Kingslander was quite reduced, judging from the number of prisoners and victims on the bridge. Their fleet was also smaller than he expected. King Robert’s Hammer was not there, and so were a few other ships.

He looked at the city. Their men had breached the Mud Gate and were pouring inside. The knights who barred their way to the city were gone. Stannis had been very suspicious about their new friend, and so Davos was, but they couldn’t deny he helped them a lot. Thanks to the plans he provided, Stannis could send a few men inside the city to open the gates for their army, and now King’s Landing was falling.

Still, it all felt too easy. Far too easy. Where were the powerful armies of the Westerlands? Their latest reports told there were about twenty thousand men camping outside the city walls. Where were they now? Perhaps they moved to intercept Robb Stark’s host.

Fire covered the shore. Boats berthed far away from these positions where wildfire kept consuming, forcing the men to take a longer but safer route to the gate. No more arrows were shot from the battlements. Joffrey’s forces no longer fought.

Davos caught something not far from the gate. A glow, different from all the others on the battlefield. A green glow. A glow that turned into fire.

"Matthos, get down!"

His son didn’t understand what was going on until it happened. A sharp green light blinded him, forcing him to look away, in the direction of the deck. Davos, his back turned on events, rushed and tackled his son to the floors while a wave of heat hit them. Protecting Matthos with his own body, Davos turned to see a column of green flames coming from the shore. But the green flames were not the only thing to see in the black sky. There were also debris flying all around, rocks and stones and wood falling all around. One fell not far from the Black Betha. Another hit its mast, and the sails were set ablaze.

"Lower the sail! Quench the fire!"

Another block of stone hit the ship at the bow, causing minor damage. Lucky enough, he carried no fire with him. Davos and his crew managed to deal with the fire quickly enough. Others didn’t have the same chance.

Around them, a few ships were now burning, and one was already sinking although not on fire. He
must have been hit by several blocks that created holes in its hull.

Bringing back his gaze to the origin of the explosion, he looked at where had been the Mud Gate not long ago. It was gone, along with a large part of the battlements around it. The explosion had wiped out a part of the city walls from the face of the world. And not only a part of the city walls. King’s Landing was now on fire.

"Wildfire."

Davos whispered the word as he looked upon the tragedy that unfolded under his eyes. The shore, the city gate, the walls, the city itself were afire as the cries of burning men reached their ears. Davos didn't need his eyes to understand what was happening. Within a few hours, the city would be in ruins. He could see in his mind Flea Bottom, the place where he grew up, burning.

"I told you, Father," his son said next to him. "The Lord of Light is with us. His fire is giving us the victory."

"I doubt it, my boy. This is Stannis’ city that’s burning right now. If the Lord of Light is on his side, then he has a very strange way to show it."

Chapter End Notes

It may look short for the first chapter told from the Onion Knight's perspective. I could have added more details, about Stannis' preparations before the battle for example, but the truth is it wouldn't have been much different from the preparations of Stannis in the books or the show. I wanted to stick to the battle we were already in.

We shall Davos' like again. From now on, he will be a POV character and our main hindsight into the action taking place on Stannis' side.

Please review

Next chapter: Cersei
Cersei VI

Chapter Notes

Part 3 of 3 of the Battle of Blackwater.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CERSEI VI

Silence. Here there was only silence, just like in Joffrey’s chambers. No noise, no cry, no wailing to disturb her. She was all alone, like she had always been.

It was only now that she realized it, but she was always alone. She was the first to come out of her mother’s belly, the elder from the beginning, and as such she was special, apart from the others. Special people were always alone. She was alone at the very start. She was kept away from Jaime, forced to learn how to be a lady. No one really cared about her, and she didn’t really care about anybody anyway. She was meant to be queen, and a queen’s destiny was to be alone. Even when someone was in her company, she was alone. The eldest of three siblings, the only daughter of her parents, without a mother at the age of ten, without a father long before he died. Her friends, her lover, her husband, her children? Never there with her. Sometimes not far, but never actually with her. She was meant to be queen from the moment she came into the world. She was meant to be alone from the moment she entered this world.

Now she understood. She understood what she should have understood a long time ago. Tyrion needed wine and women. Jaime needed battle and honor. Her father needed power. Her mother needed... she didn’t remember what her mother needed. Robert needed a war. Her children needed love. She had no need for any of this, and no need of anyone. She only needed a crown. The crown, and the Iron Throne, and she had them both, right now. That was all she needed, and that was be all she would ever need.

The throne room was empty. The throne room should always be empty, only accessible to the queen. Kings and queens should never have to deal with the common people, not even with the nobles. They were all beneath her. Why should she care about those who were inferior to her? Robert should have known this. Everyone should know that, but they didn’t because unlike her, they were no king or queen.

She thought of the rose, on her way to Casterly Rock with her half of a brother, to own the castle where Cersei grew up. They could have it. She didn’t care. She was way above them, above everything they could think about. She was Cersei Lannister, Queen of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynar, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.

You’ll be queen.

She was told so a long time ago, and the person who said it was right. She was the queen.

She rested comfortably her head against the back of the Iron Throne. Sharp, rough, cold, the perfect throne for a queen. Queens couldn’t allow themselves to be warm, or kind, or caring. It only brought them pain, and it kept them from accomplishing their destiny. She learned it the hard way with her own children.
She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of the melted steel against her back, her knees, her legs, her arms, her hands, her neck, her hair. The Iron Throne was hers. It was eternal. It couldn’t die. It couldn’t be destroyed. No grief could come out of it, for when you began to desire it, there was no place left in you for anything else but that desire. No attachment of any kind could cause sadness or grief or suffering. All that was left when you didn’t have what you wanted was anger, hatred, and that only pushed you further to the throne. There was nothing better.

The heavy doors opened like they never did, slapping like a man torn apart by two horses pulling him in opposite directions. Two men walked in, or rather ran in, covered with blood, soot, and dust.

"Cersei, we need to get out."

It was only when the first spoke that she recognized Jaime. She didn’t move. "So get out," she ordered them with a distant voice, looking at the sharp edge her right hand was caressing.

"Cersei, Stannis is inside the city. His men are getting closer. They’ve taken the walls. King’s Landing is burning."

"So what?" The Iron Throne had existed long before the city, and it would still exist long after she was gone.

"Cersei, they’ll be here any moment!"

"Let them come," she replied flatly. She was the queen. If they wanted to take the Iron Throne away from her, they just had to come and try. A queen did not feel threatened by sheep.

"Don’t you get it?" She thought she heard a point of impatience in her brother’s voice. "We lost. The city is lost! Our only chance to survive is to escape."

"I don’t see the need to escape."

"Wake up. Stannis’ men will be here anytime. You will die if you stay here."

"Queens don’t die."

"Ser Jaime, we should go," the other man next to him said. He was familiar to Cersei, but she wasn’t sure of who he was. He wore a white cloak, as stained as it was. He was certainly not the Hound. He wasn’t tall or big enough. His hair might have been blond if not for all the mud in it.

"Cersei."

For the first time, she cared to look at her brother’s face. He was so ugly, covered like this. She had loved this man, before she chose her priorities better. She loved him when she was weak. Well, she wasn’t weak now. She was strong, stronger than she had ever been.

"We must go back home. To Casterly Rock. It is our only chance." She looked away, straight in front of her, to the opened doors. "We could go to Essos, to the Free Cities. Say something but don’t stay here!"

"Ser Jaime!"

The other man, rather a boy than a man, shouted right when Cersei saw more people pour into her throne room. Their armors displayed a flaming heart with a black stag inside. It was quite accurate for a representation. House Baratheon was doomed to burn after all?
They were about twenty, just as dusty and muddy as Jaime and his friend were. They turned to face the intruders, unsheathing their swords. In the meantime, the men with the stag on fire stopped. They wouldn’t come forward. She saw some of them looking at her, and back down a foot or two. That was natural. She was the queen, and whoever was in her presence should be afraid of her.

"Surrender, Kingslayer," one of the intruders said, his voice shivering.

Jaime didn’t reply right away. A long moment went on, making the silence feel heavy like death. Cersei was about to yell at him to fight for his queen.

"Never."

It fell like a death sentence.

"So be it. Attack, men!"

Three of them lurched forward. Jaime dismembered the one coming at him easily. The other kingsguard dealt with two opponents. Jaime stabbed one in the back, and the third was hit at the leg, then a sword plunged through his head. A fourth man came for Jaime’s partner, and her brother dealt with him just as easily as the others.

The fifteen other men or so had not moved, including the one who ordered them to attack. Jaime and Lancel (it had to be Lancel, she didn’t see who else it could be) faced their enemies, waiting for them to move, side by side.

One more fool tried to attack, only to be hacked to pieces by her brother again. Then more men poured into the throne room, with more armor and better swords. There were at least fifty of them, led by an old man wearing a red-gold armor displaying a red fox within a circle of blue flowers. He removed his helmet, which revealed more accurately his silver hair. He walked forward to stand between his men and Jaime.

"Lord Florent," Jaime said. "I’m not surprised you took Stannis’ side."

"Ser Jaime, the battle is over. Drop your sword and surrender yourself to the king’s mercy. I can promise you that I’ll talk for you and try to convince him to send you to the Wall."

Jaime scoffed. "The Wall? We both know Stannis will never do that, my lord. And even if he did, why would I want to spend the rest of my days freezing my balls in the North?"

"See it as an opportunity to get back some honor, Kingslayer." He almost spat the last word.

"You know nothing of honor, old man!"

Just as he was done speaking, Jaime ran toward the Lord of Brightwater Keep. Two knights intercepted him before he could reach him, but he shoved one aside while he slit the other’s throat. Another swing of his sword and Alester Florent was on the floor, covering his face with his two hands.

A general melee followed. Jaime fought like a demon, slashing, slitting and plunging his weapon everywhere a man was to be seen. Lancel joined him after a moment, taking a first opponent by the back, then dealing with a second. He managed to reach Jaime, and they fought back to back. However, Lancel got injured at the shoulder on his way, and he struggled to keep up against the flood of enemies surrounding them. He was hurt at the leg then, and finally stabbed in the back. Jaime turned to help him, trying to protect his cousin the best he could. Fighting from all sides, an axe got him in the back, then a sword on the hand. He killed both aggressors, but when a third hit the
back of his head, he didn’t return the blow.

It all happened very slowly, as if the world slowed down for a moment. Blood spilled as the sword slid through Jaime’s head, and this time it was his own blood that appeared, not his enemy’s. He fell limp on his knees, then forward where his face met Lancel’s body. There he remained. He didn’t get up.

She felt nothing. Her brother, her lover was dead, and she felt nothing. Wasn’t she supposed to feel something? No, of course, a queen didn’t feel a thing, for a queen didn’t care for anyone’s life.

And yet, she couldn’t help but hear her brother mutter something as he gave his last breath. She was too far to hear him. What were his last words? What was the last thing he wanted to tell her, his queen, his sister, his lover? She would never know.

Two knights came forward, climbing the dais as her eyes stayed focused on the lifeless body of her brother.

"Stand up, Lannister. You’re sitting on the king’s throne."

No, not the king’s throne. The queen’s throne. Her throne.

You’ll be queen, for a time. Then comes another, younger, more beautiful, to cast you down and take everything you hold dear.

Well, this queen had not come. The only people standing before her were two knights, with a hundred soldiers and other knights below. All men. And Stannis Baratheon was a man too. The other queen had not come. She would be queen for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Who better to describe the end of a battle than the Mad Queen herself. *irony*

I hope you're not too shocked by Jaime’s end. I think a lot of people share the hope if not the belief that Jaime, if he is not to survive the story, will leave it in some redemptive way. In some way, he is in this case, since he died on the battlefield, like a knight, trying to protect Lancel in his last moments. But it seems that if Cersei must die by the hand of the valonqar, it won't be by Jaime's hand here.

The fact also remains that despite his quest and desire for redemption, Jaime has remained for most of the show absurdly loyal to Cersei, ready to do everything to get her back, and here they are not under the threat of the White Walkers (at least they ignore it) and Jaime has neither met Brienne nor lost his right hand, which limits Jaime’s chances to break from the love he feels for his sister. Even the attempts of murder on Margaery and Tyrion could not make him abandon her, just like in the show.

As for the Battle of Blackwater, well the outcome is quite different, as you could see it. We do not have a whole picture yet of what happened during the battle, but all missing information will be provided in a future chapter told from the perspective of a former smuggler. The battle may have seemed quite short when compared to the canon version but, this time, there was no dwarf to save the day. Tell me what you thought of it.
Next chapter: Margaery

Chapter Notes

I hadn't realized it had been ten chapters since the last time I wrote a chapter from Margaery's perspective. Well, here is a new one. I hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MARGAERY XXI

The wooden swords clashed, again, again and again. One Tommen was laughing as they battled, the other one more serious and stern, though Margaery discerned the smile that appeared on his face from time to time.

It was a strange occurrence that Tommen Lydden, son and heir to Lewys Lydden, Lord of the Deep Den, bore the same name than the king. Margaery had met Lord Lydden four times in the past. The first time at her wedding, the second during her tour with Tyrion of the Westerlands, and the third and fourth on their way back and forth from King’s Landing for the tourney celebrating Joffrey’s name day. Margaery’s opinion of him was that he was courteous and well-mannered, but also ambitious without any doubt. However, his ambition had bounds. House Lydden had been loyal to House Lannister for thousands of years, ever since their Andal ancestors settled in the Westerlands and Joffrey Lydden married into House Lannister, becoming King of the Rock under the name of Joffrey Lannister. House Lydden had always remained very close to Casterly Rock, their family multiplying marriages with all the branches of House Lannister to maintain their station. Unlike the Leffords, their wealth couldn’t contend with the Lannisters’. They had mines of silver on their lands, but their time of peak was long gone. Their ties with House Lannister were their best guarantee of maintaining their position and wealth, and the Lannisters had been happy over the ages to preserve these links.

Deep Den occupied a strategic position. The Golden Tooth was the gate to enter the Westerlands from the Riverlands, Deep Den fulfilled the same function for the Crownlands. To protect its frontiers, any Lord of the Rock had to ensure the loyalty of both the Leffords and the Lyddens. Tyrion and Margaery had worked together in this sense from the beginning as well. As a result, the Westerlands were secured. No army could cross their frontiers from the east without meeting a great fortress with a powerful army guarding it. From the south, they were protected by their alliance with Margaery’s family. Only the shores of the Sunset Sea were at risk, possibly vulnerable to Ironborn attacks, though they seemed occupied enough with the North and didn't bother the coast of the Westerlands and the Reach yet.

Tommen Baratheon charged Tommen Lydden, making the both of them tumble onto the ground. They both burst into laughs. They were of the same age, two children playing together, not totally aware of the war that was raging.

Her lips rolled up for an instant. She remembered how Loras used to be like them at the same age. Her mouth quivered at the memory, bringing both happiness and sadness to her heart. For a short time, all she could see were two boys playing together with wooden swords.

Then she reminded herself of who Tommen was: a bastard born of incest, the cause of her brother’s death, and the cause of the actual war. And she walked away.
She wandered through the battlements and courtyards of the castle, her black dress whirling in the wind, until she reached the gardens, where she wandered as well. They needed two weeks to reach Deep Den. They had no news yet, but she was quite certain now that Stannis had taken King’s Landing. She hoped he would crush Cersei and Jaime, and she didn’t care if they suffered or endured the greatest pains in the world before they died. That was all they deserved.

Her thoughts wandered to Tyron, like always. They avoided each other’s company ever since they left King’s Landing. Aside from when they needed to talk about the war, for Margaery’s presence was essential due to the alliance between the Lannisters and the Tyrells. She had already written to her father. The night they learned of Joffrey’s death. She was writing the message when he came to announce her the news.

_Dear Father,_

_By now, you must have heard about it. Loras is dead. He was murdered in front of my eyes, in Renly Baratheon’s camp. I call for your help. Joffrey Baratheon was assassinated, and Tommen is king now. We need the armies of the Reach more than ever. I need your help._

_Margaery_

It was short, and it didn’t convey all that was going through her mind, but she didn’t see what else she could say. Writing was a poor way to express grief. Poets and singers might say otherwise, but they wrote for entertainment and pleasure. Their writings were born from their imagination, unreal. Margaery didn't live in the fantasy world of writers and singers. She lived in the real world, where you could lose the people you loved and you cared about, where people died and where you had to expect a stab in your back at every turn. Right now, it was her heart that bled, stabbed twice by her brother and her husband.

She wished she could be with her parents right now, and with her grandmother so they could comfort each other. But she could not. She had to stay here for now, to avenge her brother.

She came upon a lone figure sitting on a bench when she turned a corner. The girl did not move. She didn’t give any sign that she was aware of Margaery’s presence. She would have expected to find Sansa in the godswood rather than the gardens. Then she remembered. Mira always went to the godswood at this time of the day. And ever since Sansa was smuggled away from King’s Landing by force, she avoided Mira at all cost. Sansa resented Mira for the role she played in her kidnapping in King’s Landing.

Carefully, Margaery sat next to the Stark girl. Sansa showed no more sign that she noticed her presence.

"We are only halfway from Casterly Rock now."

Sansa looked at her very quickly. Margaery had taken her by surprise. Sansa didn’t display the same indifference or hostility towards Margaery than she did with Mira.

"Yes, my... Margaery." She still forgot from time to time to call Margaery only by her name and not by her title.

"I won’t try to convince you that you’ll be happy at Casterly Rock, Sansa. But you’ll be safe, on that you have my word. And now that Joffrey is dead..."

"Shouldn’t the war be over if he’s dead?" The Stark girl’s tone made it clear that she considered fighting useless.
"I wish it was that simple. Stannis is still out there, and he wants Tommen to be his king no more than he wanted Joffrey. And as long as your brother fights for him...»

"I’ll be a prisoner," Sansa concluded.

"I could call you a guest or a ward, but they would only be gentler words to express the same reality. It would be like telling people that their beloved is gone to mean that he’s dead." She said the latter on a mournful tone.

"I’m sorry for Ser Loras. He was a good knight."

"He was more than that."

A sword appeared through his face, and blood spurted from everywhere. Then the body fell on the floor, and she was on it, trying to bring back her brother, hoping against all odds that he was still alive. Blood covered her dress, her hands. Her brother’s blood.

"I wanted you to marry him," she told Sansa, trying to chase the memory from her mind. "I was hoping I could convince him to defect from Renly and marry you, to put an end to this war between our families."

Sansa said nothing for a while. "I know. Lord Tyrion told me, while you were gone. I would have been happy to marry your brother."

Margaery smiled. "I would have cherished you as a sister, Sansa."

They remained silent for a long time. "What’s going to happen to me now? I’m no longer betrothed."

"And you’ll stay unbetrothed."

For now, at the very least. Depending on the situation, Sansa could be of higher value if they sent her back to her brother, or she could be of higher value if a marriage was arranged. The best option for now was to keep her unwed, while remaining aware of opportunities. If Robb Stark was ready to talk about peace, they could include a marriage for Sansa in the negotiations. For now, it was better to keep all doors opened.

"You could write to your family, if you want," Margaery told Sansa.

"I would rather not."

"You could tell them you are alive and well, and far from Joffrey. I think they would be relieved to learn that."

"Maybe I’ll write to them," Sansa said after a moment. "Will they believe me?"

Margaery understood what she meant. Would Sansa’s family think this could be a forgery, or a letter written under constraint, like after Edward Stark was imprisoned?

"In the very least, they would know that you’re still alive."

"Will my letters be verified?"

Margaery sighed very discreetly. "Only to make sure you say nothing compromising about the war. You can tell you are far from King’s Landing and in a safe place, but nothing more. Writing you are heading for Casterly Rock might give information on our troops’ movements. You can tell your family that you’re not authorized to say much because we’re not allowing you. They’ll understand."
But you could reveal you’re writing from Deep Den. Any maester will recognize the raven is coming from the castle anyway. Arya should be happy to receive news from you," Margaery added.

"I wish I was with her," Sansa whispered.

"I’m sorry," Margaery said. She was, but they couldn’t let Sansa go, not as long as they were in war with the Starks.

"How did she manage to escape? How did she find our family back?"

Margaery didn’t know if Sansa was asking the question to Margaery, or just asking aloud, but she decided to give an answer that held in only one word.

"Mira."

At that, the Stark girl looked at her, her eyes displaying surprise. "Mira?"

"Yes. We sent her to bring a peace offer to your brother. On her way, she fell upon your sister and she helped Arya to return to your family."

Margaery told her what happened on the Kingsroad and at Harrenhal, everything Mira told her during the last two weeks.

"She didn’t tell me that. Why would she do that?" Sansa asked when Margaery was done. "She is serving..."

She didn’t finish her sentence. But Margaery answered all the same. "Mira was a Forrester and a Northerner long before she was my handmaiden. She is very loyal to me, but her loyalty also goes to her homeland and her family. Who could blame her?"

"You didn’t... punish her?"

"No." After Tyrion’s revelations, she didn’t have the heart to reject Mira. "Aside from banishing her from my personal tent for the week that followed, maybe," she tried to joke. "Anyway, it’s done, and another Stark in King’s Landing wouldn’t have made much of a difference."

Mira was also very convincing when it came to explain her actions as part of the negotiations with Robb Stark, bringing back one of his sisters to improve his disposition towards the Lannisters and the Tyrells. Margaery knew this was not the only reason for her actions, but even Tyrion acknowledged it was a good idea, although it failed convincing Robb Stark to accept peace.

"You should forgive her, you know. For betraying you," Margaery suggested. "You might resent her for luring you into a trap, but she probably saved your life. I think you would be dead if we left you behind in King’s Landing."

"Yes, I would be dead."

Again, Sansa was staring right in front of her, to nothing in particular. She had seen more horrors in the recent year than Margaery in her whole life before the war started. Her innocence was stolen.

Margaery thought of her parents, and she thought of Sansa’s parents as well. Her lord father had focused on Loras ever since he was born. Margaery had been the responsibility of her lady mother. Her father had Loras focus on his training at arms, wanting the greatest knight in the Seven Kingdoms. Her mother focused on the womanly skills of Margaery. Just like most women in Highgarden, Margaery was taught the intrigues of politics as much as she was taught dancing and
singing. Her mother also taught her how to run a castle. For the politics, however, it was her grandmother who did most of the job. Not that her lady mother considered it not important, but Olenna Tyrell ended up playing a much more significant role in her granddaughter’s education in that field. Her father didn’t care to interest Loras into politics very much. And as a result, Loras died.

The Starks had been at the same time different and similar to her own parents. Ned Stark didn’t forget to teach his sons how to rule. Robb Stark proved quite competent in ruling the North and leading armies. Catelyn Stark, however, seemed to have totally banned politics and games of power from her daughters’ education. As a result, Sansa was constantly in danger of dying if someone wasn’t there to protect her, and she was unprepared to face her father’s downfall.

Catelyn had not been clever in the way she educated her daughters. It seemed like she assumed they would always have a man to protect them. Only, men were not always able of defending their women, or just not willing. Life was hard for women in this world, and they had to be equipped the best way possible.

Margaery wondered if the ladies of the North were used to staying in that situation of helplessness. Probably not all of them. Mira came from the North and, although her mother was born in the Reach, she still lived in the North for the greatest part of her life and arrived as ready as she could be in Highgarden. Mira was probably the most clever of her handmaids, sometimes against her own good. Margaery regretted Sansa didn’t have the same chance as they did. Both Margaery and Mira were prepared to face the real world. Sansa was not, and as a result she was vulnerable.

"Are there any news about my brothers?" she asked Margaery.

"No, I’m sorry, Sansa. No news yet. We haven’t heard of the events in the North for a while. I’m sure Bran and Rickon will be fine." She wished she believed it as much as she said it.

They talked a little more time. Then Margaery went to visit Lady Lydden, a woman in the middle of her twenties who came from a minor house of the Crownlands. Margaery noticed that she was doing her best to not show any scorn towards her. She was angry at the fact Tyrion and Margaery abandoned the Crownlands. Margaery insisted for Sansa to be present when she met Lady Lydden, and Mira and Sera were present as well, just like the women who were part of the Lady of Deep Den’s retinue.

The time they spent together was courteous, if not enjoyable. Margaery took her leave and ordered Mira to escort Sansa back to her chambers. Sansa accepted without complaint, like she always did. Margaery headed for her chambers with Sera.

"My Lady, may I ask you a question? One that is personal?"

"Go on, Sera."

"Is there something wrong between you and Lord Tyrion?"

Margaery slowed down, but she resumed to walk immediately. "Just a minor disagreement. Nothing you should worry about."

"I’m afraid, my lady. Is there really nothing I should fear?"

"Nothing, Sera." Unless Cersei found another way to reach her.

"My lady, I..."

"Sera, this is a private matter. It only concerns me and my lord husband. The day I want to talk about
it with you, I will. I don’t want to hear more questions about it."

"Yes, my lady," Sera said reluctantly.

They arrived before her chamber. When they entered, Margaery found someone sitting on her bed, his back turned on her. Even someone who never met him would know who he was.

"What are you doing here?" she asked on a harsh tone. She wasn’t sure if she regretted the tone or not.

"I need to talk with you," Tyrion replied.

His voice was broken. She seldom heard him speak that way. The last time she remembered him talking like this was... when he told her about his first wife. The girl his brother told him was only a whore, and who he sent to be raped before Tyrion’s eyes.

"Sera, leave us, please." Her handmaiden did as she was told.

Margaery was alone with her husband. They remained at their respective places for quite some time, Margaery looking at him, Tyrion with his back turned on her, his shoulders slumped, breathing heavily.

"What’s going on?" she asked, realizing her voice had gone very soft all of a sudden. Something terrible had happened.

He said nothing. After a moment, his body began to move, and he almost let himself fall from the bed. Slowly, walking heavily as if it was an ordeal for him, hanging on the bed frame, he came to face her, his face turned to the floor. His left hand was empty, the right one was holding a scroll, one like the ravens carried, gripping it as if his life depended on it.

He looked up to her. His lips were shaking, water threatened to fall from his eyes. A movement in his throat showed he gulped. Their eyes met for a second. His talked of unbearable suffering. He looked away very quickly. He ended placing his back against the bed and sliding to the floor until he sat there.

"Tyrion..."

The scroll was still crumpled into his hand.

"My brother is dead." He finally revealed.

For a moment, she was relieved, happy by the news. Margaery had wanted this man to die. She wanted Jaime Lannister to perish, but right now, with Tyrion right there in front of her, who just told her the news, who was devastated by it, she was unable to say anything. And she felt guilty as quickly as she had felt joyous at the news.

"I guess now I know how you feel... or at least... I know a part of it," he said.

"What about Cersei?" If Jaime Lannister was dead, she knew what this meant for King’s Landing.

"Prisoner. Stannis took the city and she’s still breathing. I wish she was dead."

"Me too."

For a long moment, they remained there in silent. It happened a lot since they left the capital. Usually, Tyrion was the one who didn’t know what to say in such circumstances. Margaery didn’t
want to say anything to him, and she had nothing to tell him anyway. This time, she was the one at a loss of words. She had not forgiven him for his lies. At the same time, if someone could understand what he was going through right now, it was her. She lost a brother as well.

She realized he loved his brother, just as much as she loved Loras. He loved a brother who betrayed him, and he loved him because he didn’t know Jaime betrayed him.

Should she tell him? Seeing him in this state, she decided against it. She just approached and sat by his side. After a while, she took his hand. He squeezed it gently but didn’t look back at her. It had been a very long time since she saw him so miserable.

A voice was telling her to reveal the truth, to tell him everything his now dead brother confessed to her. With Tywin and Jaime Lannister dead, Margaery was probably the only person alive to know that secret. Though maybe Ser Kevan and Genna had some knowledge of it.

But then she remembered something Jaime Lannister told her before they left the city. It would destroy him. It would destroy Tyrion to know the whole truth. And as much as she wanted to hate him for hiding the truth about his brother and sister, for protecting them, she didn’t want to see him destroyed. Because she still loved him.

She had two weeks to think about it. She loved him just like she loved Loras. Her own brother had wanted her to turn her back on the man she loved, to abandon him, to marry Renly in order to be queen. Loras would have killed Tyrion if he had the occasion in the war. Loras sided with Renly. He didn’t care about the fact Joffrey was a bastard or not. All he cared about was that his lover would become king. He didn’t even think about her when he took the decision to support Renly. He just assumed Margaery would agree with this, despite their discussion at the tourney over a year ago.

In some way, both she and Tyrion were betrayed by their siblings. Loras would never have tried to kill or harm her in any way, physically speaking, but he would have been capable of killing the man she loved. Just like Cersei was ready to kill her sister-in-law, and just like Ser Jaime allowed his sister to try to kill her and Tyrion both.

"I’m sorry," Tyrion whispered. "I didn’t know who else to tell. I have no one else to tell."

"Me neither," Margaery replied.

Slowly, Tyrion got back on his feet, his hand still in Margaery’s. For a long time, he stood there, holding her hand, gripping it as if he was afraid to lose her. He finally let her hand go and looked at her, still with his defeated expression. He seemed about to say something but walked away in a heavy pace. Margaery wanted to say something as well, but she couldn’t find it before he left her chamber. It was only then, when she closed her eyes, that she realized she was crying just like her husband. She slept alone probably for a hundredth successive night, but this one was he first in fifteen where she actually missed Tyrion’s presence.

Chapter End Notes

The aim of this chapter was mostly to show what was happening on Tyrion's and Margaery's side while Stannis is taking King’s Landing. We also get to see how Sansa is doing in her new predicament, away from Joffrey but still a prisoner.

We won't see Tyrion and Margaery for a few chapters, for about the six next chapters
will take place in King's Landing. But don't worry, they'll come back in force.

Please review

Next chapter : Davos
"Matthos, get down!"

The instant after his son disappeared. The place where he was the fraction of a second before was engulfed in green fire, and Davos was thrown overboard as his ship was torn apart by the blow. He fell to the black water. He fell but never came into contact with the water of the bay. His fall was without end, and as it carried on, the dark damp was filled with flames, red flames.

"The night is dark and full of terrors, old man, but the fire burns terrors all away. Death by fire is the purest death."

As she said so, the fire turned green. It surrounded Davos, until the flames licked his feet, then his legs, his arms, his neck, his face, his eyes.

He woke up screaming. Standing high before the desk on which Davos fell asleep last night while working, the Red Woman looked at him, displaying a neutral expression.

"Having trouble to sleep, Ser Davos?"

It took some time for him to clear his mind from the nightmare he just made. "I don’t remember giving you the permission to walk in," he retorted, scrubbing his eyes.

"Why do you think I need your permission? The king will summon you very soon. I thought it would be better if you were ready before."

"You thought? Really?" He frowned. "You said he will summon me soon?"

"He will."

"How do you know that?" She gave him a look that told clearly it was obvious. "Of course."

He stood up, removing some imaginary or real dust from his clothes, anything to not look at the woman in front of him. He had fallen asleep on the scrolls he struggled to read last night. The princess Shireen had come to help him, but a single week of lessons wasn’t enough to make up for a life without reading. Matthos was trying to help him as well, but he was quite occupied. And so Davos was.

Three days since they took the city, and for three days they fought the fire that devoured it district by district. Priority went to the most important ones, like Aegon’s Hill or Visenya’s Hill, where
remained the Red Keep and the Great Sept of Baelor. They managed to keep fire from this place, and also from the Guild of the Alchemists and their stocks of wildfire, but not much more. Flea Bottom was gone, and so were important market places. From time to time, a new explosion would be heard, when a cache of wildfire would be reached by the flames. The Alchemists themselves didn’t know where all this wildfire came from.

"I just wanted to be sure we agreed on some matters, before the small council meeting, Ser Davos," the Red Woman said.

"I doubt we will ever agree on anything, my lady."

"We both want the same thing. We want Stannis to be king."

"Not for the same reasons."

"And yet we share a common goal. No matter what you think, Ser Davos, we both try to serve our lord the best we can."

"Not the same lord."

She smiled and walked to the window. Davos wasn’t used to live in such lavish rooms, but Stannis gave him the apartments of the Hand of the King since he actually was the Hand of the King. He still didn’t know what he would do of all this space. Right now, it was used to house soldiers and guards for the most part.

"The city is still burning."

"And it will keep burning unless we stop it," he retorted.

"Fire cannot be tamed." She turned to look at him. "But that is not the reason of my presence. The fate of Cersei Lannister will be decided today."

"And how can you know that?"

"I know," an enigmatic smile creeping over her lips again. Her visions once more, probably. "The false queen must be burned at the stake."

Davos chewed his lips before he answered. "Cersei Lannister must die, on that you’ll hear no objection from me, but I see no point in making her suffer. The executioner block and a good sword will do."

"The Lord of Light will not be satisfied with this."

"Stannis owes nothing to the Lord of Light. He is a king."

"And yet the Lord of Light granted him victory."

"Do you have any proof of it?"

"Look at the fire all around you, Ser Davos. You cannot find better testimony of our Lord’s will. Stannis’ reign is beginning in the fire."

"Is it the will of your Lord to burn innocents alive?"

"Sometimes sacrifices must be made to ensure victory. And if you had not advised our king to leave me behind at Dragonstone, perhaps the wildfire wouldn’t be ravaging his city right now."
Davos scoffed. "Don’t count on me."

"As you wish, Ser. But a day will come when you’ll understand you were wrong to see me as the enemy. Because I’m not the enemy here. Death is coming for everyone and everything. A darkness that will swallow the dawn."

She walked away to the door, but before she left the room, she faced him one last time. "Be careful with your son, Ser Davos. He’s not safe."

Davos was puzzled by her last words as she left. Should he have Matthos being watched? Was that a threat? It would be useless to tell the king. He would have to take dispositions himself. A messenger came to tell him the king requested his presence. Davos walked to the small council chamber immediately.

When he arrived, the king was alone with his Master of Ships. Lord Monford Velaryon had been named at the position because of his quick answer to Stannis’ summon and his contribution to the royal fleet. During the battle, he had been in the vanguard with Davos, his ships sinking two of Joffrey’s ships and capturing another. He also lost one to the debris projected by the wildfire explosion. Overall, a courageous man, experienced on the sea like Davos, loyal and honorable, but also proud and impatient. He was among the men who urged Stannis to storm the walls of the city as soon as possible. He was already boasting about the fact he occupied the king’s previous office on the small council, though he did it discreetly.

"The ships are safe, your Grace, but as long as the fire continues, we won’t be able to start major repairs, even less to build new ships," he was explaining.

"I know that damn well. That’s why I’m putting all efforts to protect the harbor, and why I ordered you to build more ships in your own wharves at Driftmark."

"It will take too much time, your Grace. For every ship we build, the Tyrells and the Lannisters will have three more ready. And now that Loras Tyrell is dead, nothing stops the fleets of the Arbor and Oldtown from attacking us whenever they want."

It was good to hear the opinion of another man of the sea. Ser Davos Seaworth may have been a smuggler who did everything to avoid Monford and Lord Velaryon a ship commander who did everything to arrest smugglers like Davos, they both lived on the sea and understood it better than any man spending his time on land. Davos used the opportunity to jump into the conversation.

"Your Grace, Lord Velaryon. If you would permit, I think the Greyjoys might offer us an opportunity. If we could make a temporary alliance with Balon Greyjoy..."

"I won’t make an alliance with an usurper," the king stated. Despite the tone that meant there was no further place for discussion, Davos tried to go on.

"It would only be temporary. We could convince the Balon Greyjoy to attack the Westerlands and the Reach instead of the North for the time we need to deal with the Lannisters and the Tyrells. After that we could deal with the Iron Islands. It would also free the North from the threat of the Ironborn and help them to focus on our enemies."

"The smuggler is not wrong, your Grace," Lord Velaryon said. "It would benefit us on the short term to only focus on the Lannisters and the Tyrells, and it would relieve our allies."

"The Starks and the Tullys are not my allies. They are my bannermen, my subjects," Stannis retorted.

"Of course, your Grace, but still it would relieve them. Winterfell has been taken. If Robb Stark will
not head back north, he will certainly want it," Davos argued. "And it would force the Greyjoys and the Lannisters to fight each other instead of only fighting us."

The king did not speak for a time. Davos could see he saw the sense of the option, but Davos suspected it wouldn’t change the king’s mind.

"I’m not making any alliance with an usurper, temporary or permanent. If Balon Greyjoy wants an alliance, he can surrender, and his daughter or his son, whoever his heir is, will help me against the other usurper."

Davos held back a sigh. It was difficult to advise a king like Stannis. The Hand’s badge was pinned on him, on his right shoulder next to his lucky pouch. It felt so awkward on him. He often forgot to wear it, but for a small council meeting, he had no choice. He still had a hard time believing Stannis named him his Hand. He would have expected someone else, of noble birth, probably Alester Florent, the queen’s uncle, to take the office. He said so to the king, but as usual the king had made his mind and he wouldn’t be moved from it. Davos had no choice but to accept an honor he never wanted.

The other members of the small council arrived shortly afterwards. Alester Florent, Master of Laws, and Axell Florent his younger brother, Master of Coin, took place side by side. The Red Woman came in not long afterwards. Stannis made her Mistress of Whisperers against all expectations, and to the fury of the High Septon. The latter had come to the Red Keep, braving the fire that devoured the city to speak to the king about it, and to refuse to crown him as long as this foreign priestess remained at his service. He left the castle an hour later, white like a blanket, after a private discussion with the king and Melisandre. The next day he crowned Stannis.

The last to come was Grand Maester Pycelle. They found him in the black cells, missing a beard and desperate for anyone to save him. He had showed his gratitude to Stannis in innumerable stuttering words since he left the black cells. Stannis maintained him at his position, even though he didn’t trust him. But the Grand Maester was chosen by the Conclave of the Citadel, not by the king, and Stannis decided it wasn’t an important enough office to ask the Citadel for another. Furthermore, Pycelle had been sent to the cells by Tyrion Lannister and resented the Lannisters for this. The chances for betrayal were thus reduced.

As always, the king didn’t lose time with courtesies.

"Let’s go down to business. We still have several fires to extinguish. I trust you, Ser Davos, to make sure they disappear before the whole city is burned to the ground."

"We do the best we can, your Grace," he said.

"That’s not enough. Do better."

Despite the bitter voice, Davos knew the king didn’t resent him for that. The fire was started when pots of wildfire near the Mud Gate exploded during the battle. The explosion reached a cache under the city walls and started a chain reaction with other caches until everything near the Mud Gate was on fire and it spread quickly to the rest of the city. It was the result of Cersei and Tyrion Lannister ordering massive quantities of wildfire to defend the city. Stannis Baratheon was not making any reproach, just ordering him to find better ways to quench and control the fire.

Ironically, it was the attack of their men from inside the city that may have caused this. Petyr Baelish had sent messages to Stannis a few days before the battle, giving him details of secret passageways that led inside the city. Stannis had not trusted Littlefinger, but he sent men to verify the claim all the same, enough to cause trouble behind the walls if the secret passageways indeed existed. And the
passages were there. About three hundred men found the passage, used it to emerge in a back alley near the Mud Gate and attacked its defenders from behind. The gates were opened, Stannis’ entered the city... and wildfire exploded.

They had no news from Littlefinger. The man who gave them his message didn’t know where he was, or so he claimed. He said a complete stranger gave him the letter with the information on the secret passageways under the city and a bag of silver to deliver it to Stannis, and so he did.

Petyr Baelish should have come to Stannis personally. If he had helpful information to provide to the king, then Stannis would have listened to him, then probably give him a chance to prove his loyalty before he forgave him for serving Joffrey for months, while still making him pay for his early betrayal. *A good act does not wash out the bad, nor a bad the good. Each should have its own reward.* Instead, Littlefinger disappeared, and Stannis was not about to forgive a man who refused to bend the knee before him.

No trace of Varys, the Spider, was found either. According to the few people in the Red Keep they could question, Joffrey the bastard died in mysterious circumstances the night during which Tyrion Lannister and his army abandoned King’s Landing. Some suspected the Imp to have killed his nephew. There had been a huge argument between the Lord of Casterly Rock and his siblings the night before he abandoned the city, apparently. They had left with Sansa Stark as well, keeping a precious hostage with them. As a result, Stannis didn’t face a full army when he attacked, and despite the absence of the Starks and the Tullys, he could easily take the city.

"Now, a scout arrived this morning," the king resumed. "The army of Robb Stark is only a day away from us. I intend to head for the Reach the day after he arrives. The levies of the Crownlands will join us on our way. I will conquer the lands of the Tyrells with the help of the lords who are loyal to me down there and the army of the Stormlands that already invaded it. Then we will turn north and enter the Westerlands by the south, where their defenses are the weakest. Lord Velaryon and his fleet will circle Dorne from the south and head for the Arbor to destroy the Tyrell fleets in the meantime. Once the Lannisters and the Tyrells are dealt with, I will deal with Balon Greyjoy and crush the Iron Islands once and for all."

"A sound plan, your Grace," Lord Florent said. "My house will be glad to help in the conquest of the Reach. I wouldn’t want to be presumptuous or presume that I can ask for that, but once the Tyrells are defeated, we will need for a new Warden of the South, and my house..."

"It’s useless to presume you may ask or not for this, Lord Florent, when you already asked," Stannis cut short. "For now, our priority is to conquer the Reach. I will decide the fate of Highgarden and who gets to become Warden of the South once the Reach is ours, not before. Suffice to say that this honor will not go to someone who’s done nothing for their king. My enemies will be destroyed, you can be certain of that. Whoever decides to support Tommen the usurper will perish."

"What about Dorne?" Ser Axell wondered. "The other bastard of the false queen is betrothed to Prince Doran’s heir. They are traitors as well."

"They are, but we will deal with them in due time. The Dornish are keeping to themselves and stay in their deserts. The army Doran Martell stationed at his borders didn't move for the whole war. I doubt he has any attention to take part to this war. But they’ll have to surrender the false princess when the time comes, or else they’ll be destroyed as well."

"If I may, your Grace," Pycelle began, "Princess Myrcella..."

"Only Myrcella. She is no princess, she is a bastard born of incest."
"Uh, yes. Sorry, your Grace. Myrcella is merely a child, and a woman as well. The rules are clear. The closest male relative of the king is his lawful heir. If Tommen was to die, then you’d have precedence over the girl, and she would be no threat to you as such."

"She will always be a threat as long as she is alive. And in Dorne, the elder is the heir, no matter he is man or woman, which means the Dornish might see Myrcella as the rightful queen. I won’t have a possible threat in my kingdom."

"We may ask Prince Doran to keep Myrcella as a ward for the time of the war, and offer him to participate in the war by attacking lands in the south of the Reach. The Lannisters offered him a few territories in the Stormlands. We could guarantee him the same, or offer lands in the Reach instead against their help," Davos proposed.

"I don’t have anything to give them. If they want something, they just need to fight for me, and then they can expect me to reward them afterwards."

"But their help could be useful against the Reach," Davos kept arguing. If he couldn’t get the king to make a temporary alliance with Balon Greyjoy, then perhaps he could convince him to make an alliance with Dorne. At least he got to try. "Dorne has fought the Reach for centuries. They are long time enemies, and even with Robb Stark’s men, we will still be fewer than the Tyrells and the Lannisters."

"I won’t have bannermen who need promises of lands and gold to rally to me. I am their king, it is to me to reward them after their deeds are done, not for them to demand rewards before they’ve accomplished anything."

"Our king has the Lord of Light on his side," Melisandre declared. "That is all he needs. The very fact we’re sitting here is proof that R’hllor watches over him. Fire brought us victory."

"And many dead as well," Davos countered. "If we lose as many men in future battles as we have at Blackwater, then after two or three battles we will be lost."

"Enough. I won’t have any of this. I’ve made my decision. We will invade the Reach, then the Westerlands. And then we will deal with the Ironborn, not before," the king stated.

"Our fleet is at a disadvantage from a numerical point of view," Lord Velaryon said, "but we’ll never be readier than today. I just wish a part of the royal fleet was not gone when we came. Some of the best ships it had are now in Dorne, and I doubt their crew will surrender to us. By the time we reach Dorne, they’ll probably have joined the Tyrell fleets at the Arbor and Oldtown. This will reinforce our enemy."

"As you said, there’s nothing we can do about it. Have the ships prepared and ready to leave in two days."

"Yes, my king."

"Now, to another matter I must take care of now as I’m leaving soon. Cersei Lannister."

"She must die," Lord Florent stated.

"Don’t you think I know it? Of course, she must die, and she will. However, she is a lady, and she was my brother’s wife, his queen not long ago. She’s going to die, aye, but I intend to leave her the choice as to how she wants to die. What do you say?"

"It appears to be a decent kindness, your Grace. The least we can offer to a queen, though we could
also keep her as a hostage for future negotiations with the Lannisters," Pycelle said.

"Cersei Lannister is a former queen. Selyse is the only queen now. And it is not the least I can offer her, it is the most. I do not do it out of kindness but out of duty. She was Robert’s queen, but that’s all. She represents nothing in my eyes. She must count herself lucky that she was married to my brother. And she would be useless as a hostage. Tyrion Lannister left her behind. It wouldn’t surprise me if he didn’t care about her at all. What do you think of it, Ser Davos?"

Davos was surprised that the king asked him directly his opinion. But after all, he was Hand of the King now.

"As far as I’m concerned, your Grace, Cersei Lannister must die. The method matters not. Perhaps we can give the least painful death we can find, but aside from that there is little I can say on that matter that you’ve not already said. Let’s execute her and be done with it."

He met the gaze of the Red Woman. She looked... disappointed. Did she really expect he would support he idea to have the former queen burned alive? Of course, that was the moment someone else at the table intervened.

"This woman does not deserve any respect, your Grace." It was Ser Axell. "She may have been your brother’s wife, but she betrayed him. She committed incest with her twin brother and three children were born out of it, all monsters in the face of our Lord. She stole your crown and placed it on the head of one of her monsters, and another still claims he is the king and not you. She must suffer for what she did, and what she gave birth to. She must burn at the stake."

Silence followed that declaration. Melisandre was next to speak.

"Her crimes do not matter here, although Ser Axell is right. Cersei Lannister must be burned alive to bring the Lord’s favor on our king’s upcoming campaign."

"Burning seems a little..."

The Grand Maester didn’t finish what he started. His eyes met Melisandre, who raised an eyebrow, and immediately Pycelle ceased to speak.

"With all the respect that is due to you, my lady, even though I have embraced the faith in the Lord of Light, very few in King’s Landing have. Turning the execution of the former queen into a sacrifice might indispose some people towards us and make us lose possible allies," Lord Alester Florent said.

"Our king’s best ally is the Lord of Light," she said sweetly.

"Ser Davos, you said the method to execute Cersei Lannister didn’t matter. What say you now?" The king asked.

Davos inhaled deeply before he replied. "Although I think the method doesn’t matter as long as she dies, your Grace, I don’t think it would be appropriate to burn her at the stake with the fires ravaging the city as we speak. This would give you the image of a king who mocks the suffering of his people, even if you don’t. And I agree with Lord Alester when he says turning the execution into a sacrifice to the Lord of Light might create us new enemies."

"If you sacrifice him the false queen, your Grace, the Lord of Light will be with you through your journey. Cersei Lannister must burn if you want this war to go the way you want, and if you want to be king. Remember it is thanks to our Lord that you are sitting here today," the Red Woman declared.
Stannis seemed to ponder over Melisandre’s last declaration. Finally, he stood up.

"I’ve made my decision, and I see no reason to come back on it. Cersei Lannister will die the way she wants. If she wants to burn, then so be it, but I don’t give a damn whether she dies hanging, her head chopped by a sword or an axe, drowning or starving to death. That’s a choice I leave to her. This council meeting is over. I have more pressing matters to attend to. Lord Valeryon, Lord Florent, come with me. I must prepare my troops for tomorrow. You’ll accompany me. Ser Davos, I entrust you with the city while I’m away. Make these fires cease and ensure it doesn’t fall into our enemies’ hands. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Lannisters come back when they learn I’ve taken the city."

"Yes, your Grace" he replied, a little surprised, though the king’s choice made sense.

As Hand of the King, he spoke for the king when he wasn’t there, and since the king probably wouldn’t be in the capital for a long time, then it was only fitting that his Hand remains to rule in the meantime. Davos shuddered at the thought of the task ahead of him. The biggest thing he ever ruled was the small keep the king granted to him and his wife after he saved him at the Siege of Storm’s End. He never administered anything closely as big as a city, even less a kingdom. After all, if Stannis was on campaign, that would mean Davos would also have to deal with the Crownlands. He thought he might soon miss his small keep.

Melisandre walked to him as the king was leaving.

"The king is making a terrible mistake. He listens to me, but he doesn’t trust me. He trusts you, however. Convince him to burn Cersei, or else he will never rule the Seven Kingdoms."

"My lady, you should know by now that when Stannis takes a decision, he doesn’t change his mind. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a city to rule, and fires to extinguish."

And indeed, that was what he kept doing for the rest of the day: quenching fires. What helped them was the rain that began to fall around noon. It slowed the progression of the fire, allowing Davos’ men to secure the last vital parts of the city, such as the harbor and the Guild of the Alchemists, that were not protected from its destruction. From now on, they could hopefully focus on reducing fires around merchant squares and the neighborhoods where people actually lived, and not only the rich people but also the poor.

Late in the evening, Davos was attempting to read scrolls again. Matthes had prepared him a sheet with the letters of the alphabet, but a few days trying to learn to read wasn’t enough for him to make sense of half of the words he looked on the paper. This one was a raven from Castle Black, on the Wall. Pyelle said it should be a good practice for someone who didn’t know how to read.

"T... o... To... h... i... s... To his G... r... a... c... G... r... a... c... e... Grace, I guess. To his Grace, t... h... e... How do we say it yet?"

Pounds at the door. It opened to allow in a small girl with greyscale on her left cheek. Davos smiled.

"Princess, you’re disturbing an old man while he's working, I’m afraid."

"You’re not old. Pyelle is. But he’s not working like you."

He laughed. The young princess came to sit in front of him. "What can I do for you, princess?"

"I want to visit the cellars where the dragon skulls are, but Mother won’t let me. Could you talk to Father, ask him to tell her that I can?"

"I’m sure if you ask him yourself, he will grant you the permission."
"He doesn’t have time to see me. Mother stops me from seeing him."

Davos sighed. The only person who could overturn the queen’s authority on her daughter was the king. And the only one who could talk to Stannis about such a matter was the actual Hand of the King. That meant him. "I’ll talk to him," he promised, though when he could bring the matter on the table he didn’t know.

Shireen smiled, all happy. Then she looked at the things on the desk and the parchment right in front of Davos. "Have you been trying to read?"

"Trying, princess, is quite the appropriate word."

"You really never learned to read before? No one ever thought you that?"

"Alas, I was born in Flea Bottom, princess. A boy from the streets doesn’t really have time to read. And a smuggler either. We must know how to sail, we must understand the seas, know when we can sail and when we cannot, but reading? We don’t get much use out of it. I didn’t think I would be Hand of the King one day. Had I known, I might have learned before."

"What are you trying to read?"

"I’m not sure. A raven from Castle Black, from the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. But I only know where it comes from because the Grand Maester told me. I could only read that it was addressed to your father, so far."

"It’s not long enough. You should try with something longer, and funnier too. That kind of message seems dull."

"I’m quite sure, princess, but that’s the kind of reading a Hand of the King must do."

"You should try this." The princess had been carrying a book when she entered. She laid in front of Davos. "It’s a history of the Targaryen kings of Westeros, by Archmaester Gyldayn. Try to read the title. Just the three big words."

Davos tried to read it, but to no avail. He couldn’t recognize the letters. He looked at Matthos’ paper, but none of the letters he saw were there. "You're reading it upside down, you know," she noticed.

Realizing his mistake, Davos rotated the book to have the title in the right sense. Then using the alphabet Matthos wrote down for him, he began identifying the letters, then turning them into syllables. At least he tried.

"Fi... r... Fire... Fire... a... an... and... B... l... Blo... Blood... Fire and Blood. Fire and Blood." Shireen clapped her hands. "Thank you, princess. The Targaryen words. I’m sure it’s a nice book."

"It is. You could try to read it. I can help you."

"I’m afraid without your help I would not be able to read it anyway."

And so they began to read. The first paragraph was an ordeal, and so was the second and the third. But he endured. By the time the author began to talk about the origins of House Targaryen, Davos had started to find it less tortuous.

The princess helped him until late in the evening, then Matthos, who had been sent by Queen Selyse, came to bring her back to her chambers. Davos went to bed. The next morning, the execution of Cersei Lannister took place. It was said that when the king offered her to choose the way she would
die, she laughed and refused to make a choice. The king gave her the whole day to consider. That very morning, the former queen still refused to choose, for according to her, Stannis had no choice to offer her. The choice belonged to her by right since she was the queen, and Stannis couldn’t give her a choice to make. In her madness, she finally let escape that if she was to leave, she wished to leave the same way the man she loved and her children would leave this world. Stannis satisfied her wish.

She was brought to the courtyard, with only the nobles and the people of the Red Keep to witness her execution. She was showed the heads of Jaime Lannister and their son Joffrey, planted on spikes over the battlements. Davos saw her burst in cries when she saw them. And so it was a wailing and screaming queen, cursing Stannis and swearing revenge to him one moment, then begging for his mercy the next, who was brought to the executioner’s block. It was the king’s justice, Ser Ilyn Payne, who Stannis maintained in his position for he was not considered a threat, who removed Cersei Lannister’s head from her body. Davos could only agree that, despite the fact he hated to see such things, the king proved right and just in his sentence. The usurper queen was dead. There would be no way now to make peace with the Lannisters.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
They saw the smoke long before the city became visible. Their scout reported that the city belonged to Stannis, but it was also burning. Still, it unsettled for Jon to see the smoke rise from such a long distance. When they were finally close enough to see the battlements, the day was coming to an end, and when they looked at the city they could see shades of orange and red, shades that were not caused by the setting sun.

They were welcomed by a group of knights led by a certain Ser Justin Massey, who rode to them as they were approaching the city. As soon as they met, he told Robb and Ser Brynden, who commanded the Riverlands troops who traveled to King’s Landing with them, that they had to make camp right there and to not approach the city further, for fires were ravaging it. He also commanded the Lord of Winterfell and the Blackfish to accompany him for the king had to talk with them immediately.

And so they rode, but not toward the city. They had arrived by the north, Stannis’ army was stationed west of the city. They circled it. As they rode by, Jon saw the damage to a part of the walls and felt a horrible smell. Ser Justin told them the city was burning. How many bodies might be decomposing right now within these walls? Everyone said there was over half a million people inside these walls.

Jon remembered the time he spent at Casterly Rock, and the few visits he made to Lannisport while he lived there. The city was well organized, with clean streets and houses aligned in order. No foul smell. Not that Lannisport had no odour, but Jon had only found it odd at the beginning, and then pleasant for a short time before he got accustomed to it. Nothing to see with what he was seeing and smelling today. Also, he didn’t really have the impression that King’s Landing was a bigger city than Lannisport. Lannisport had about a hundred thousand people living within its walls, while King’s Landing had five times more people. How could life be in such a cramped space?

With Robb and the Blackfish rode not only Jon, but also Lord Galbart Glover, Ser Wylis Manderly, Lord Jason Mallister and Lord Clement Piper. Robb had picked the lords who were the less likely to cause problems in Stannis’ presence. After they had learned the city was already fallen, some lords, especially among the northern ones, complained that they should never have headed south and should have kept pursuing the Lannisters instead, or gone back home to deal with the Greyjoy threat. The mood was not a happy one in the Stark encampment these days. People wanted to go back home and deal with the Ironborn invasion, or at least fight the real enemy, House Lannister. During a discussion he had with Gregor Forrester, the Lord of Ironrath told Jon that the Northerners are not fighting for Stannis. They are fighting the Lannisters. They are not fighting to put Robert’s brother on the Iron Throne. They are fighting to kill the people who murdered Lord Eddard Stark.

They arrived at the outskirts of Stannis’ camp, where they unhorsed.
"What do you think we should expect?" Jon asked his brother as they walked through the camp, some people stopping their work to look at them as they passed near them.

"To meet a king. I just hope he’s not too angry that we missed the battle."

"It doesn’t matter much," the Blackfish told them. "He won it, and he didn’t face enough enemies to need us."

"What do you think will happen now?" Jon asked.

"The best course of action would be to invade the Westerlands by the south. I suppose the king will bring us all in the Reach," the Blackfish answered.

Jon approached his brother so only he would hear his words. "What are we gonna do for Winterfell?"

"We will see it with the king."

It didn’t relieve Jon. Their homeland was invaded by the Ironborn, Winterfell had been burned, and Bran and Rickon...

They received the news only a few days ago. A rider from Harrenhal rode tirelessly to reach them with the news. Bran and Rickon were dead. Ramsay Snow had been besieging the castle when the Ironborn put it to the torch and tried to escape. The prisoners they took confessed that Bran and Rickon were burned by Theon long ago. His own men killed him when they turned on him at the end of the siege. His body wasn’t found, no more than Bran’s or Rickon’s, lost in the fires. They wouldn’t even be able to bury them.

How could Theon do something like that? How could he kill two children? Rickon had barely been eight-years-old. Betray them, follow his family and his house, that Jon could understand, that was his family after all. If Jon had been the one to live as a ward at Pyke, he would certainly have betrayed the Greyjoys, but to kill two innocent children, burning them furthermore? What kind of monster lived under their roof for all these years? Theon had eaten with them, played with them, trained with them. How could he do such a thing? The question kept coming again and again. Betrayal was everywhere. They couldn’t seem to trust anyone.

Jon couldn’t see much difference between the king’s pavilion and the other tents in the camp, aside from the fact it was bigger. They walked into it and came face to face with a tall man, dressed for war, with a square jaw, grayish hair, and piercing eyes. He was talking with another man when they entered, but they stopped right away.

"Your Grace," said Robb going on his knee, followed by everyone in the tent."

With a movement of hand, Stannis Baratheon ordered them to stand up. Jon looked at him more closely. People could have expected some resemblance with King Robert, but there was none. If he wasn’t told, he would never have thought this man was the brother of Robert Baratheon. He seemed more like a warrior though. Only looking at the man’s stance, Jon had no trouble believing his father when he told them Stannis Baratheon was a battle commander.

"You’re Robb Stark, Ned Stark’s son." Jon wasn’t sure if it was a question the king asked his brother, but Robb answered nonetheless.

"Yes, your Grace."

Stannis looked at him for a moment, nodded, then turned his gaze to Jon. "When you walked in here,
I almost thought it was you. You look like him when he was younger. Who are you?"

Taken aback, Jon straightened himself. "My name is Jon Snow, your Grace."

"Hm. The Bastard of Winterfell. Your father was an honorable man." He turned back his gaze to Robb. "Your father told me of the Lannister's treachery. I regret his death." He turned away and positioned himself on the other side of a table where a huge map of Westeros was laid. "You came late. I was counting on the forces of the Riverlands and the North to take the city."

"We received your order too late, your Grace. By the time we had it, you were almost at the city gates," Robb explained.

"No matter, the city is taken, now I have to make sure all the Seven Kingdoms obey to their king. We won't waste time here. The armies of the Reach are on the move since the death of Loras Tyrell. They threaten both King’s Landing and the Stormlands and represent most of the rebel forces. We will march tomorrow to Highgarden. From there, we'll be able to attack the Lannisters by the south where they are vulnerable. Ser Brynden Tully, you're the most seasoned warrior in this tent. What do you think of it?"

The Blackfish approached the map on the table. "It can work, as long as you leave sufficient garrisons in Riverrun and King’s Landing. The Tyrells have the biggest army in Westeros and the Lannisters have the one with the best military equipment. This will be no easy task."

"I didn’t expect it to be easy, but it must be done."

"Your Grace," Robb stepped in, "with all your respect, I request your permission to send half of my men back in the North to face the invasion of the Ironmen."

"That is not something I can allow. Your men are needed here, right now."

"They are also needed in the North, your Grace. The Greyjoys have invaded our lands. Deepwood Motte has fallen, Torrhen’s Square, Moat Cailin, even Winterfell. Two of my brothers are dead, slaughtered by Theon Greyjoy. Villages are burned to the ground, children are slaughtered, the wives of my men are being raped."

"Just like it happens in all wars and conflicts since the dawn of humanity. I don't want the North to suffer, and you can consider my house has some degree of responsibility in that since it was Robert who spared Balon Greyjoy after the last rebellion. If he had listened to me, the Greyjoys would no longer be a problem. But my brother never listened to me, and so here we are. Still, I won't let your men go. They are needed to fight the other traitors. Your father swore an oath, and you swore an oath as well, Lord Stark, to serve your king and lend him your help whenever he needed it. Well, the time has come. I need your help to end this rebellion and deal with the traitors who killed your father. Then we will deal with the Iron Islands, and this time I will not spare a single Greyjoy."

This king wouldn’t be moved, Jon could see that. Robb had been pushed by his bannermen to demand that the king allow a part of their army to go back home to face the Ironborn threat. Galbart Glover especially, whose castle had been taken by Yara Greyjoy, the very daughter of Balon Greyjoy and Theon’s sister, and whose wife and children were being held as prisoners, put pressure on Robb on that point. He had been supported by half of the northern lords, especially those ruling the lands in the western part of the North, such as the Forresters, the Cerwyns and the Mormonts. Even Lord Umber, Robb’s staunchest supporter, was of the opinion that they should let lords whose lands were threatened go back home while the others would keep fighting the Lannisters in the south. Roose Bolton had approved the Greatjon, and even Ser Wylis thought it might be a good idea as they didn’t have enough men on their own to repel the invaders. Robb had finally given in, but the
king just flatly refused to let a part of his army go home. Lord Glover was obviously furious, and Ser Manderly silently disapproved.

"Your Grace, with all your respect I cannot do that. I am the Warden of the North, and as such I am bound to protect the North."

"You are Warden of the North because I allow you to be it. I could choose whoever else I want to replace you, Robb Stark. And don’t tell me the Northerners cannot face bands of pirates who only know to fight on the seas."

"Bands of pirates?" almost roared Lord Glover. "These bands of pirates, like you call them, have seized entire castles. My home has been taken and my family is being held up in hostage. For what I know, the same fate than Brandon and Rickon Stark may be awaiting them."

"And if one of my bannermen in the Stormlands had seen his family captured by pirates of the Stepstones and his castle seized by them, I would just give him the same orders I just gave you, Lord Glover. If you’re not happy with it, then just tell me when you’re ready to become a traitor and I’ll make sure everyone sees you as an example of how I deal with traitors."

The Lord of Deepwood Motte was fuming. "Lord Glover, stay out of this. I’ll handle this," Robb told him. "Your Grace, you are the king, we will do as you say, but don’t expect the North to be able to send you any more men in the future for this war."

"I don’t need more men in the future, and certainly not those in the North. I need your men who are here, right now." He stepped forward and looked into Robb’s eyes. "Your father was an honorable man. He never turned his back to his king. I expect you to be just as honorable as he was. I’ll be waiting for you at dawn. We’ll talk further about the march ahead of us. You’re dismissed, Lord Stark."

They were about to leave, after Robb took his time to bow before Stannis, but when he turned his heels, he was called back by the king.

"Wait. I have something to show you first."

Two men came in, carrying a huge chest. They opened it. Jon moved to get a better view of what was inside. There were three heads.

They had not been dead for a long time, judging by their state. Jon would say they had been dead for a few days, maybe a week at most. They were not disfigured enough so that he wouldn’t recognize them, despite the fact he only saw them shortly when they visited Winterfell. On the left end, Joffrey’s head, with short blond hair. It was hard to judge because of the decay, but he seemed to have an expression of horror on his face. There were red traces around his mouth, as if he spat blood before he died. Jaime Lannister’s bead was in some better state. The way the heads were positioned, you could see the resemblance between the father and the son. As for the queen, strands of her long hair remained. Jon was surprised by how well her face was preserved, as if she only died today, though there was soot and dust in some places. Joffrey Baratheon, Jaime Lannister and Cersei Lannister, the people behind his father’s death, were dead.

"As you can see, Lord Stark," Stannis declared, "I don’t lose time dealing with traitors."

The way back to their own camp was long and silent. As soon as they unhorsed inside the perimeter, Lord Glover approached Robb, obviously angry. "My lord, this is unacceptable. We cannot just abandon our homes and our lands..."
"Lord Glover, if you want to talk about this, we won’t do it here. Follow me."

Galbart Glover followed Robb. His brother made a sign to Jon to follow him, and also to the Blackfish. Jon ended walking side by side with the brother of Catelyn Stark.

"You’ve met Stannis Baratheon before?" Jon asked him.

"Yes, I have. He’s not changed a bit. He was already like this years ago. Bitter, direct, not the kind to pat you on the shoulder. But he’s a fair man, and one of the best military commander in the Seven Kingdoms. If someone can conquer the Westerlands and the Reach with one single army, that’s him."

"But he needs our men?"

"He needs as many men as possible. Even the best military mind must use every tool available to his advantage. Stannis is not the kind of man who goes to war blindfolded. Unlike Robert, he doesn’t rush on the enemy at first sight. He’s calculating, and will always choose the option that yields the highest probability of victory. And, I’m sorry to tell you that, but he’s not as honorable as your father was."

They arrived at the tent. Lord Glover spat what he had on the heart before Jon and Ser Brynden could join them inside. "The king’s orders are madness. We’re going to spend years invading the western kingdoms while the Ironborn plunder our lands and live in our castles."

"Don’t think I’m not as mad as you are, Lord Glover," Robb replied, calmly but with an obvious anger he tried to control. "Your home is occupied, mine was burned to the ground. Your family is being kept hostage, my two brothers are dead. I know very well what you feel, because I feel the same way that you do."

"In this case, what are you going to do?"

Robb didn’t reply for a moment. "Stannis is the king."

"Aye, and you are the Lord of Winterfell. We didn’t follow him to war. We followed you. So, I ask you again, my lord, what are you going to do?"

"I need to talk to all of my bannermen, not only to you, Lord Glover. Come back in an hour, then we shall discuss all together."

"As you wish, my lord," the Lord of Deepwood Motte finally said, leaving afterwards.

"It is hard to follow a king who brings you far from your home when it is in danger," the Blackfish said after he was gone.

"Aye, I know. But we cannot disobey him. He’s the king."

"Aye, he’s the king. And you’re the Lord of Winterfell, Robb. Don’t ever forget that."

Ser Brynden Tully walked out as well, leaving Robb and Jon alone.

"You think we should not follow the king?" Jon asked to his brother.

"I would rather not, but if I disobey Stannis, what will keep my own bannermen from disobeying my every order? And there are still Lannisters alive out there. Joffrey, Cersei and the Kingslayer were not the only ones who had a hand in Father’s death."
Jon had to agree with Robb on the first part, though he wasn’t sure that other Lannisters played a role in their father’s downfall, especially after his discussion alone with Mira and the things Lady Stark told them when she returned from the Stormlands.

"Bran and Rickon..." Robb said their names with difficulty. "They’re both dead. Sansa is not here. She’s still a prisoner of the Lannisters." Ser Justin Massey had told them while they rode to Stannis’ encampment. "We just lost our two brothers, Jon. We have to keep fighting for Sansa. This is the only way we can get her back. The Lannisters will never free her."

Jon knew, deep down, that it was true. Stannis would never negotiate with the Lannisters and, although Jon had enough trust left in Lord Tyrion and his wife to treat her kindly, much better than Joffrey ever did, and to keep her safe, they would never let her go as long as Stannis fought them... and as long as the Starks and the Tullys would fight for Stannis. Sansa might be the sibling he liked the less, she remained his sister. He thought of Arya who stayed at Riverrun. She was safe, and with her mother. Sansa was not. They had no choice. They had to fight for Stannis.

Late in the night, Robb convened all his bannermen. They were too many to hold inside the command tent, so they made their council outside, with the glow of King’s Landing’s fires at the horizon. He told them the king’s orders, which didn’t please most people there, especially those from the North. The river lords were less hostile. Their spirits got a little better when Robb showed them the heads of the Lannisters.

"I know it’s been a hard time you lately. It’s been a hard time for all of us," Robb continued. "We are far away from our homes, our lands have been ravaged, plundered, taken away for some us. Some lost their home, and their family are in danger. My family is in danger as well, and I already lost a lot me too. My brothers Brandon and Rickon are both dead, murdered by a man that I considered like a friend. My sister Arya was given back to me, but Sansa is still in the hands of the Lannisters. But I’m not about to abandon. I didn’t lower my arms when they imprisoned my father, nor when they killed him. I didn’t give up when my two sisters then my two brothers were made prisoners, nor when they got killed. I didn’t abandon when my home was burned down. You didn’t either, and I thank you for that. You followed me because you believed in our cause, just like I did. I still believe in it. The Lannisters killed my father, Lord Eddard Stark, your lord, and although some of them are dead, many are still alive, and they want their revenge just as much as we want ours. I am not going to let them have it. I’m not going to give up. I will never bow, and I will never kneel before a Lannister."

Many lords who were present approved. Lord Karstark was one of the most eager, followed not long after by Lord Umber. Even Lord Glover nodded in approval. Roose Bolton was as quiet as ever, showing no reaction and listening attentively.

"I do not command you to follow me. I do not demand that you follow me. I ask you to follow me. If you don’t, then go home and fight the Ironborn. All that matters is that we fight the enemies of the North, whoever they are."

Again, they all approved. Jon agreed as well. Maybe that wasn’t what Stannis wanted, but after all if Robb’s bannermen walked away from their own free will, he couldn’t blame Robb as much as if Robb decided to leave himself. It was this or to fear a rebellion among his bannermen. And right now, none of them seemed ready to leave. Even Lord Glover didn’t raise. In fact, it was someone totally unexpected who stood up first: Jon Umber.

"Lord Stark is right. We must fight the enemies of the North. We must follow Robb Stark." The lords roared in approval, even those from the Riverlands. "But why should we follow Stannis?"

The silence that fell afterwards was as thick as stones. Everyone listened, intrigued, surprised. Roose Bolton looked more interested. Robb looked stunned, just like Jon was.
"Eighteen years ago, it wasn’t Robert Baratheon we followed to war. It was Eddard Stark we followed, and he who led us. When Balon Greyjoy rebelled, it was not Robert either that we followed. It was Lord Stark, again. And it wasn’t Stannis we followed in this war. It was you, my lord." He turned towards Robb. "Twice you’ve defeated the Lannisters. Twice you made them leave with their tail between their legs." Many people laughed. "The only reason you didn’t give them the final blow is because of Stannis. The first time, he forbade us from approaching King’s Landing, from attacking it, ordered us to hold the Lannisters within the Riverlands. In the meantime, where was this king? In the Stormlands, murdering his own brother. Making himself a kinslayer."

Disgust and anger were plain on everyone’s face. "And then, when we threw Stafford Lannister from Riverrun, Stannis called us to King’s Landing. Twice we could have given a crucial blow to House Lannister, and twice Stannis kept us from doing so. All he could do in the meantime was to take an empty city, a city that is now burning."

Lord Umber looked at the red lights of fire in the south. "This is not our capital. This is not our city. These are not the people we fight for. They don’t have the same gods, the same laws, they do not think like us. We bowed to the dragons. The dragons are gone. Why shouldn’t we rule ourselves again?"

He turned again to look at Robb. For a long moment, Lord Umber eyed him. And Jon understood just before he drew his sword what was happening right now, in the outskirts of King’s Landing, at the dawn of the three hundredth year after Aegon’s Conquest.

"There is only one king I know, and he’s standing right in front of me. The King in the North."

The Lord of the Last Hearth went on his knees, his sword planted into the ground. Some lords didn’t seem to believe what was just said. Jon looked at his brother. He didn’t react, and Jon neither did.

A soft voice spoke then. "Lord Umber speaks true. Why shouldn’t we rule ourselves again?"

Roose Bolton drew his sword and went on his knee as well. "You are my king, Robb Stark."

He said it without emotion, the same way he always said everything. Jon failed to understand for a moment. Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort, descending from the family who fought House Stark for centuries, just declared Robb to be his king.

"The King in the North," a female voice followed, drawing her sword as well. Maege Mormont raised it.

"The King in the North!"

"The King in the North!"

"The King in the North!"

The outcries added up with the swords that were drawn. Soon all the Lords of the North were hailing Robb as their king, and the river lords who were present joined them against all odds. Jon looked at the scenery before him. He turned to his brother who looked at him in an uncertain way.

And Jon remembered something their lord father used to tell them, when he talked about Torrhen Stark who knelt before Aegon three centuries ago. A Stark could kneel, but he can always rise back, stronger. Jon drew his sword and knelt before his brother, his king.
Jon knelt before his king, but perhaps not the one you were expecting. I hope I succeeded to create some kind of surprise, even though it happens in the canon in different circumstances.

So, Robb is now King in the North (again), but this time with Jon at his side, and the enemy in front of him is not Tywin Lannister this time. And technically speaking, this is a War of Five Kings (no, six: Joffrey, Stannis, Renly, Balon, Tommen, Robb). If a certain King Beyond the Wall makes it through the Wall, it will be seven.

Please review

Next chapter: Jon (again)

The next chapter may take some time to come out because I want to upload it along with a few other chapters at the same time. The next upload will probably take place in three-four weeks.
Jon X

Chapter Notes

It's been a while. I should have uploaded this chapter long ago. There are six more chapters to come immediately after that should be uploaded tomorrow if I have time, by the end of the week at worst.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON X

Before their eyes, the army of Stannis Baratheon, the might of the Stormlands and the Crownlands united. Behind their back, the forces of House Tully and House Stark, the power of the North and the Riverlands. Between them, on their left, the city of King’s Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, the center of a Realm the North decided to leave last night, a decision that was accepted if not approved by the Riverlands.

Following the declaration of Robb as their king by the northern lords, a very long discussion took place with the Blackfish. His brother Hoster Tully was not present, nor his presumptive heir Edmure Tully. None of them had acknowledged Robb as a king. However, the river lords who were present hailed Robb as their king, along with his own bannermen. And the river lords who were present had significant power in the Riverlands. A raven had left this very night for Riverrun, but they would need a few days before a reply came. In the meantime, the Blackfish chose a middle path. While Robb sent a message to Stannis where he declared he would now be King in the North, Brynden Tully declared he would fight alongside his grandnephew if Stannis refused to acknowledge Robb in his new titles and rights. Family came first.

They didn’t wait long for a reply. The knight they sent, Ser Belon, came back with a very clear order: Robb and Ser Brynden were to present themselves to the Red Keep within the hour, or else they would be branded as traitors. Robb and the Blackfish countered by proposing a meeting outside the gates of King’s Landing. Robb had wanted to go in the Red Keep, to show Stannis he meant no disrespect, but the Blackfish opposed and finally convinced Robb that it would be too dangerous. Reminding Robb that Stannis probably killed his own brother was enough to convince him.

It wasn’t late after they sent their reply that Stannis’ army took position with the city on its right. Robb had no choice but to call his own troops to face them, and the Blackfish aligned his men by his side. My brother and I once chose to betray our king for the betrothed of Catelyn. I'll be cursed if now I choose my king over her son, the knight told them.

And now they were waiting between the two armies, Robb, Jon, Lord Umber, Lord Karstark, Lord Bolton, Lord Glover, Ser Manderly, Ser Brynden Tully, Lord Mallister and Lord Piper, their banners displaying wolves and trouts flapping to the wind. Ghost and Grey Wind were there as well. After his army was in position, Stannis sent another message that he would parley with the usurper. And now he was approaching, followed by half-a-dozen people. When they were close enough, he noticed their banners that displayed a burning heart instead of the black stag of House Baratheon. Jon had found this odd when they rode into the king’s encampment the day before, but this struck him much more when he saw that one of the banners was carried by a woman.

When they stopped a few feet away, the woman was looking at Robb, but her gaze slowly turned to...
Jon. She wasn’t young. Jon would probably say she was in the end of thirties, maybe the beginning of the forties, but she was very beautiful, beyond what Jon had ever seen. Her heart-shaped figure was without any default, her deep blue eyes like amethysts scrutinized him, her long red hair that seemed to burn like fire stood still despite the surrounding wind. And she kept looking at Jon.

She was probably the foreign priestess Lady Stark told them about. Jon had heard the tales that spread through the Riverlands that she was Stannis’ lover. He didn’t know if Stannis truly burned the kingswood of Storm’s End, but something was giving Jon the impression that this woman had a huge influence on Stannis Baratheon. Her mere presence at this parley seemed to prove it.

"So, after traveling all this way to join your king, you finally choose to betray him, Robb Stark?" Stannis asked him. To say he was displeased was the least they could say. Jon feared the brother of Robert Baratheon might break his jaw so much he was clenching it.

Robb sustained the gaze of the king very well. Their lord father prepared Robb to be the Lord of Winterfell, and Robb worked hard so that he would fulfill this role honorably one day.

"I chose nothing, your Grace," Robb replied. He rotated his horse so he could look behind, to the lords accompanying him and to his army. Then he stared back at Stannis. "The North chose. If I made any choice, it was to follow the will of my people, and that of the lords who stand by my side today. They wanted me to be their king, and I respect their wishes, and I understand them. They are far away from their homes, fighting for a king they never saw before, a king who demands that they abandon their homes. Did you expect them to love you after that?"

"I’m not asking for their love, nor for yours. I’m demanding their loyalty, that they respect their oaths of fealty. We shouldn’t even be having this conversation. I am their king, as such they are bound by oath to obey me."

"And I am bound by oath to protect the North. Warden of the North, isn’t it the title your brother and you bestowed to my house, as the Targaryens did for three hundred years before you? I am bound to protect the kingdom of the North, and that’s why I’m his king now. I’m ready to follow you into battle, I will help to take your rightful place on the Iron Throne, but not as your bannerman."

"And you’ll snatch away half my kingdom in the process."

"The North was an independent kingdom for thousands of years long before you were born, long before your brother sat on the Iron Throne, and long before my ancestors knelt before Aegon Targaryen. We will continue to be an independent kingdom long after you are gone, your Grace."

As the discussion progressed, Robb’s tone turned sourer and more hostile, losing the respect he tried to show Stannis. In the meantime, the Red Priestess kept staring at Jon. He felt quite uneasy under her gaze.

"Ser Brynden," Stannis addressed the Blackfish, "do you agree with this?"

The veteran knight looked to Robb, then back to the king, a bored expression on his face. "I don’t approve it, but it’s not my place to decide. What I have to decide is whether I let you kill my family or not, and that I cannot let you do it. If Robb Stark declares himself King in the North and you fight him, then you’ll have to get through me first."

"So you’re betraying your king."

"My brother rebelled against a king long before because he killed the man who was supposed to marry his daughter. My brother may be ill, but I know he would not hesitate to turn against his king
"This is madness!" the words came from a man between two ages who stood not far behind Stannis. Jon didn’t know who he was, but he certainly didn’t have the look of a noble man. "Don’t you see that it is exactly what the Lannisters want? They want us to tear us apart, to kill each other so they can grab the pieces and rule over the ruins once we’re done destroying ourselves. To divide is the worst thing we could do right now. We need a military commander to bring the Lannisters and their allies on their knees, and only Stannis can do that while defeating the Ironborn at the same time. Don’t you see this is foolishness to rebel against him? You won’t even be able to deal with the Ironborn if you do that. You have no fleet to attack their islands, you need the help of the other kingdoms, and only Stannis can provide you this help."

"We don’t need help from southerners," the Greatjon declared. "We’re capable of defending our borders ourselves."

"You do need the help of his Grace." The priestess had a very sweet voice. It was the first time she spoke since the parley began. "Stannis is the only true king, the Lord’s Chosen One. He is the only one who can defeat the coming darkness. If you don’t side with him, you will all be destroyed, and that won’t be his doing. Death will swarm your lands, destroy your villages, turn your people into unspeakable things. The Long Night is coming." The last sentence created some reaction among the northern lords. She looked to Jon. "Stannis is your only chance. He fights for the world of the living. If you want to fight for the side that fights for the living, then come and join him. He’s the only one who can save you from the darkness that will swallow us all."

"My offer still stands," Robb said after a moment. "I am ready to ride by your side against the Lannisters with half my forces, your Grace. Only, it will as a fellow king, and not as your servant. Accept these terms, or you won’t get any help from the North, ever."

A long silence followed during which Robb and Stannis eyed each other. Then all of a sudden, Jon recalled all the conversations he had since the news of his father’s arrest was brought to him at Casterly Rock. He recalled the discussion he had with Tyrion Lannister and Margaery Tyrell back then, with Mira in the Riverlands, with Lady Stark at Riverrun. And again he noticed the red woman looking at him.

"I have one question for you, your Grace. Did you murder your own brother, Renly Baratheon?"

The question laid heavy in the air after Jon formulated it. The king was now looking at him, and so did most of the people for some time, before they switched their gaze to Stannis. Jon realized the man who told them it was madness to enter rebellion gasped after he asked the question, then saw him cast glances to Stannis, and also to the woman in red.

"I don’t have to answer that question," the king replied.

Jon, for his part, looked to the priestess, and he wasn’t affected by her gaze this time. "It was you. The shadow."

From the corner of his eyes, a movement drew his attention, and he noticed how the middle-aged man was quivering now. That was it. Lady Stark couldn’t have lied to them about that.

"You truly murdered your own brother?" Robb asked to Stannis.

"I don’t have to justify myself, before you even less, Stark," the king replied, angry.

"Aye, you do. My father died for you."
"He did, and now you’re dishonoring him by revolting against the king he served."

"A king who let him die. Where were you when Joffrey murdered him?"

Stannis didn’t reply, no more than his expression changed. This was going nowhere. The King in the North and the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms would find no common ground here to solve their disagreement. There was however one last thing Jon needed to know.

"Did you convince our father that Joffrey was a bastard so you could claim the Iron Throne for yourself?"

Stannis looked at him, obviously furious though he perfectly controlled this anger. "I don’t have any answer to give to traitors. You already know the truth anyway. And still you decided to rebel against your lawful king. Count yourself lucky we are in a parley, for else I would have you executed on the spot."

"Then we were right to refuse your invitation in the Red Keep," Ser Brynden retorted.

"Robb Stark and Brynden Tully, I, Stannis of the House Baratheon, First of My Name, Rightful King of the Andals, the First Men and the Rhoynar, hereby declare you and all the men who follow you guilty of treason and sentence you to die. Prepare to meet your fate."

The king rode away.

Chapter End Notes

And another battle begins.

Please review

Next chapter : a new POV
The six following chapters were supposed to be released at the same time than Jon X, but after almost a month without updates, I wanted to give you something yesterday. Now let's go with the six chapters describing the second battle to take place in King's Landing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She didn’t ride away with the king. Her gaze remained on the young man with dark hair and grey eyes who stood next to Robb Stark. He was the one who questioned Stannis’ actions. He wasn’t a stranger to the king’s failure to bring back these men on his side. There had been a moment when she thought Stannis would accept Robb Stark’s help, as unlikely as it seemed. And then this young man asked the king if he killed his brother.

Now the king would have another army to fight, and although Melisandre knew Stannis was chosen to defeat the coming darkness, the Great Other, she didn’t like the way events were unfolding. She told Stannis that he needed to sacrifice Cersei to the Lord of Light, that it would bring the Lord’s favor on him, but he didn’t listen to her. And now the result laid before them, and this young man almost destroyed any chance for the Prince That Was Promised to avoid fighting more enemies.

"You should have listened to me. Look to your sins, Jon Snow, for the night is dark and full of terrors."

She left them on these words they would probably never understand. As she rode back to the king’s army, she couldn’t help but wonder about what she just witnessed. She had found herself in the presence of three different people with power in their veins. Stannis, of course, with the blood of the dragon, king’s blood, diluted but still powerful. Robb Stark, with old blood, this very blood that created the bond she felt between him and the grey beast that was right next to him. And, of course, there was this young man, Jon Snow.

She never felt something like that into a human being. This was something strange, powerful… unknown. That was the word. There was this bond with his own direwolf that could explain the power she felt in his veins, but there was more. It wasn’t at all like the power inside Robb Stark. There were similarities, of course, but they were almost nothing compared to the rest. There was something similar to the blood of… Stannis. That must not have been a surprise, after all. All kinds of magic had common points, but still, it was…upsetting. Who was it she just saw? Who was Jon Snow?

The king was organizing his men, shouting orders everywhere among the lines of battle. Melisandre didn’t know much about the art of war. Her focus was on the mysteries of her Lord, the only thing that truly mattered. But here, she had to admit, Stannis’ competency in battle would prove very useful. The Lord of Light didn’t grant him this gift for nothing. In the case Stannis turned his back on the Lord, he needed something to survive in order to go back to Him. On the other side, however,
the army that was supposed to help her king only yesterday was preparing as well.

The Lord didn’t grant her any vision about this battle. She didn’t know how it would end. She knew how this war would turn. She had seen Azor Ahai reborn destroying the servants of the Great Other, saving the world from the darkness. But here, right now, she doubted.

She straightened herself. She couldn’t doubt, not when the Lord of Light was with her. She had seen his wonders, and she knew what he was capable of. Stannis was his champion. He would never abandon him, even if Stannis turned his back on him for a moment. It would be Melisandre’s task to bring back the king on the right path once this battle would be over.

From the other side of the battlefield, a great outcry came. The Northerners were provoking the king into battle, maybe. Her supposition soon proved to be wrong. The northern troops charged with all the force they had. Volleys of arrows struck them, reducing the numbers by a small margin. Still, when the impact happened, there were more than enough Northerners who fell to cause a huge shock. Melisandre looked as the men of the Prince That Was Promised fought those who should have followed their king. Such a waste, but it was the Lord’s will and there was nothing Melisandre could do against it.

"My lady." Matthos Seaworth, the son of Ser Davos, came to her. "The king ordered me to escort you back to the Red Keep. It’s not safe here."

She looked at the men battling not far away. Death was indeed close and would bring many men back to their Lord today, but Melisandre was no man. She was not afraid. She knew today was not the day she would die.

"If the king commands it…"

She looked straight to the young man. To the opposite of his father, he believed in the Lord of Light. As a result, he hesitated, facing a situation where he might have to choose between obeying the Lord of Light or following his king.

"This is the king’s wishes," he just said.

Melisandre smiled enigmatically, as she usually did to trouble men. Matthos reddened, like most would. He wasn’t fighting his nature like the king or his father did. No wonder Stannis chose Ser Davos to be his Hand. Both fought what nature gave them.

"I’ll follow you."

It was useless to make the boy choose between his king or his god. She had no use for it, and it would be anything but good considering Stannis was chosen by the Lord of Light. Placing Stannis and R’hllor in opposition was not in her interest, quite the opposite.

They rode away from the battlefield, the Old Gate opening quickly for them and closing back as soon as they got in. The Onion Knight was on the walls, commanding the troops protecting the battlements as the battle raged in the plains. Their gazes met as she was escorted by her son away from the gate. Melisandre warned him that his son was not safe. He was going to die. She didn’t how, when or where. The visions the Lord gave her were not always clear and she had to interpret them, but she was certain of one thing: the former smuggler would lose his son.

On their way to the red castle, Melisandre saw many people turn their heads to look at her. Most of the gazes she met showed hostility, anger, hatred, disgust. The people of her kind were not loved by many down there. But there were some nonetheless who embraced the light. They were few, but
some people in this city didn’t see the fire as a malediction brought on them by a foreign woman dressed in red. Some saw the fire for a manifestation of the Lord of Light and decided to follow him, hoping that R’hallor would save them from the fires that devoured their city even as Melisandre rode. She and her escort had to avoid some parts of the capital because fires were still burning there or because the streets were in such a sorry state that they just couldn’t ride there.

Melisandre had done more to convert people to the ways of her Lord than Thoros of Myr had in years. Sent in Westeros to bring the light of the Lord to Robert Baratheon, he failed miserably, drowning himself in wine, food and women just like the king he was tasked to convert. No one chose to follow their Lord due to his presence. Within a few days, Melisandre already gathered a few hundred people who prayed with her every night outside the city walls.

Where was Thoros of Myr now? She didn’t know. She asked the Lord of Light once, but all she saw was a forest. She put the search for this drunken Red Priest aside. She had more pressing matters to attend, like making sure Stannis fulfilled his destiny.

As soon as they were inside Maegor’s Holdfast, Melisandre went to her personal room, still accompanied by Matthos. Once she arrived, she asked the young man to stay with her. She always made sure that someone else was with her ever since she walked into this castle. There was only residual magic in this place, probably left by the dragons that once lived there and whose skulls were now in the dungeons. She had gone to see the skulls once, with two knights accompanying her for safety.

Magic didn’t frighten her. What frightened her in this castle was something different, something or someone that belonged to the realm of men, built against men. Every time she looked to the flames, the first thing she asked was if she was in danger. And lately, she always saw the same dark figure, roundly shaped, swirling in the dark, hidden behind the stones. That’s why she always wanted to be with someone carrying a sword around her. She knew she wasn’t safe in this place.

The fire was still burning in the hearth. She looked at it, focusing to read into its flames. This time, she decided her own safety would come second. A battle was raging outside, and she needed to know more about it. She searched for any image she might find about the battle. And in the fire, what she saw was… fire. Fire growing, spreading, meeting black ice that grew as well. Marshes. A huge shape falling. Then smaller shapes. Snow falling all around.

Then eagles, eagles heading north. Beasts fighting near a frozen lake among eagles. Then more animals of all sorts, water surrounding them, their bodies piling on each other as more came out of the water to join the fray and die so that others could replace them. And then fire again, swarming over the melee, killing everyone but not all, leaving a field of flowers in its wake.

And then people burning, screaming. Melisandre heard them all the time. Men screaming, roaring as fire devoured their flesh. And then the wolves. The wolves were burning as well. And the stag. The stag, coming through the fire, unscathed, imposing, victorious.

The vision stopped. It was time for this to end, for she felt the fire burning in her hip. It became more and more difficult every day. It was easier, back in Asshai, and it was easier in Dragonstone too, but here, in King’s Landing, where traces of magic were so faint, every vision was hard to get, a challenge that added to the difficulties to interpret the visions correctly.

However, she reveled in the pain. The Lord of Light granted her wishes. She knew what to do. If only the king did it before.
Please review

Next chapter: Jon
One step at a time, the main body of the army approached, over ten thousand Northerners getting impatient as they walked to the enemy, feeling left aside as their comrades from the vanguard, led by Jon Umber who charged first, fought Stannis’ men in front of them. It was difficult to tell from where he stood on his horse, but Jon would say that for now, the battle was even. No side managed to take the advantage.

"Halt!"

Under Robb’s command, the army froze, its progression stopped, the enemy still not far away. Jon was at the right wing of the army, commanding nearly half of the cavalry. The other half, on the left wing, was under the command of the Blackfish. Jon waited, as it was decided, until a horn was heard. It was the signal.

"Ride men! The North remembers!"

His fellow horsemen heeded Jon’s words and rode forward with him and Ghost. The white direwolf could have run much quicker than he did, but instead he followed the pace of the horses, just a little ahead to not scare them. The distance between their ranks and the soldiers of Stannis looked enormous and long to travel. When they finally reached the enemy ranks, they still had to struggle in order to fight them. Their fellow Northerners were between the horsemen and the infantry of Stannis.

Ghost got through the lines very easily and jumped on the first soldier he found. The presence of a direwolf seemed to open a breach into the enemy lines, a breach the Greatjon’s men let the cavalry use. They rode straight into it, piercing the heart of the enemy troops, pushing them back just enough.

Jon fought from an advantageous position, striking at all men below him. He slashed one across the face, cut another one’s head, ripped the hand of a third. They kept fighting like this for just enough time. Then the horn was heard again, and Jon and the other horsemen rode away, leaving Stannis’ men as quickly as they met them.

He saw that the men of the Greatjon had already retreated and were almost all back into Robb’s ranks. As the cavalry retreated, rows of archers emerged from the northern army. Dropping his head, sticking it to the mane of his mount, Jon waited as he kept riding back to the right wing he came from. Then the arrows were unleashed. They flew over his head and fell upon what Jon believed to be Stannis’ lines.

As soon as he was back with the bulk of the army, Jon made sure to reorganize the lines of the cavalry squadrons he was responsible of. In the meantime, he shot looks at the other side of the battlefield. Stannis’ men had not chased them. They remained in place, their shields up. Robb had hoped the initial attack of Jon Umber’s vanguard, followed by the intervention of the cavalry to cover an organized retreat back to the lines, then the planned retreat of the same cavalry to the lines, would push Stannis’ men to counterattack. They would then be welcomed by a rain of arrows and
reach the first rank of the northern army, exhausted from their run and the previous fight with Umber’s men, facing fresh troops, which would either force Stannis to intervene with the bulk of his army or let him assist to the destruction of a part of it. But none of this happened. Stannis’ men remained where they were, sustaining their archers’ assault. Jon realized pretty quickly all this was just a waste of arrows.

Then the last thing they had been expecting happened. Arrows were shot back, decimating their archers and the first rank of their army. Men from the infantry came with their shields to protect their archers and quickly it became a fight of archers against archers. The range of the arrows Stannis sent to them increased, falling on further ranks as a few men fell there and there.

Now all men were firing at will, reducing to ashes the psychological effect of the attacks from both sides. There were some movements in the opposite army. For a moment, Jon thought Stannis was repositioning some of his troops, but he soon realized that instead he was sending men forward, farther than the archers actually shooting. Those men brandished bows and released the arrows they previously knocked… that fell directly on Jon and the other horsemen.

The arrows were dispersed, but a few men or their mounts were touched. Then a second volley came, causing more death. Jon looked around. The men were getting uneasy and for good cause. He looked at the row of archers firing on them. They weren’t far. They were quite close in fact. Another volley of arrows was coming on them.

"Men, in formation," he shouted. They did as he told them. "Attack!"

They charged together, the men in the rear lines who didn’t hear Jon followed those who rode in front of them. Almost at the same moment, Stannis’ archers fell back and his cavalry came from his left wing. They made contact between the two armies, closer to Stannis’ lines.

Jon was surprised to find himself fighting a knight with the sigil of House Florent on his breastplate. Weren’t the Florent bannermen of House Tyrell? He parried, then hit twice before he parried again and tried to reach his opponent on the fist. His sword was deviated aside, leaving an opening. Another blow to the arm and he lost his equilibrium on his horse, then Jon delivered a final blow that sent him to the ground.

Ha faced another opponent with arms he couldn’t recognize. Their duel saw no victor as they were interrupted by other knights. Jon saw more than one knight of White Harbor fall. The rest of their cavalry came to join them while Stannis reinforced his own cavalry with more horsemen coming from his left wing. How many horses did he have in reserve?

All of a sudden, a strong arm seized his right shoulder. He was about to hit back the man who did it, but the said man seized his fist that held his sword the moment he tried. Jon came face to face with Ser Brynden Tully.

"Are you mad, boy? Tell your men to fall back immediately!"

"What?" He wasn’t sure he heard well in the chaos that surrounded them.

"You heard me! Orders from your brother. We fall back. We won’t gain anything by keeping fighting there."

Jon realized it was true. Robb had not moved his infantry. If Stannis decided to move his, Jon’s brother might not arrive in time to help them and their cavalry would suffer great losses. And with the way the battle was going, they had no chance to overrun Stannis’ cavalry.
Jon rode around, shouting and yelling to his men to fall back. They did so in nothing that resembled an orderly fashion. As they rode back to their lines, Jon realized that the cavalry of Stannis’ army was not pursuing them. However, his archers came back into place and fired again. More vulnerable as they rode their backs turned on them, more horsemen fell this time. Jon brought them to a safe distance and tried to assess the casualties. They had lost several men, either dead or now captive of the enemy. The game of shooting arrows had resumed between the archers of each side, no one gaining the upper hand.

Jon understood at this moment. They had thought Stannis would want to deal with them swiftly so he could proceed with the conquest of the kingdoms actually in war against him. As such, he ought to pursue the soldiers of the North and the Riverlands if they flew away. But he did no such thing. He just camped on his positions, waiting for them to attack him. Jon noticed the field where Stannis positioned his army was a little elevated when compared to the rest of the plain. This gave him a slight advantage. He wasn’t going to attack them, and Robb wasn’t going to give into his trap. The two kings remained on their positions. It was like this for the whole day, each side trying to provoke the other. A few skirmishes took place. Jon participated to two of them, but no large-scale battle happened. When the night came, both armies went back to their camp with the situation unchanged.

Later, Jon was with Robb and the Blackfish. None of them were too happy with what happened today.

"Stannis doesn’t seem in any hurry to destroy you, which means he’s buying time," the Blackfish said.

"Could he have reinforcements on their way? He might be waiting for them," Jon suggested.

"Maybe, though if he does I think he would have told us about it when we first met," Robb pointed out.

"We should increase the patrols all around the camp, and the number of scouts to avoid any surprise," the Blackfish advised.

"Aye, I agree. Let’s do it."

Ser Brynden Tully walked until he was face to face with Robb. "I’m not helping you because I think you are right."

"I know. You made it very clear from the beginning."

"The riverlords who are here might have proclaimed you their king, but I haven’t, and neither Hoster nor Edmure have. But we are now at war with Stannis, and he’s not the kind of man to give people a second chance. Once you’ve betrayed him, you’re a dead man in his eyes. He won’t rest until we’re dead. I chose to fight with you because you are the son of my niece, just like I chose to fight with your father because Catelyn was his wife."

"I’m aware of that, but the lords who are here with you also called me their king. They’re here because of that."

"Don’t forget they called Stannis their king before as well." The Blackfish turned away. Jon could say he was angry, but also worried. He looked back to Robb as he was about to leave the place. "You better defeat Stannis and quickly. Your men want to head back north, mine don’t want to see their lands invaded again."

"We better defeat him. He’s our enemy to us all now."
The Blackfish nodded. "And tell your half-brother to not charge the enemy against your orders in the future. He could have gotten us all killed."

He left. Robb turned to look at Jon.

"He’s not wrong. You shouldn’t have launched an attack on Stannis’ archers."

"They were shooting arrows on us. My men were dying."

"Ser Brynden’s men as well, and he didn’t attack. You can consider yourself lucky I sent him to rescue you, or else you and your men could have all remained on the battlefield. This is no place for heroic actions, Jon. We must hold the lines and do as I say, or else the army is without cohesion and direction. You’ve seen how Stannis’ men are disciplined. We cannot allow ourselves to be less than they are. Some knights and minor lords were captured by Stannis because of your decision."

Robb looked at a map of the terrain, displaying where Stannis’ lines and camp were positioned. Jon remained silent, realizing the consequences of his charge on the enemy lines.

"I think I know what Stannis is doing. He’s testing our unity, the loyalty of our bannermen. He’s hoping some of them will turn on me, or maybe the riverlords will abandon us. He’s on a favorable position and he’s using it. He’ll just let us smash against him and push us back again and again. At least, that’s what he hopes for. He doesn’t have much time, but he’s got more than us. And while we’re clawing at each other, the Lannisters and the Tyrells are reinforcing themselves." Robb shook his head.

"I wish he accepted your offer," Jon said.

"Aye, I do too. But now we need to defeat him, and to defeat him quickly."

"Then nothing changed. We must still find a way to win this battle."

Robb looked at him, a small smile creeping on his face. "Aye. It’s quite simple. Either we win or we die. It’s not much different from before."

Jon looked at the map, suggesting an idea to Robb for tomorrow’s battle. While they discussed, the rain began to fall outside.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Davos
He couldn’t believe the order he just received. The heat of the air and the soot that stuck to his body didn’t help to make his thoughts clearer.

"Are you kidding me, good ser?"

The use of "good ser" was all but appropriate for Axell Florent, but old habits die hard. No matter what happened, no matter how high the king brought him, he still felt like nothing compared to the other noble men

"You must know the king enough by now to know that he’s never joking," the knight retorted. That was not entirely true, but very close to it.

"Does the king realize what will happen if we remove the men who are fighting the fire?"

"It’s not to me to answer this question, Onion Knight. I am a soldier. I do not question orders, I obey them. Of course, it must seem weird to a man who spent his life breaking the laws and following false gods but there it is. You are in the army of the Lord of Light, led by the Lord’s Chosen One, in case you forgot."

If there were people that Davos hated more than arrogant soldiers or fanatics, it was arrogant soldiers who happened to be fanatics as well.

"If the king issued such an order, then I’ll hear it from his very lips, not from yours."

"As you wish, Onion Knight."

No matter he was Hand of the King now, the others would always see him as the smuggler. Davos ordered the men to keep throwing water and sand on the fires then rode away.

As he travelled through the streets of the city, he could see as many ruins as there were shops, houses and other buildings that somehow remained useful. Maybe it was because some ruins were not that different from their state before the flames devoured them. While some fought the burning demon, others slept in the streets, a few feet from the flames. Davos himself had slept in these streets more than once, with rats running around him, thieves and assassins roaming in the dark, the stench of shit and every imaginable and horrible smell in the air.

The stench barely receded as he passed the gates and rode west to where the king’s army was camping. The guard was heavy but they let him pass without a word. Everyone recognized the Onion Knight, and even though it pleased few people, they all knew he was the King’s right hand.

The camp was a mixture of unstoppable activity and great calm. The king made sure his men would be rested for tomorrow. He managed to hold off Robb Stark for today. It was on Davos’ recommendation that the king waited for Robb Stark to attack. Davos convinced him that if Robb Stark could not defeat them quickly, then the riverlords and his bannermen would start defecting.
Stannis might see all of those on the other side as traitors, but he was also a clever military commander who knew he needed men to win this war. Robb Stark’s fate was decided, but not that of the northern lords. With some luck they could expect the Blackfish and the Tully allies to change side, which would leave Robb Stark alone in enemy territory. He would be much easier to defeat and make a good example of what happens to those who dared to resist Stannis Baratheon.

The king was with Melisandre when Davos walked into the command pavilion. He cast his eyes on him as soon as Davos came into sight.

"Your Grace, I beg your pardon to disturb you, but Ser Axell just relayed your order to join all the fighting men in the city who are not at the gates to your army."

"That is correct. Where are they?"

"Your Grace, you know I never back when it is time to tell you’re making a mistake. Well, I think you are about to make a huge one here."

"Ser Davos, the war is at our doorstep, literally. I need all the men I can gather, which means all those in the city I can mobilize."

"These men are necessary to fight the fires that are still threatening the city. Without them, King’s Landing will be reduced to dust."

"Ser Davos, how many people live in this city?" The question had not come from Stannis but from the Red Woman.

"Half a million."

"And how many more live in the Seven Kingdoms? Millions? Tens of millions? Stannis is their rightful king and the only one who can save them. If he cannot defeat Robb Stark, how many will be doomed? Isn’t the interest of the many more important than the interest of the few?"

"Your Grace, this is your city and your people who are burning and dying. This is the capital of the Seven Kingdoms."

"It’s only bricks and stones, wood and mud, Ser Davos, nothing more. A city may be rebuilt very easily. Rebuilding an entire kingdom is far more difficult," the king declared. "Some of my reinforcements won’t come before days and I need all available men to fight this new usurper. Of course if I was to deliver one final battle tomorrow, I might give you back your men more quickly. Would you advise me to do so?"

Davos didn’t answer right away. "No, your Grace."

"Very well then. Send all the soldiers who are not guarding the battlements here. As for the fire, use the local population. It’s their city. If they love it so much, it won’t be difficult to motivate them."

"Yes, your Grace," Davos reluctantly grumbled.

"Stay here, Ser Davos. I need your help on another matter. The Lady Melisandre has come up with an idea concerning the prisoners we made yesterday. Do you know how many we caught?"

"I’m afraid not, your Grace. No one made me private to this knowledge."

"Now I do. We have six knights and two sons of minor lords, all from the North. They were taken prisoners during the battle. All traitors. I asked them to commit themselves to my cause and they
refused. The only option left is to execute them. Do you agree?"

Davos thought carefully. "If they refuse to follow you, then yes, execution seems appropriate, but there is an alternative option, your Grace. We could send them to the Wall. For their families, it would be a decision that would make them better disposed to join you, while remaining an appropriate punishment for traitors."

The king nodded very slightly, which was a good sign since it meant he was considering the proposition. The Red Woman chose to intervene at this moment.

"Your Grace may have to head north one day. When this happens, do you wish the men guarding the Wall to be your former enemies?"

The king remained silent for a long time. He gazed at the woman, then at Davos. "Do you know what the Lady Melisandre just advised me to do? She wants me to burn one prisoner every day until we’ve defeated the new usurper, and in front of our enemies so everyone can see."

Davos’ eyes widened and his mouth opened in horror. "Have you lost your mind?" He was addressing the Red Woman, not the king. "If we do this, no one will ever want to follow Stannis, not ever."

They would lose any chance to get back support from the North, and maybe from the Riverlands as well.

"I told you Cersei Lannister should burn, but you didn’t listen to me. Now here we are, the North rebelled against us. If the false queen had been offered as a sacrifice to the Lord of Light, our king would be marching on Highgarden as we speak."

"And how do you know that? Can you see all the possible futures in your fires?"

"I can see a great many things, Ser Davos, which is much more than you can. You told the king to not have me by his side at the Battle of Blackwater and now his city is burning. I was there yesterday and you held back the rebels. Do you need any more proofs?"

"Aye, I do, for these are no proofs, merely things that happen into war. Coincidences, that’s how I call them."

"I need to make an example," the king decided. "Robb Stark and Brynden Tully have rebelled. They are traitors to the Crown and so are all those who follow them. I’ll execute someone tomorrow and since this Lord of Light says he can help us, then I’ll do his bidding for this time."

"Your Grace…"

"I’ve made my decision, Ser Davos." He realized it was too late. Once Stannis decided something, there was no coming back. "There’s a young man from a minor house sworn to House Glover that we have. He was the first to refuse to bend the knee when I ordered them. He will be the first to die. Rodrik Forrester, first son of Gregor Forrester and heir to Ironrath, will burn at the stake when dawn comes."

The sentence fell like the sword of the executioner. Davos knew the fate of this man had been sealed.

Two hours later, after having organized the movement of all soldiers in the city back to the camp outside its walls, Davos was travelling through the Red Keep’s corridors, back to his chambers to grab what few hours of sleep he could get. He would be commanding the troops on the battlements tomorrow and he needed to be in a good enough state for that. Sadly, the fighting of the flames was a
second priority now. Davos had opposed the king’s decision, but it was a logical one.

Climbing the stairs of the Tower of the Hand, getting more tired at every step and only wishing to fall into his bed to get whatever sleep he might gain, he fell upon Shireen as he completed his ascension, sitting on the last step, holding *Fire and Blood* on her thighs.

"You’re very late."

"Aye, I am." He pursued his trip, his mind blurry, but when he arrived at the end of the stairs, he looked back to the princess and sat next to her. "I’m sorry about the stench."

"Don’t worry. Everything smells funny around here."

"That, I must agree with. I’m surprised your mother let you out."

"She told Bert to guard me, but he drinks while he’s guarding me. I let him drink and in exchange he doesn’t tell Mother I’m sneaking away."

Davos sniggered. This girl’s sweetness was a balm after the day he endured.

"You shouldn’t be here alone."

"I’m not alone. You’re with me."

Another snigger. "Alright, I’ll tell no one this time, but I beg you to not wander alone in the future. We are at war, princess, as much as it saddens me to tell you."

"Is it true the Starks turned against Father? Mother will tell me nothing, but I heard the guards talking about it."

"I’m afraid the guards told the truth."

"Father has never been very good at making friends, doesn’t he?"

A sad smile crept on Davos’ lips. "Again, I’m afraid you’re in the right."

Shireen took on a sadder expression. "I thought I could talk with Robb Stark when he arrived. I wanted to see who he was. I didn’t know if he was like Ned Stark. He was kind with me when we met. Or I thought he might be like Torrhen Stark, the last King in the North, or Cregan Stark, the Hand of the King at the end of the Dance of Dragons."

"I regret to tell you it won’t be possible to talk to him. Not before long." And certainly not as a friend of the king.

"Why is everyone fighting?"

That was a very good question. Why did they fight? Davos knew who he was fighting for, but the others? Some probably fought for glory, others for riches and power. The king fought for justice. Some may be fighting for family. Davos was certain that there were people on the other side who only fought Stannis because their family was against him. He couldn’t blame them. After all, Stannis fought the Mad King, his rightful king, when his brother Robert rebelled.

"That is quite a difficult question to answer, and one that may need more than the night to answer, princess."

"Is it true that Father killed Uncle Renly? Or Joffrey?"
That was an even harder question to answer, especially for the first person. Davos had played a decisive role in Renly Baratheon’s death and it still haunted him at night, the method that was used more than the killing itself.

"Renly was… he died in circumstances and in a way I can hardly understand myself. But you must know that he tried to become king when it is your father who is the king. That’s how he ended up dead," he tried to explain as carefully as he could.

"So Father killed him?"

Davos realized he wouldn’t get away that easily. He chose to be as honest as he could.

"No, princess. Your father didn’t kill Renly. He’s not an assassin. And he didn’t kill Joffrey either, that I can assure you. But… you know your father is the king, right?"

"Yes, I know."

"Well, when your uncle Robert, Stannis’ elder brother, died, there were people who wanted to become king themselves. You were right when you said your father wasn’t good at making friends, and that played a part in it. There were people who had more friends, and these friends wanted to see them as their king, and so here we are today. Your father didn’t want to fight, but he had no choice because he is the king, and he cannot allow other people to declare they are kings. Or else… let’s just say horrible things would happen."

The small girl nodded. She looked at the binding of the book she held. "You know that the Targaryens fought each other during the Dance of Dragons. Brothers against brothers, sisters against sisters. They killed each other and, in the end, Aegon and Rhaenyra both died, and the dragons disappeared. We’re doing just the same. Renly and Joffrey are dead. Are we all going to die?"

Davos realized that this girl was way too clever for her age. She was kept away from the world, but it didn’t keep her away from learning a lot of things about it, and now she was seeing the events in the books she loved happen in real life.

"No, princess. We are at war, so I won’t pretend no one’s going to die. People die in wars. Some died this very day. But there are always people who survive, and believe me when I tell you that your father will get out of this alive."

"Does that mean he’s going to kill Tommen?"

Davos sighed. "I hope it won’t come to that."

"I don’t want him to die. He seemed nice enough when we met. The Imp too. He was spending a lot of time in the library, just like me."

"Oh, I don’t doubt it, princess. Though I don’t believe he will offer you books to read if he comes across you."

"You’re sure?"

Davos tried again to choose his words very well. "I know this is hard to understand, but the Lannisters are not good people, no matter which Lannister we’re talking about. Cersei Lannister and her brother Jaime did horrible things, and for that your father had them killed. Tyrion Lannister won’t forgive that to your father. A Lannister always pays his debts."

Shireen seemed very sad. Davos wished he didn’t speak about it. The child was sweet and kind. She
didn’t need such darkness in her life. *The night is dark and full of terrors*, as the Red Woman said.

"Will you read with me?" she asked, almost pleading.

"Alright, but just a little. I have a long day ahead and I need rest. Don’t forget I’m a clumsy reader, child."

They smiled a little. She helped him to read through the arrival of Aegon in Westeros before Davos went to bed. His moment with Shireen was the only pleasant moment of the whole day.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
Waking up long before dawn, Jon couldn’t manage to fall back into sleep. After wasting time in his bedcamp, he chose to arise and donned his clothes and armor for the day. Still very tired from yesterday’s battle, he left his personal tent and walked out. The beginning of the day’s light was barely distinguishable. He recalled the sunrise at Casterly Rock, the sun rising between the mountains and falling back into the sea as the day advanced. Blackwater Bay didn’t have the same beauty or the same calm as the Sunset Sea or the surroundings of the Rock. Or maybe it was just Jon’s actual state that made his surroundings bleak. He wandered through the encampment, crossing the path of guards and a few other men who couldn’t sleep. They had made better plans this time and Jon hoped these men would not suffer as much as yesterday, in part due to his decisions.

The banners of the Starks, the Umbers, the Karstarks, the Mormonts, the Dustins, the Manderlys, the Glovers appeared on his way. All men who were determined to fight Stannis, the Ironborn and the Lannisters. To believe that not long ago, Jon lived among them. And again, the image of Mira came to his mind. Where was she right now? Somewhere in the Westerlands? Had she returned to Casterly Rock? Was she praying in the Stone Garden, with nobody aware that her dark hair was shining by the torch light? Or had she gone back to Highgarden? Was she even free? Did they make her a prisoner after she came back from the Riverlands, having freed Arya? Jon was beginning to think about what he would do to anyone who dared to hurt her when he spotted the white tree on a black field, a black sword in the trunk. And not far from it, Gregor Forrester was sitting, a mug of ale in his hand.

Jon hesitated, but he thought that to fear the fury of the Lord of Ironrath was no good reason to stay away. If Lord Gregor was angry at him, it would be for good reasons and Jon shouldn’t fear the consequences of his actions. He approached and Mira’s father noticed his presence.

"I see I’m not the only one who’s unable to sleep," he told Jon.

"Aye. You’re not alone in that."

He invited Jon to sit. "I can serve you some ale if you want."

"Thanks, but I’m not sure it would help for the battle."

"You would be surprised. Many men drink themselves to death before battle. That’s how they manage to face it. Fear lowers after a good drink."

"Everything’s better with some wine in the belly."

Something an old friend once told him. Jon watched the Lord of Ironrath staring at the fire. He hid it well, just like Jon’s father would have, but he knew Gregor Forrester was afraid for his son Rodrik. He felt responsible for his disappearance. People saw him being dragged away by Stannis’ men. It was because of Jon’s second charge on the enemy lines. Rodrik Forrester was captured at this moment. Had he not ordered the attack, Mira’s brother would still be with them. What would she think of him right now?
"Wisdom of drinker," the Lord of Ironrath commented, emptying his mug and putting it roughly next to him.

"Tell me, Jon. How did you feel back when your two brothers were alive, prisoners of the Ironborn?"

"Powerless. My only wish was to ride back to Winterfell and free them."

"But you didn’t?"

"No. Because I could not. I couldn’t abandon my brother, the army… or my king."

"And now my son is prisoner of this said king."

"I’m sure nothing will happen to him. He’s too valuable alive. Stannis is not the Greyjoys."

But then again, Jon and Robb never expected Theon to murder their brothers. He didn’t say it aloud. He was fearing the worst for Rodrik. His father sighed heavily.

"No, indeed. I have known Stannis in the past and he wouldn’t execute valuable prisoners. If Tyrion Lannister didn’t kill your sister, I don’t expect my son to die. I just regret he didn’t stay at Ironrath, more now than ever. I told him to stay behind, to rule my lands as I rode to war, but he wouldn’t listen. He wanted to fight. There was no way I could have forced him to stay home, even if I had wanted."

"I thought you wanted him to remain at Ironrath."

"Yes, I did. But I wanted him to take that decision by himself. I didn’t want to force it upon him. A good lord must take his own decisions, not wait for someone else to take them in his stead."

"My father used to say something similar."

"He was a good man, Jon. If only for him this war was worth it."

"Do you think it still is?"

"What do you mean?"

"Joffrey and his parents are dead. My father is avenged. Sometimes I wonder what’s the point of fighting the Lannisters."

"Protecting the kingdom of the North, my boy. The people who killed Ned Stark may be dead, but now we must defend the North. Anyway, I doubt the Lannisters would make peace with us so easily. Remember they still have your sister."

"Aye."

They started a war to avenge Jon’s father, and now they ended fighting for their freedom and independence. How did it come to that?

"You’re never worried about Mira?" he asked. Lord Gregor’s face turned a little darker.

"Yes, I do worry. But… at the same time, I tell myself that it might be good to have someone on the other side, just in case this war doesn’t turn the way we want. Look at how things went wild quickly. Two days ago, we were preparing an invasion of the western lands and now we’re fighting the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. Mira believes she is safe by Lady Margaery’s side. She knows better than I
do. What I fear the most is that she claims to be safe because she wants to protect her family."

"You think she’s not safe?" Jon felt cold all of a sudden.

"I just hope she is. You know, physically Mira takes more after me than after her mother. She definitely has the Forrester look, and my blood as well. But she was raised by her mother with the idea to become a southern lady. She’s stubborn. She won’t walk away from it. And I fear she will try to use her position to help us, and that only makes me even more worried. She could put herself in danger for her family, and she already did. I’m afraid, Jon, yes. I am."

They remained silent. Jon thought about the girl he met in the godswood of Winterfell, who he travelled and spent time with at Casterly Rock, who took huge risks to bring back Arya to their family. Somehow, he felt less nervous about his sister, especially now that Joffrey was dead. Sansa was innocent, no threat at all, possibly more an honored guess than anything else now. Tyrion Lannister had brought her with him when he abandoned King’s Landing. Probably she was more an honored guest than anything else now and risked few. Mira, however… Jon didn’t expect he would think it one day, but Mira was getting herself into trouble as much as Arya did. Not in the same way, but both got themselves into trouble. Only Mira was playing to much more dangerous games than Arya.

A horn sounded. Dawn had come. The camp was stirring up.

"It seems it is time, Jon. We’ll see each other on the battlefield."

"Good luck, my lord."

"Winter is coming."

"Iron from Ice."

Lord Forrester nodded as a sign that he appreciated the fact Jon said his family words. Jon had already donned his armor, so he was ready for battle. He went to see Robb and the other generals and prepared all together the final details of the coming battle.

Not long after, Jon found himself on the battlefield, among the cavalry again, though not leading it this time. Lord Glover had been given command. Instead of commanding the complete wing, Jon was only at the head of a squadron. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised after the catastrophe of yesterday, but still he felt ashamed and frustrated.

Robb’s plan was simple, in some way. They had to defeat Stannis now. Their scouts revealed the king had reinforcements coming from around the Crownlands, which could explain his willingness to wait. Robb couldn’t count on any reinforcement, and both he and Jon knew the loyalty of the riverlords and even some Northerners was not guaranteed. They were in a precarious situation. Although Stannis couldn’t wait forever, he could wait much longer than Robb. So they needed a victory, and a victory now.

In front of the enemy lines, a pile of wood trunks were piled, with a stake planted upon them. A few men stood next to it, including a figure wearing red robes. She was probably the red priestess who stared at Jon during the parley. More men came, holding another who seemed to struggle to get free. When they tied him to the stake, Jon recognized him, and he understood right away what they were doing.

"NO!"

He never heard Gregor Forrester scream before. He rode passed Jon and went to Lord Glover.
"Galbart, we’ve got to do something. We cannot let them do that."

"The king told me to not attack before he gave the signal," replied the lord.

"Galbart, he’s my son!"

Right when he said that, the horn sounded.

The Lord of Deepwood Motte looked confused for an instant, then he drew his sword.

"Attack!"

The cavalry charged. As Jon hurried his mount forward, followed by Ghost, he thought that this time they did not do it to fight Stannis. They did it to save an innocent man.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Davos
The enemy stirred up at the very moment the pyre was lit. The signal was sent in the form of a banner being shaken. Davos had no choice but to give the order. From the battlements where he stood, he could see all the movements of both sides. Stark and Tully horsemen rode to the king’s lines, and just when they began to move Stannis’ own cavalry ran to meet them.

Davos could hear the shock even from where he stood. Knights and men on horse from both sides battled in the middle of the field while fire reached the victim. Davos thought he despaired just as much as the Northerners to see one of their countrymen being sacrificed in this way. The father was in the other army. What if it had been Matthos on this pyre?

The infantry of the North and the Riverlands charged as well, trying to push forward in a desperate attempt to save the burning man. Stannis’ cavalry slowly fell back.

He looked at the other people with him on the walls. They didn’t know what was about to happen. He looked to his son, who stood proud next to him. Unlike him, Matthos showed no sign of shock or horror at the sight of the sacrificed man. He had the look of… a fanatic. That was the truth. His face and eyes told the same story as those of Queen Selyse or Ser Axell Florent when the Red Woman lit her fire every night.

And here she was, Melisandre, riding with two guards to the gates. The king wouldn’t let her near the battlefield after she lit the stake. She was too precious to put her in danger. It had been her idea to burn that young man before the Northerners. To bring the Lord’s favor on our king, she said. To lure the Starks into attacking, Stannis thought. To set a trap. He wished that woman had stayed behind to burn with her victim.

And the trap was triggered. A row of fire emerged from the middle of the battlefield, green flames rose to cut the Stark troops in two. Earth and dust were propelled in all directions. The battle seemed to cease for a moment, fighters from both armies totally surprised by this sudden turn of events. Screams were heard as some men burned and others were covered by the earth of the land they fought on the instant before. Only Stannis and his closest advisors knew of the whole plan. Pots of wildfire hidden in a tunnel that went under the field at this place, lit by a single torch dropped by a soldier who accepted to sacrifice himself for the Prince That Was Promised and his cause. With hope, the other men in these tunnels wouldn’t die. Davos had given the signal to the first, at the entrance. He had waved a torch, which made another man inside the tunnel wave his own, then another further in waved his torch as well, and so on until it reached the lad who stood right next to the row of piled pots, filled with green liquid. Here was the result. If Davos had ever believed in gods, he would have prayed for no other men to die in these tunnels. However, he knew this was only the beginning.

The Lady Melisandre arrived at the gates just when Stannis gave the order. From both wings, the reinforced flanks of his army charged the flanks of the enemy. In fact, they charged half the enemy, the part that was stuck between Stannis’ lines and the wildfire. Soon, this part of Robb Stark’s army was surrounded on all sides, and the other half was cut from it by the fire, stunned by the recent...
events. Stannis’ officers, only aware that they were to outflank the enemy at a convened signal, were surprised by the outburst of flames, but not as much as Northerners and men of the Riverlands. The soldiers of Stannis had seen wildfire before, Robb Stark’s men had not.

Just as the slaughter began, the Red Woman appeared next to him.

"See, Ser Davos. The Lord of Light is with us. He’s granted our king his victory."

"At what price?"

He looked to his son as he asked the question to which he didn’t expect an answer. Matthos was still looking at the battle that raged below them, seeing the hand of Melisandre and her red god in this. But that slaughter wasn’t the work of the Lord of Light, or the work of Melisandre. It was the work of the man who relayed the signal when he could have stopped it. It was Davos Seaworth’s doing and no one else.
Jon XIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JON XIII

He was lucky that his horse dropped him to the ground when the explosion happened. Had he stayed on him he might have ended being crushed under the weight of the animal. All around, mounts got mad and the few men on horse who were not thrown down or didn’t find themselves under their mount struggled like hell to keep control of it.

A strong gust of wind, then heat, and finally the earth projected by the explosion fell upon them. Jon raised his arms to protect his head from debris. At the same time, he shot glances all around. Most of the men around him were incapacitated in some way or another by the sudden outburst of fire. The wall of fire at the north of his position rose. Where it came from, Jon had no idea, but he was sure of one thing: he couldn’t stay here and do nothing.

He cut the closest enemy he could spot before the man could react, then a second who barely managed to block his first blow before he was impaled by the second. Press forward. They had to press forward on Stannis’ forces. Retreat was no longer an option with the green flames behind them.

"Forward, men! Forward!" He killed one more man who was coming at him. "Forward!"

He shouted the word every time he could, hoping this would bring the others to do the same. A southern knight tried to hack his head, but Jon ducked his sword just in time. All around him chaos ruled the land. Sometimes he wasn’t even sure he was fighting foes or allies. Ghost remained close to him, causing his own share of deaths. Parries, blows, blocks, faints succeeded each other, sometimes accompanied by fists and kicks. Jon blocked an attack directed toward his head, then deflected his opponent’s sword before hitting him by the side, making him stumble to the ground where he could finish him with one final blow in the throat. Another man with few armor was killed by a simple slash across the chest. Ghost jumped on someone who tried to attack him in the back.

Then a knight on his horse tried again to chop his head. Instead, Jon’s blade cut through his leg, then went through his chest by the side of his guts. The man with the burning heart on his armor fell, freeing his mount for Jon to use it and keep fighting from an advantageous position.

When he mounted the horse, he realized they were surrounded. The banners of the enemy were all around them. There were friendly banners far away on their left flank, separated from them by the enemies, but they were alone. They needed to press forward, but Jon didn’t see how to regroup the men. They were fighting on three sides at the same time. The Greatjon and his son fought savagely, sparing no man who came near them. Galbalt Glover wasn’t far either, still on his horse.

Something caught Jon’s attention. Further into enemy ranks, Gregor Forrester fought, surrounded by men from the other side. And his horse fell, not far from the stake where the burned figure of Rodrik Forrester laid.

Without thinking further, Jon urged his mount forward through the crowd of men who quickly turned to be only Stannis' men. Some withdrew, fearing Ghost who followed him. When he arrived to the location where he last saw Lord Forrester, he found him pinned on the ground, about to be
finished by a sword hanging over his body. Jon was too far to intervene. Ghost was too far as well, but in no time he was on the man, reducing his throat to shreds. Mira’s father used the opportunity to get back on his feet and resume the fight. Jon was there by this moment, dealing with the enemy as well. Two men, one with a horse, and a direwolf fighting amidst a sea of burning hearts. Soldiers with the fist of House Glover soon joined them, the Lord of Deepwood Motte at their head. A new balance of forces was settled, for now. Lord Glover approached Jon as he dealt with another knight.

"We must retreat. We won’t hold longer."

"We cannot, we’re surrounded," Jon shouted back.

"No, we have a way out."

He pointed to the northeast. Jon saw at this moment that there was a thin line of banners from river and northern lords, a corridor close to the line of fire that led out of it, without burning hearts to close it. Robb’s banner was there. His brother must have sent all their forces to break the enemy’s maneuver and give them a way out. Jon rapidly glanced around. It only took an instant to realize they had no chance of piercing Stannis’s defenses. Retreat was indeed their only option.

He saw Lord Gregor, still fighting on his feet near the stake. The body of his son was all black. Anything that could be alive in Rodrik Forrester’s body was gone.

"My lord." It was hard for Jon to approach the Lord of Ironrath enough so that he may hear him, but he did. "My lord, we must leave, or we will die."

Jon had to kill an infantryman who ran at him, then he finished a second one. In the meantime, Gregor Forrester looked at the remains of his son. When a third soldier tried to take on Jon, the Lord of Ironrath ended his life with a blow through the neck, right before another man pierced his own leg with his sword, getting a scream out of the lord. Jon repelled the soldier before he could end Lord Gregor’s life and kept others at bay while Mira’s father climbed onto his horse. Then they rode away from this sector, far from the enemy while other Northerners fought to keep them at bay.

Riding at full speed with two people in the midst of battle was far from ideal. Jon struggled to bring Gregor Forrester to safety. He went through the corridor his brother created, getting out of the trap Stannis Baratheon set for them.

"It’s alright, my boy. I can do the rest on my feet. Go back to fight, there are others who need you."

Jon hesitated, but the look Lord Forrester sent forced him to obey. Heading back for the melee, he engaged the first enemy he came upon.

Jon saw their troops slowly retreating from the trap, escaping through the route Robb created. But many remained behind, holding the assailants to let their comrades get through the exit. Many fell, and many others escaped just in time. With their men within trap either dead or escaped, the trap disappeared to leave two armies fighting each other with all their forces, a barrier of flames still burning next to them. The fighting finally broke up when Stannis’ troops retreated on their own and Robb chose to not force a counterattack.

In the evening, the camp was filled with screams and cries, of men injured, dead or dying. Jon wandered to the sections where the people of House Glover and their bannermen usually were. There were as many injured people as those still fit to fight. He found the Forresters among them, but Lord Gregor wasn’t there. Anyway, he wasn’t looking for him, at least not officially. He told Robb he would fetch Lord Glover because he thought he might see how Mira’s father fared, but the priority was still to bring the Lord of Deepwood Motte to the command tent. They had to decide
what to do after such a disaster.

A man finally indicated a corner between two tents. Jon found the two lords he was looking for. Galbart Glover was patting the shoulder of his friend. Jon knew that Gregor Forrester once was his squire. He earned such a position after defeating Lord Galbart in duel, which he said he would gladly lose again.

"Lord Glover. The king is requesting your presence. There’s a war council."

"I’m coming." He turned to his friend. "Stay strong, Gregor. Your men need you."

As Lord Glover left his friend, Jon addressed him. "Lord Gregor, I’m sorry for Rodrik."

"Thank you, Jon."

All life seemed to have left his eyes. As they walked to the command pavilion, Jon asked Galbart Glover how the Lord of Ironrath was.

"He just watched his son burn alive. It would be very hard for anybody."

They arrived at their destination. The other lords were almost all there. Robb was just as dirty and miserable as Jon was. He approached close enough to whisper.

"How many men have we lost?" He feared the answer, and he almost regretted asking when Robb replied.

"Ten thousand. Half the men we had."

Chapter End Notes

A lot of short chapters, but that amount to a sizeable section. Robb and Stannis are two great military commanders and any clash between them would be huge. I hope I delivered. Though I recognize I have kept a lot in store for future battles. The war is far from over.

Please review

Next chapter: Margaery
A new chapter... already. I think this is because I feel guilty for leaving you off the hook for over an entire month last time.

I know many people were eager to see Tyrion and Margaery again. Well, here you are served. I hope you'll enjoy seeing the power couple of this fanfiction after such a long absence.

The wind whipped her face. Despite the warmer gown she wore, she felt cold out there, the gazebo carved into the cliff of Casterly Rock offering no protection where she was standing. Her hair flew over her face. The heavy sleeves hit her chest, unable to entirely protect her crossed fingers.

She stood there over two years ago, in the exact same position, while darkness fell upon the Westerlands just like today, but with a lighter robe. Back then, Tyrion had just revealed the truth about his first wife. Margaery had come here to be alone, and she did it for the same reason today. She was thinking of Tyrion again, if not for the same reasons.

Jaime and Cersei were dead. It had been confirmed. The Kingslayer died at the end of the battle, at the feet of the Iron Throne where he murdered his king twenty years ago. As of Cersei, she was executed, her head cut off her body. Within a few months, half the royal family was killed. King Robert, Renly, Joffrey and Cersei were gone. Only Tommen remained here at the Rock, along with his sister Myrcella in Dorne, and Stannis and his wife and daughter.

Tyrion was mourning, just like Margaery was. They both lost members of their family. Margaery didn’t know if Tyrion only mourned his brother, or if he also mourned Cersei and her son. He wasn’t sure himself. When she asked him, he said he was definitely not mourning Joffrey. He didn’t say he wouldn’t mourn Cersei. Margaery had not pressed the issue.

In some way, Margaery was mourning not only her brother but also her brother-in-law. She regretted more the impact it had on Tyrion than the actual death of Jaime Lannister, but she found it enough to somehow mourn the man, even though he didn’t deserve it. Tyrion said he mourned her dead brother too, so that was something she owed him in the very least.

The journey from Deep Den to Casterly Rock had been anything but merry. The ambiance was dark and silent. They only arrived two days ago. She and Tyrion slept in separate rooms. He left her the lord’s chambers, preferring his former rooms, back when he was the second son of Tywin Lannister, the son whose existence he barely acknowledged. He kept himself busy with discussions about war, and she managed to keep her mind occupied by helping Sansa to settle in. The Stark girl seemed to get a little better as they travelled, away from the place where her father died and away from the people who murdered him. However, her mood turned darker as the news reached them. Sansa had become very good at hiding her emotions, but she didn’t grow in an environment where court
intrigues were the main occupation of a normal day like Margaery did, and she wasn’t taught by a master like Olenna Tyrell. The Lady of Casterly Rock knew how to decipher the smaller signs of emotions and feelings.

She spent a lot of time with Sansa lately. The girl needed someone to talk to, even though Margaery suspected the real reason why she dedicated so much time to the Stark girl was because she wanted to stay away from her husband. They crossed each other’s path every day, but their former relationship was gone. They were unable to rekindle it. Margaery could barely try to comfort Tyrion over his loss, even though she wanted to… as much as she wanted him to comfort her. She thought about her parents, who just lost their son. They could rely on each other. Why couldn’t she and Tyrion do the same?

Because he lied to me.

"My lady."

The voice she wanted to hear, but at the same that she didn’t want to hear. She gulped, then turned to face him. Just like her, he wore black. Everyone in Casterly Rock wore black, and so did many people in Lannisport. Even Sansa did. Margaery knew she didn’t want to do anything to indispose her hosts, but she had no doubts Sansa might be using the opportunity at the same time to mourn the people in her family she lost. She never had the chance to mourn them in King’s Landing, not with Joffrey and his kingsguards threatening her at every corner. It was probably for the better that they all had someone to mourn.

"What do you want, my lord?"

She noticed a small scroll of paper in his hands. She felt that other bad news were coming. Judging from his behaviour, it had to be the case. Her husband looked down. He was just as uncomfortable with her as she was with him.

"I know you wanted to be alone and that this is your private place, but I thought you ought to be the first to know."

He raised his hand with the scroll to be taken. She approached him, resigned, and took the parchment. Her hand lingered on his for a moment. It didn’t last long, but these were the kind of small gestures they did to try to show each other’s support. When she looked at the paper, she noticed immediately the seal, all black, displaying a tree with a sword inside.

"It came from Ironrath."

Tyrion stated what she had already guessed. Her reading made her fears come true.

My dear Mira,

My dear, dear Mira,

A raven sent by your father just arrived at Ironrath. There was a great battle near King’s Landing. Your brother Rodrik died on the battlefield. Your father is still alive and well, though he is heartbroken, just as I am.

Please, stay close to Lady Lannister. This might be your best chance now. The North might be lost.

I love you.

Your mother
She wondered if Elissa Branfield truly believed that her daughter would be safer at Casterly Rock, or if she knew her messages were being read and she wanted to give the impression her daughter would never leave Margaery’s side. Maybe both. It was true that with the battle Stannis recently won over the Starks and the Tullys, where they lost half their forces, and that now he was chasing them through the Riverlands, the odds were fairly against Robb Stark. The reign of the Young Wolf wouldn’t be long. Mira was better off to stay in the Westerlands.

"You read it?" she asked.

"Creylen told me the content. He reads every raven that flies in and out. I just… thought you’d like to know. In case you would like to tell her yourself. I know Mira is important to you."

"Yes, she is."

They stayed like that together, for a moment, together but not really together. Finally, he walked away after wishing her a good night.

Margaery remained at the gazebo for a little while longer. She spent a lot of time thinking about everything that happened these last few months and she had come to a conclusion. There was just something more she needed. But first, she had to visit a friend to tell her grievous news.

Mira wouldn’t be in her personal apartments at this hour. She would be waiting in Margaery’s chambers, to prepare her for the night. As she walked through the corridors of the Rock, she noticed the increased number of soldiers and guards. Tyrion placed more inside the walls of the castle.

She followed an empty corridor, the torches casting dark and long shadows on the walls, the floor and the ceiling. She heard whispers, impossible to understand first, but getting clearer as she moved forward.

"Ser Pounce! Where are you?"

She stopped. Margaery knew that voice, and she knew the corridors of Casterly Rock well enough to be certain of where the voice came from. After hesitation, she kept moving. A boy wouldn’t frighten her. The whispers turned into voices soon enough.

"Your Grace, we’ve searched everywhere. He’s not here."

"You’re wrong. He’s here, not far."

At the turning of a corner, she found them. She remained hidden, her black attire providing helpful camouflage. Tommen was in the middle of the tunnel, Ser Barristan and Ser Preston with him. The knight of House Greenfield looked bored, while his Lord Commander seemed a little amused by the situation, though tired as well. The king was looking all around, in every corner, to find the only knight who was authorized to sleep in his own room.

His gaze wandered from place to place, until it stopped at one specific spot, a hole in the wall, at the level of the floor. Tommen plunged his hands and arms into the hole and came out of it with a ball of furs, meowing.

"We found you, Ser Pounce. You cannot hide."

The smile on his face and the shining of his eyes were impossible to miss.

"Congratulations, your Grace, but I fear you must rest now," Ser Barristan said, his voice heavy from the lack of sleep. Margaery could only pity the old knight. He hadn’t filled the ranks of the
Kingsguard yet and took most of the burden on his shoulders.

"Are you still tired, Ser Barristan?" the king asked.

"I’m afraid I am, your Grace. I was just as young as you are once, but not anymore. These old muscles of mine are getting rusty. I confess that I probably want to go myself to bed much more than your Grace."

"I’m sorry, Ser. I didn’t want to exhaust you."

"No worry. Let me escort you, and then I’ll rest."

"Of course, Ser. Let’s go back to my chamber."

If Barristan Selmy had dared to tell Joffrey he was tired, the arrogant boy would probably have called him an old man, at best. Now they headed in her direction. She turned the corner and met them face to face.

"Aunt Margaery!"

Tommen was all smile, his cat buried into his arms, as he looked at her. He didn’t even wear a crown right now. Margaery looked at him and saw no king. She didn’t see a bastard born of incest either. There was only a boy, a boy with his favorite cat in his arms. He once told Margaery Joffrey had threatened him to skin the poor beast alive and mix his innards in Tommen’s food. Maybe she should have been disgusted by him, but all she could feel looking at Tommen were sadness and pity.

"My lady." Ser Barristan bowed to her, and so did Ser Preston. She forced herself to smile, something she did so often in her life that it turned into a second nature.

"Auntie, we just found Ser Pounce."

He showed her the cat who stirred, showing the same signs of exhaust than the other people around. Margaery barely hesitated before she ruffled his fur, earning purrs in return.

"I believe everyone here is good for a little rest. I’d better let you go back to your chambers, your Grace," she said.

"Yes, auntie. Have a good night."

They walked away. She looked at the boy slowly disappearing and resumed her path, her mind troubled by renewed thoughts that plagued her for days.

When she reached the doors of their chambers, she thought that nothing had changed. It was still Casterly Rock, the greatest castle in all the Seven Kingdoms, the castle whose lady she was… the only difference from the last time she was there was how things were with her husband.

She found Mira, Sera and her other handmaidens ending the preparation of the chamber and the bed she shared with Tyrion for over four years. She just reached her sixteenth name day when they met, and now she was twenty, a woman by all standards. So much time had passed, and yet… So much more could still happen here.

"Thank you all. You can go and rest. Except for you, Mira. I need to talk with you."

The other girls all left. They didn’t wonder why Margaery sent them away without preparing her for the night. They were used to this late behavior from their mistress. It had been like this ever since she
came back from her journey in the Stormlands. Some glanced at Mira, with fear or sympathy in their eyes. They must be afraid she was about to remove Mira from her service. She would do no such thing, though she wondered if that wouldn’t have been kinder news for her northern friend.

"Mira, please sit. I need to tell you something very important."

Dutifully, the northern girl obeyed her command. Margaery took place in front of her.

"We just received news from your family. Bad news."

Her handmaiden had remained impassive up to now, but her brows raised at the mention of her family.

"Has something happened to them? Is it the Ironborn? Is Ironrath in danger?"

"No, it’s not Ironrath, Mira. Nothing happened to your mother or your siblings in the North. It’s about the battle that took place near King’s Landing."

She had all the attention of her friend now. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then she said it.

"Your brother Rodrik is dead. He was killed during the battle."

In an instant, Mira’s face fell down. Her lips moved, but no word came out of them. She gulped so hard that Margaery hear the noise. She looked everywhere, as if she was searching some help, then her eyes went back to her mistress.

"Are you sure?" Her voice was strangled. "There’s no chance that he might…"

Margaery shook her head. "I’m afraid not. We received this raven from your home. I’m sorry we opened it before you, but Tyrion has every raven coming in and out read."

Mira didn’t reply right away. She ignored the scroll of paper Margaery handed her. "I understand."

Margaery saw the tears coming to her eyes. She stood up and came to her friend’s side, placing her hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

"I’m so sorry, Mira. I know what it is to lose a brother." She let some silence settle between them. "I can give you a day of rest tomorrow, if you want."

"No, thank you, my lady. I… I’ll just go to bed. I’ll be back in the morning… to attend you."

"If that’s what you want… You may go, Mira."

Slowly, her friend raised and walked to the door.

"Mira." She stopped when Margaery called, but she didn’t turn to face her. "If there’s anything you need, just tell me. I’m here for you."

"Thank you, my lady."

She resumed her path. Margaery supposed she was crying and didn’t want to show it to her. Maybe she should force her to rest tomorrow. She just lost a brother. Margaery knew only too well what it was, to lose someone you love and to not be able to mourn him.

She remembered the first time Mira celebrated her name day at Highgarden. There wasn’t much of a celebration for it. Such events were only celebrated for important people, such as kings or queens, or
lords and ladies and their children, and mostly when they were at home, in their castles. Handmaidens, no matter the family they came from, had no right to feasts or anything resembling for this occasion. At most, their names were mentioned by the lord at dinner, and a toast was given, but nothing more.

Margaery, just like her mother and grandmother, made a tradition of offering gifts to the people close to her the day they added one more year to their age. When Mira turned fourteen, Margaery had offered her a brooch that once belonged to her grandmother. The Queen of Thorns herself suggested that gift. A few gifts had also come from her family in the North. Her eldest brother sent her a very rare book about the history of House Manderly. To help you remember where you come from, while not forgetting where you’re heading, the word accompanying it read. The choice of this house was no coincidence. The Manderlys had been lords in the Reach once, before they were welcomed by the Starks on the western coast of the North.

Mira’s eyes had been shining as she looked at the gifts her family sent her. Margaery could see she missed them and that it caused this reaction far more than to receive these presents. Her handmaiden appreciated the presents Margaery and a few other people at Highgarden gave her, including that of her cousin Willas, a book on Dornish poetry. However, none could replace her parents, brothers and sister. No matter what Margaery would do, she couldn’t make Mira forget about her brother’s death. All she could do was to be there for her and help her the best she could.

She wondered a moment how she and Tyrion could have helped each other, had there not been his lies concerning Jaime and Cersei. She told herself for a long time that without this, maybe Loras would still be alive. Though, what would have happened if Tyrion told her the truth? Would he still have wanted to protect his siblings? What choice would she have made then? Margaery realized with horror that she didn’t know. Back then, if she had been placed in a situation where she had to choose between her husband or her family…

She thought about Loras, who was ready to kill the man she loved. Did it really matter for him that Joffrey was a bastard or not? He sided with Renly early in the war, probably even before he knew who Joffrey was, maybe not even caring whether Stannis told the truth or not. Did Renly care? He didn’t seem to care much about the rights of succession. He rose in rebellion against his elder brother. Did the fact Joffrey was the result of an incest truly matter?

"Stop."

She said the word aloud. That was enough. She knew why she was so upset when Tyrion finally confessed the truth. She was angry because he hid the truth to her, because he didn’t trust her with something like that. She noticed tears falling on her cheeks. She wiped them, got rid of her clothes and went to bed without further preparation.

A man was being carried on a wagon. His hands and feet were tied to it. He only wore a simple shirt. People in the courtyard and on the battlements looked at him as he crossed the distance to the stage. Everyone was silent. Arrived at the steps leading to the stage, the gaolers untied him. Four knights escorted him. Margaery was very close. She had waited this moment for so long, and finally it came. Jaime Lannister stood, his walking uncertain, his face empty. Their eyes met as he slowly walked ahead. When he tried to take the first step to the stage, he missed it and stumbled. A man helped him to not fall. The man was his former Lord Commander.

"Thank you, Ser Barristan. But when I come down again, let me shift for myself, as well as I can."

The old knight nodded, a grim expression on his face, a mixture of sadness and disappointment. Ser Jaime resumed his climbing, the shadow of a smile on his lips. When he reached the top, only the High Septon and the executioner, Ser Ilyn Payne, stood with him. He was about to speak with Ser
Barristan climbed on the stage as well. The two men exchanged a look. Both nodded to each other. The Kingslayer turned back to the crowd.

"I've never been good with speeches, but since this is my last opportunity to make one, then I better do it. I ask you to bear witness with me that I shall now suffer death for the love I bear for a woman."

His eyes seemed to wander in the crowd, looking for someone. His lips quivered and finally his gaze fell upon her, where they remained.

"I beg you earnestly to follow my brother, and to pray for him if you think it's worth it. And tell him I died the lover of our sister, but his brother first. Tell my brother… that he is a hundred times the heir our father wished I was. And tell him… that I always cared for him… more than I ever cared for Cersei."

As it became clear he wouldn't speak further, Ser Ilyn knelt before him. For the first time, Margaery thought there was sadness in the eyes of the executioner.

"Ser Ilyn is asking for your pardon and blessing," Ser Barristan told her brother-in-arms.

Ser Jaime did something Margaery did not expect. He took the executioner by the shoulders and forced him back on his feet.

"I never had the chance to tell you, Ser Ilyn, but you are a good man. One of the best my father ever had. You will give me this day a greater benefit than any mortal man can ever be able to give me. Pluck up your spirits, and be not afraid to do your office."

People began shouting, some asking for blood, others begging to let him live. There were also people who remained silent. Jaime Lannister, resigned to his fate, knelt and pressed his elbows on the execution block. He looked at her all this time. The High Septon recited prayers while Ser Ilyn prepared to deliver the final blow. People prayed with him all around Margaery among the shouting of the crowd. Slowly, her husband's brother lowered his head on the block. Margaery could see his eyes. They were shut. He opened them, then raised his arms.

The longsword fell in one sweep on the knight's neck, cutting it clean from his body. Jaime Lannister was dead.

"AHHHHHHHHHH!!"

Far away, someone screamed like Margaery never heard. It faded as the blood coming from the lifeless body of the Kingslayer poured on the stage and down in the courtyard.

The world vanished all around. A complete darkness surrounded her. Light began to emerge from it, coming from a long but tight window, so high she could only see the grey sky through it. She was in a dark room, comfortably furnished and arranged, but a dark room all the same. A prison.

The crowd roared outside. It would happen soon. Desperate, she looked around. She had to see it. She noticed a huge box in a corner. She struggled to move it to the window, each movement being difficult. She then added a stool before the box, so she could climb on it.

Outside, the crowd was gathering. It would happen in the same courtyard and on the same stage where Ser Jaime was executed. Only this time it wasn't Tyrion's brother they brought forward. It was her own, Loras, dressed exactly the same way as the Kingslayer. Many people were present, many of whom were present the last time, including Ser Barristan Selmy, the rest of the Kingsguard, Lord Varys, Petry Baelish, Pycelle, Ser Kevan, Genna, Sansa and even Mira. Margaery had asked her to be present at the execution since she couldn't.
Two men brought Loras roughly to the execution block. Unlike Ser Jaime, who seemed to show some honor and dignity, none could be seen in Loras. Perhaps it was only because the crowd didn't show him any respect. Where some had observed silence or begged to spare Ser Jaime, Loras was only insulted and mocked. She knew what was going to happen. She knew her brother behaved in such a way that it was a likely outcome, perhaps an inevitable one, but she hoped still against all odds that something might save him in the very end.

"I say to you…"

People didn’t listen to him as he spoke. Margaery placed a hand on the window. She wanted to get through, to hug her brother one last time, to save him, to do anything but to stay there, far away from him, while she watched him die.

"I say to you trust in the Father, the Mother, the Maiden, the Crone, the Warrior, and the Smith. Do not trust in the vanities of this world, for if I had done so, I think I would still be alive, as you are now. In the very least, I get to die for the man I love. I just wish I could live with him."

People kept insulting and mocking him as he mirrored Ser Jaime’s movements, with the exception that his head was forced on the block by the executioner and he wasn’t given one last chance to pray if he wanted. His head was turned to the side, unlike Tyrion’s brother who was looking to the ground when he died. Ser Ilyn touched his neck three times with his blade to be sure it was well aligned. Then with one swift blow, he cut off his head from his body.

Margaery burst into tears, looking at the headless body of her brother from afar, shaking, what remained of his life leaving it. She cried and screamed, the pain in her heart as lively as if she was stabbed. She didn't have the courage to see the four other people who died under the same sword used by the same arms, her brother's blood still on it. In the end, she stumbled and fell to the floor.

She woke up in the bed, sweating and gasping. She felt cold. The temperature had fallen since the last time they were at Casterly Rock. She quickly put on a nightgown to protect herself from the cool air and sat on a nearby chair. She continued to shiver, shaken by the dream she just made.

*It's only a dream.*

She remembered that when Tyrion made nightmares, she used to be there for him when he woke up. Instinctively, she looked around to find him, but the bed was empty. They didn't share it anymore.

Out of nowhere, she cried. She cried a lot these past weeks, only when she was alone, to not show eventual weakness to the others. But her world was crumbling, falling apart, and so she was. Her brother's blood was everywhere. The shadow loomed over her, threatening her family and everyone else she cared for, all the people she loved.

The shadow. A long shadow, taking all those she held dear. The shadow who ruined her life.

Slowly, she dried her tears and swept away what was left of them. She clenched her fists. The time had come to face her demons, and for the man responsible for her brother's death to pay. She stood up and, determined like she had never been, Margaery Lannister of House Tyrell went to see the man she married.

Chapter End Notes
I don't know if some of you noticed, but the dream Margaery made is inspired from the TV show "The Tudors", where Margaery's actress plays the role of Anne Boleyn. Jaime's execution is mirroring that of Thomas More, while Loras' mirrors that of George Boleyn. Note that I do not see Margaery as an equivalent of Anne Boleyn, and that I see Tyrion even less as an equivalent of Henry VIII. I just liked the execution scene of Thomas More so much that I wanted to include something similar in this fanfiction. Plus, I thought the executions fitted in some way the different fates of both characters in this story. Jaime might have died in a more honorable way than Loras, and George Boleyn happened to be homosexual just like Loras. I loved to adapt Thomas More's final speech for Jaime, replacing his double loyalty to the Church and the king by Jaime's loyalties to Tyrion and Cersei.

We'll get to see the power couple together much longer in the next chapter.

Please review

Next chapter : Tyrion
Tyrion XV

Chapter Notes

Tyrion is back... after an absence of 17 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION XV

The men are showing the first signs of restlessness. We keep them busy with training and sending them foraging the lands but that won’t last. Armies are not made to remain stationary for a long time. I understand your orders, cuz, but I still wish I could bring my men to battle. Take care of you.

Daven

The message came from the Golden Tooth. Tyrion wasn’t surprised. Soldiers grew restless when they remained idle. However, he couldn’t give Daven what he asked. If the army he and his father Stafford commanded was to attack the Riverlands, then there was a chance the Tullys and the Starks would fall back into Stannis’ arms. Right now, they only held a few castles in the western part of the Riverlands and used the opportunity to have their army live on Tully lands. They also took a lot of the food and livestock of this kingdom back with them when they abandoned the siege of Riverrun. Tyrion didn’t have to send too much to sustain the army stationed at the Golden Tooth as a result. For now, at least. Things might change if this situation dragged on. But first, he had to wait, let Robb Stark and Stannis fight and weaken each other.

The other raven was from Deep Den, where Ser Addam Marbrand led the second Lannister army.

No sign of Stannis attacking us or intending to do so. He seems to focus on the Starks and the Tullys, like you informed us. We remain on our position for now, renewing our troops and preparing to invade the Crownlands as soon as you give us the signal.

He did nothing. Sometimes, nothing was the hardest thing to do. As to whether it was the right or wrong thing to do though, it depended on the circumstances. His father waited for the right moment to strike during Robert’s Rebellion. It paid off. Tyrion would do the same thing, launching his troops when the time was right. Sadly, doing nothing didn’t serve him as well in his private life as it could serve him in the world of politics.

On the wall on his right hung the golden rose of Highgarden with the green field behind. Right now, he and the Rose of Highgarden had nothing to tell each other. He had gone to see her this evening. She was alone, all wearing black, still beautiful despite everything that happened. He had brought her the message about the death of her handmaiden’s brother.

Tyrion regretted the death of Rodrik Forrester. He met his father at the Tourney of Lannisport long ago. As for his daughter, he saw her so often over the last few years that he came to respect her and her family deeply. He knew how close Margaery was to her. Did he believe that by telling her about the death of Rodrik Forrester, not hiding her this information, he would somehow be forgiven for what the many months of his lies left behind them? He doubted it, but he didn’t want to lie to her anymore.
He read the reports on the recruitment of new soldiers to compensate for their losses, the reports about the state of provisions for winter, and requests from all the lords and landed knights and merchants and all other people who could read and write. Work, he had to work to forget but he could not.

Finally, he blew up a few papers away from him and fell back into his chair. His solar was dark, only lit by a single candle. A wine decanter was placed on the corner. For the hundredth time today, he considered taking some. But he didn’t. Whores, drinking, gambling, he stopped all this the day he got married. Well, not entirely, he still occasionally drank and gambled, but Margaery made sure he would never overindulge himself again in these domains. Strangely, Tyrion made a game of sneaking wine past her eyes so he could drink when she was absent. It was some sort of half serious half joking game before. Now that they were estranged, he didn’t dare to go back to his old habits. He didn’t want them anymore. A few times, the idea to visit a brothel made its way through his mind, only to be blown apart right away. A whore could not replace the woman he loved, and he didn’t want to replace her anyway.

*Jaime dead. Cersei dead. Joffrey dead. Loras dead. Margaery lost to me. Where would it end? He had lost the only family member who never treated him as a monster. Without him, Tyrion would never have survived his childhood. Jaime was all he had for a very long time. Cersei would have killed him long ago without him. Now both were gone, and their eldest son as well. Myrcella was still in Dorne, safe or so he hoped, while Tommen was here, at Casterly Rock, for now the seat of their new king.

He should have been happy that Joffrey was dead. In fact, he was quite glad that he no longer had to deal with this spoiled and cruel boy. Tommen was sweet, king, good-natured, and with time he could become a good king for his people. While they were at it, they could also hope that he would build castles made of gingerbread and moats would be filled with blackberry wine under his rule.

However, he didn’t feel happy about Joffrey’s death. Perhaps it was only the fact that the boy was Jaime’s son after all. Or maybe it was only because like everyone else, Tyrion somehow took pity for Joffrey because he was dead and now his heart was trying to trick his mind by only showing Joffrey’s good sides, whatever small they were. *Why do we always think more fondly of people after they’re deceased?*

Tired. He was so tired, and since he couldn’t drink, and that he couldn’t whore either, then the best option was probably to sleep. He let himself slip from his chair and walked out of his solar, the great banners of House Lannister and the small one of House Tyrell defiling as he progressed to the exit. In the corridors, there were guards at every door and every corner. After what happened to Renly and Joffrey, he wasn’t about to take any chance. Was his nephew murdered by a shadow as well? Ser Barristan said they couldn’t find the assassin. Even if it wasn’t a shadow that killed him like Renly, then this meant Stannis must have hired a specialized assassin to do the job. Maybe Varys, though his spies in the capital swore the eunuch had not been seen since the city fell.

No matter who did that, Tyrion now knew that Stannis had the necessary means to kill someone in his own castle or while he was surrounded by his own men. Tyrion didn’t know if that would make much difference, but more guards was a supplementary protection he didn’t mind paying for.

He arrived at his old chambers. He lived there before his father died. It was an eternity since he set foot in this room, since his father told him on his deathbed that it was time for him to behave like the Lord of Casterly Rock. The guard didn’t move when Tyrion approached, nor when he pushed the door. Slowly, the long hours of the day weighing on his shoulders, he walked in direction of his bed. "We need to talk."
At first, he didn’t know what to do. Did he just imagine the voice?

"Tyrion, look at me."

This time, he couldn’t have imagined that. He looked where the voice came from and saw his wife. Despite the limited light provided by the few candles still lit, Tyrion could see her very well. Her hair was unbraided, and she wore a nightgown in the Reach style, the kind he loved the most since they revealed the largest parts of her body. It seems like some rumors about me are true, after all. No matter the circumstances, I’ll always be attracted to women.

"I wasn’t expecting you," he whispered.

"I know, but I needed to see you."

"I won’t complain about your presence." He moved the chair in front of her and sat down. "What do you want, my lady?"

Like always between them, a long and heavy silence settled. Tyrion waited for her to speak. He didn’t know himself what to say, so he didn’t hold it against her to not say anything. Finally, she seemed to take a decision.

"How did you know they were their children?"

"Pardon me."

"Joffrey, Tommen, Myrcella. How do you know they are Jaime and Cersei’s children? How do you know your brother is the father? Did they tell you?"

He found it an odd question. He thought he made it quite clear that he hid her the truth about their nephews and niece ever since the day they were married.

"Well, they never said that they were his children, but it wasn’t hard for me to find out. I’m their brother and I spent more than enough time with them to recognize the signs."

She sighed and shook her head. "What I mean is… how can you be sure that they are Jaime’s children? Cersei was sleeping with Robert. Is it impossible that maybe one or two of them are from him?"

Tyrion blinked several times. Where was she going? Again, she sighed and dropped her head. She seemed… desperate. When she looked back to him, her eyes made it even more obvious.

"I crossed Tommen today, on the way back to our chambers. He was looking for his cat and… I tried all this time, ever since we left the capital, I tried to look at him and to see the son of your brother and sister, a bastard born of incest, a monster. But all I could see today was a boy playing with his favorite cat. So tell me…” Her voice was shaking now. "Is there a chance that he might be Robert’s son? Or even that Myrcella could be his daughter?"

Tyrion remained silent for a long time. He had his chance. He could tell her that yes, it was possible. After all, how could they be certain that all Cersei’s children were from Jaime, since he wasn’t the only man she slept with. He could try to mend his relationship with his wife, just make her believe that Tommen might be Robert’s son… but he didn’t.

He sighed just as Margaery did before he answered. "I wish I could tell you that, but I don’t ever want to lie to you again. I wasn’t in the bedchamber when my siblings made love, and I wasn’t in Robert’s personal chamber either to see him fuck my sister. But I know they were lovers, and as far
as I’m concerned, I’m persuaded that Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen are all Jaime’s children."

She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, then reopened them. "I asked if there was a chance. So don’t lie to me again."

"There is a possibility, yes, but I don’t believe in it."

She nodded. "If Stannis wins this war, if he catches them, they will die."

"Stannis will never let them live," he confirmed. "Even if he believed they were Robert’s children, they would remain a threat to his rule. We lose, Tommen and Myrcella die, and I most certainly die as well."

She nodded again, and another long silence took place between them before she talked again. "Stannis killed my brother." She stood up and began to pace around the room, Tyrion following her with his eyes. She came to a stop and looked straight at him. "I know what I saw, Tyrion. Maybe you don’t believe me, but I know the truth. A shadow with the face of Stannis Baratheon murdered Renly right in front of me."

"I believe you. Even if I find it hard to believe in such a tale, I believe you all the same."

"My brother would still be alive without Stannis. He didn’t kill him, but it’s as if he did. Loras is dead because of what happened in this tent on that night."

"Just like Jaime," Tyrion whispered.

"Stannis is a threat to us all. I will not let him harm any other person I love."

Tyrion nodded. "It’s good to hear." At least, they shared a common enemy and this was clear now. Their alliance with House Tyrell was essential if they hoped to win this war and place Tommen on the Iron Throne. That was the best he could hope for.

"There’s something else I wanted to tell you." He looked back at her. Her expression of determination was gone. She looked at him like… like the day he told her about Tysha.

"I had time to think about it, Tyrion, and I still wish you told me the truth when Stannis started to tell the story."

"I should have, but I was afraid."

"I still believe you shouldn’t have protected Cersei and Jaime like this. They were your siblings, part of your family, I get it, but Cersei tried to kill you, and your brother…” She looked about to say something. "He didn’t deserve your love. He wasn’t worthy of it."

Tyrion looked to the floor. "You have no idea what it was like to grow in this family. My mother died the day I was born, my father despised me because I killed her and because I was a dwarf. Cersei hated me because she lost her mother the day I came into the world. But Jaime… he was the only one who never saw me like a monster. The only one to treat me like a member of his family. You have no idea what he’s done for me. Without him, I would have died long ago. Cersei would have killed me long before. I don’t know what I would have become without him. I would never have met you."

He didn’t dare to look at her. None of them said anything for a long time. Only a few feet from him, the woman he loved stood, and here he was, sitting in a chair, telling her about the good things Jaime did for him, defending his brother who played no small part in the starting of the war that killed her
own brother. He defended the brother who pushed a boy of ten from the top of a tower, who made love and gave three children to his twin sister, who murdered his own king, who… He defended the Kingslayer. But he couldn’t do anything else. Jaime was his brother.

"I understand why you lied to me. I don’t have a brother and a sister who make love together but… you know where Loras’ preferences lied." Of course, everyone knew. "If he had ever been in danger because of that, I would have lied about it to everyone, even my own family. Even to you, if needed."

For a moment, Tyrion tried to imagine the events had their roles been reversed. What if Margaery hid to him some huge secret about her family? A secret so dark that it caused him to go to war for her. Somehow, it was hard for him to imagine how he would have reacted. There were so few people he trusted in this world that he was never disappointed or even sad when someone betrayed him. It was as if he expected it. What if… what if it was Jaime who betrayed him? How would he feel? The problem was that he simply couldn’t imagine Jaime betraying him, not even for Cersei.

And Margaery? Could she ever betray him? Well, he did betray her, so why wouldn’t she? And for her family, overall, why would she choose him over her parents, her grandmother, even her cousins? When he thought about that, Tyrion only wondered whether Margaery could betray him during the first year of their union. At the beginning of their marriage, he assumed it as being normal, so he never questioned the possibility that it might happen. Six months after their marriage, after she said she loved him for the first time, he doubted on many occasions. And then it was like his mind, all of a sudden, didn’t consider it as a possibility anymore.

With Tysha, he had doubts from the very beginning, but he ignored them. And then the truth came out, but Tyrion could never resent the poor girl, not after what his father’s men did to her. Not after what he did.

Did he regret not taking his doubts about Tysha more seriously? Strangely, not at all. These two weeks were the best of his life… until he met Margaery.

His eyes moved up to meet hers. "I still love you, Tyrion. I tried to hate you, but I can’t. And I don’t believe my brother would have wanted that I hate my husband for the rest of my life."

"Somehow, I doubt it."

"I know your brother wouldn’t have wanted that."

He gulped. He couldn’t say anything for some time. When the words came out, they were strangled by his tears. "I love you too."

This night was the first in a long time he spent in the company of his wife. They didn’t make love, they didn’t become one, but they laid in each other’s arms. When Tyrion fell asleep, it was to get the best night he had since she left King’s Landing for the Stormlands.

On the morning, when he woke up, they were still in the same position. The barely visible way in which her lips curved was a sight he almost never hoped to see again. Her arm laid along her body, her palm pointing to the ceiling. Her hair was pushed back behind her neck. Tyrion noticed it was a little tangled, like when he used to pass his hand through her locks. He didn’t move, just stayed there to look at her, sleeping peacefully. She was beautiful, like she had always been.

He began to caress the soft skin along her arm. Up and down, from her elbow to her wrist, again and again. She still wore her nightgown. They hadn’t cared to undress before they went to bed. His eyes moved from her arm to the curves her clothes were revealing. After a moment, he thought he heard a
giggle. His eyes shot back to her face. Her eyes were still shut, but he had the distinct impression the curve of her lips was more pronounced.

"Are you awake?"

Slowly, the eyelids opened to reveal her beautiful green eyes.

"Hi."

"Hi."

It took a long, but they got closer and their lips met. It was sweet, tender, slow, deep. He caressed her left cheek. Her hand wandered on the pillow, over his dead.

"I missed this," she told him as they lips separated.

"You’re reading my thoughts, my queen," he replied, initiating laughs from both of them.

They resumed their kiss, but it was then that the door opened. Tyrion’s squire, Ty, froze up the moment he entered the room and realized after a moment what was going on in his master’s bed.

"Ty, have you never understood the concept of knocking when a door is closed?"

"Sorry, my… my lord. Sorry, my lady. I didn’t know you were… If I had known… Please forgive me."

"Go out, Ty. I’ll call when I need you."

The moment he was gone, he looked to his wife and they chuckled.

"Don’t be too hard on him for the next few days, Tyrion. He’ll be afraid you’ll want to have him skin alive."

"I can’t promise that, my lady. Sometimes, having people fearing the worst from can be quite funny."

She shot another irresistible smile and rose from the bed. For a short time as she moved, he saw one of her legs, perfectly shaped, uncovered by the tissue of her nightgown. Four years were gone since their wedding and she was more beautiful than ever.

"Try not to gawk too much at me today," she warned playfully. "We are still at war."

And that was it. They were back to reality. Tyrion dressed himself, realizing the meeting of the war council would start soon. That must have been why Ty came to see him.

Margaery and Tyrion found themselves sitting at an oval table with his aunt Genna, castellan of Casterly Rock in all but name during his absence, his cousin Ser Damion Lannister, the official castellan, Maester Creylen, Vyarr who was in charge of the defense of Casterly Rock, and Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, and Ser Rodger Bridges, the commander of Margaery’s personal guard, the closest to a representative of the Reach apart from Margaery at this table. This wasn’t the small council. Tyrion didn’t name one yet. Tommen was too young to rule, and with the war ongoing, there were more important things than to name a new small council.

Furthermore, if he was to name members on the small council right away, it would be difficult to unname them afterwards. Better to keep all seats available for later, when the time would come to reward allies or to encourage enemies to take their side. For now, Tommen had officially acknowledged Tyrion as his regent and Protector of the Realm. The council assembled in this room
was some sort of officious or shadow council, in place as long they had not taken King’s Landing back.

On the table, a large map of Westeros was displayed, with pieces showing the position of all forces in Westeros.

"Very well, we’re all here. Creylen, were there any changes to the situation since yesterday?"

"No, my lord. As you can see, the armies on the map haven’t moved. Robb Stark is still riding away from King’s Landing, and Stannis is chasing him. Whether the Stark boy will stop at Harrenhal, head for the North or assemble his troops at Riverrun, I cannot say."

In some way, Creylen was the non-official Grand Maester and Master of Whisperers. Tyrion regretted Varys. He had become fond of the eunuch, though he would never have entrusted his life into his hands. Still, he wished the Spider was with them. Tyrion had his network of informers he started to develop after he became Lord of Casterly Rock. All this time he spent in the brothels wasn’t only useful with Margaery in bed. The owners of whorehouses in Lannisport had contacts with their competitors or collaborators in the capital, even inside the Red Keep itself, despite Stannis’ attempt to ban them, though the latter decision was softened since Stannis departed from the capital. One of the girls in King’s Landing managed to hear a conversation between two of Stannis’ advisor when they were wondering about the place where Varys was hiding. This was good and bad news at the same time. Varys didn’t work for the enemy, but he didn’t work for them either. Who did he work for? The Realm, my lord. Someone must.

Tyrion’s network combined with Creylen’s work didn’t make for a perfect substitute, but that was good enough for now.

"If Robb Stark is heading north, then he is a fool," Genna said, not willing to let the men do all the talking like always. "The Ironborn hold Moat Cailin. It is impossible to take it from the south. So unless he has some army besieging it from the north, he will die if he tries to get through."

No one would dare to contradict her.

"According to the latest information we have, Robb Stark should be very close to the frontier between the Crownlands and the Riverlands," Tyrion pointed. "I agree with my aunt, Robb Stark is not foolish enough to run into certain death. Ser Barristan, if you were in his place, what would you do?" He was the closest thing to a general Tyrion had right now.

"Going back in the North is indeed too dangerous, my lord. I wouldn’t try to hold Harrenhal either. The fortress is in ruins. I think if I was Robb Stark, I would be heading for Riverrun. His uncle Edmure Tully has enough men to switch the balance. If Robb Stark was to join his forces with those of the Riverlands, he would have an army larger than Stannis. Furthermore, the Starks could take everything they need from the land as they progress to Riverrun and prevent Stannis from living on their lands."

"If the Starks take everything they want from the Riverlands, the Tully bannermen might choose to support Stannis," Creylen pointed out.

"I doubt it, Creylen. The Blackfish is riding with the Starks and the lords of the Riverlands only have their castle’s garrisons at their disposal," Tyrion countered. "The rest is at Riverrun or covering the western part of Edmure Tully’s lands." Tyrion took the lion positioned on the frontier between the Riverlands and the Westerlands. "Before I left the capital, I commanded Stafford to abandon the siege of Riverrun and bring his men to the Golden Tooth."
"A decision few of us here understand," sharply commented his aunt. Tyrion decided to ignore the jab.

"However, Daven and Stafford did well. They kept a few castles on the way, creating a corridor of occupied fortresses. Considering Stannis is now chasing Robb Stark from the Crownlands, I'm afraid Hoster Tully only left half a kingdom to his son, and soon he will not have any control over the other half."

Lord Hoster had died a few days ago. Not that it mattered a lot. His son, the brother of Catelyn Stark, was already Lord of Riverrun in all but name. When Tyrion met him as they travelled to Winterfell, he didn’t find much to say about Edmure Tully. He was a common lord paramount, nothing more. He had much more respect for Hoster Tully, an old man who struggled to keep ruling as long as he could despite his declining health. Somehow, when Tyrion met him, it made him think of his own father on his deathbed, but much more civil.

"Edmure Tully is stuck between us on one side, and Robb Stark and Stannis on the other one. Some of his lords were there when Robb Stark was acclaimed King in the North and they joined their northern allies to cheer him. Considering how the Tullys consider family important, they will remain by the Stark side."

"Don’t you think they could choose to betray them for Stannis?" Ser Rodger asked.

"This is not in the Reach," she said. "Edmure Tully will never turn on his own blood."

"So, what do we do?" Genna asked. "We all agree Robb Stark is most likely heading to Riverrun, so what do we do with that information? We let our enemies kill each other then deal with those who are left? That’s what my brother would have done, just so that you know."

Hearing his aunt mention his father brought bad memories to Tyrion’s mind. "I think this would be the safest course," he agreed. Tywin Lannister might have been a horrible father, but even Tyrion could not deny he did a lot to increase the power and prestige of House Lannister. Using the strategy his father would have used if he was still alive seemed like a very good idea right now.

"I believe my aunt is right. But I would rather not have us just stay under the Rock while we let events unfold outside. We have two armies, one at the Golden Tooth and another at Deep Den. We can’t have them staying where they are for too long. Stannis will keep chasing Robb Stark until he’s defeated. He cannot and he won’t let another contender escape him. Besides, he needs the Riverlands if he is ever to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. He cannot be king only with the forces of the Stormlands and the Crownlands, not after the losses he suffered at King’s Landing." He extended his hand and seized the lion that rested on a fortress along the Goldroad. "Ser Addam Marbrand will march on the capital and retake it. We have a king, but I think he should rather have the Iron Throne. Stafford and Daven will keep the west of the Riverlands and march again on Riverrun the moment Robb Stark or Stannis is defeated to deal with the survivor. As for the Tyrells, they will neutralize the troops Stannis sent in the Reach, then deal with Storm’s End. I think they should also send us reinforcements for the attack on King’s Landing."

He looked to his wife while saying the latter. "I'll write to my father. It won’t be a problem," she said. Her eyes told him he had all her support.

"Good. As of Dorne, they remain uninvolved in this war and I doubt it will change."

"Any danger for your niece?" Genna asked, on a very well hidden accusing tone.

"Prince Doran has no reason to break our alliance. We still have the most powerful army and navy,
and now that Robb Stark and Stannis are at each other’s throat, it is even less likely he will side with
them.

"What about the Vale, my lord?" Ser Barristan asked. "The knights of the Vale are strong warriors.
For now, they haven’t taken part to this war, but now that Robb Stark is in danger, they might decide
to join him."

Tyrion had thought about this as well. "This is a good point, Ser Barristan, but I’m afraid there’s
nothing we can do about the Vale of Arryn. Lysa Arryn seems determined to stay in her tower with
her son. Let’s hope it remains that way until the war comes to an end."

"I met Lysa Arryn before her husband’s death," Margaery intervened. "She is overprotective of her
son, but she was also… I’d say she wasn’t sane when we last met. Ser Barristan, you saw her on a
daily basis for years. What’s your opinion of Lady Arryn?"

"She is… I must agree that she was very protective of her son, with a tendency to see enemies and
danger where there were none. As to what she will do, I don’t know. If Jon Arryn was still alive,
then no doubt the Vale would already have joined the fray."

"But Jon Arryn is dead. There’s no point in wondering what would have happened if he was there. I
guess the best we can do is pray that the Vale stays out of the war, for all the good it can do. Now,
another problem. The Iron Islands."

"I would advise you to neutralize the Greyjoys as quickly as you can, my lord," the Lord
Commander of the Kingsguard told him right away. "They are a danger for all the Seven Kingdoms.
They might only be attacking the North for the time being, but sooner or later they will invade the
rest of the Realm."

"For now, they are only raiding the shores of the North. They’ve made no move on the Westerlands
or the Riverlands," Rodger Bridges said. "I think we should just let our enemies kill each other."

"It is obvious you were not here the last time the Ironborn stroke. Their attacks on the North are
temporary. They will tire of taking wooden castles and burning fishing villages," Genna intervened.
"Lannisport was burned the last time they rebelled. We have much more to offer for plunder than the
North ever will. They will sail for the shores of the Westerlands and the Reach when the time
comes."

"Is there any chance for negotiations? Balon Greyjoy might not be open for discussion, but other
lords in the Iron Islands might be ready to parley. Rodrik Harlaw is one of the most powerful among
them…" Creylen began.

"He is just one man among thousands who will cut your tongue the moment you say a word."

"I already tried the diplomatic path with Balon Greyjoy," Tyrion said. "It didn’t work. We had no
reply from him, and I doubt we will get any. The man only thinks about plundering, reviving the old
way of his people. However, for now, the North appears to be his sole target. We have to thank
Theon Greyjoy for the destruction of Winterfell."

And the murder of two children, Tyrion thought darkly. It was probably for the best that the former
Stark ward died, for the Northerners would have made him suffer like he couldn’t imagine.

He resumed. "And since the Northerners killed his last living son, Balon Greyjoy might just fix on
them further. For now, it would be better to remain out of the Iron Islands. But let’s keep a close eye
on our coasts all the same. If the Iron Fleet ever attacks us, we must be ready."
The rest of the meeting concerned details such as food stocks for winter and the financial situation of the Rock. Despite the fact their vaults were overflowing with gold and silver, there was still the fact that as long as Stannis held King’s Landing, the Crown wouldn’t pay back the huge debts it contracted towards House Lannister.

When the meeting came to an end, Genna asked him to stay. Being one of the few people in Casterly Rock who could still give orders to Tyrion, her nephew complied. Margaery sent him an encouraging and compassionate gaze as she left.

"When I heard you abandoned King’s Landing, I expected you would bring Jaime and Cersei with you, and her other son," she told him when they were alone.

Tyrion avoided to look at her. "You’re talking about the woman who tried to kill my wife, Genna. And she tried to kill me too."

"She was your sister all the same. And there was Jaime too."

He felt a pang in the heart but refused to succumb to it. "What would Tywin Lannister have done, if someone tried to kill him and his wife both?"

Genna didn’t reply immediately. "Worse than you did."

"I had no other choice. Besides, even if I had offered Cersei to follow us, I doubt she would have accepted, and wherever Cersei would be, Jaime would stand by her side. We’re still lucky I managed to smuggle Tommen out of the Red Keep."

He stared at the wall where hung the tapestries of House Lannister. Their family might be large, he felt as if he was the last of the Lannisters. All his siblings were dead, and he had no children. His mind drifted away to Jaime, as it happened so often since he received news of his death. Jaime, the big brother who always protected him, the only one to not see a monster in Tyrion, who offered him presents for his name day when everyone ignored it.

"You remember I once told Tywin that you were his son and Jaime wasn’t?" He looked back at her. She had a sorry expression on her face. "I’m afraid that today, I’m more certain than ever that I was right back then."

"I’m not sure if I must take it as a compliment, Genna."

She smiled ruefully. "I saw you grow up, each one of you. I quickly realized you were the only one who could keep the Lannisters where Tywin brought them and higher. I just wish we didn’t have to sacrifice Cersei and Jaime on the way."

She stood up on that remark. "Don’t forget about Kevan and his sons. We shouldn’t abandon them," she reminded him before she was out of the room.

Tyrion remained in the room for a long time. Maybe. He didn’t know. He left it in the end and spent the rest of the day dealing with political matters, small or huge. He and Margaery held court in the afternoon. He tried to be as fair as he could, and to keep his attention on the requests that were laid in front of them, but his mind drifted away, his thoughts repetitively wandering to Jaime.

Merchants complained about the additional taxes and levies they had to support. Shipbuilders complained about the lack of workforce to build the new ships they commanded. Lords complained about the men who left their farms in this time of harvest. Tyrion could perceive their dissatisfaction, their eagerness to see this war end as quickly as it began. Margaery helped him a lot. She did it the previous days, but she seemed more eager to do it now. At one point, after she saved him from a
Lady Westerling who seemed to have taken upon herself to make his day a nightmare with her endless complaints, she placed a comforting hand on his own. Their eyes met. He had the impression to be married for the first time in weeks.

Before they cleared a court, a man in rags came to them. The smallfolk were always heard last, after all the people with titles, lands or gold, when it wasn’t the three. Tyrion wasn’t sure about his age. The misery of people sometimes disfigured them so much it could make them look ten, twenty or thirty years older than they were. There were some who didn’t know how old they were themselves.

"My good lord, my good lady, I used to run a small shop where I sold fruits and vegetables from the neighboring farms. I had a son who joined your army when you marched to war against Stannis the usurper. He died in the Riverlands, at the Battle of the Kingsroad."

"We are sorry for your loss," Margaery said right away. She was always better with that kind of things. "What is your name?"

"Jorge, my good lady."

"Jorge, you have all our condolences. It is a tragedy that a father has to bury his son. I lost someone I loved not long ago. I know how you’re feeling."

"Pardon me, my good lady, but you don’t know. My wife…” The man struggled to speak. Sobs escaped from his lips that were loud enough for all to hear. "She was sick. Terribly sick. When we received the news of our son’s death, her state got worse. She died a few days ago. And my son… he had debts. He borrowed money to pay for herbs to heal his mother. He joined your army in the hope he could pay them back when he’d come home. But when the merchant to who he owed the money heard of what had befallen him… He considered the debt was on me now. He threw me out of my shop, took everything inside for him. I have nothing left. My good lord, my good lady, please… I have nothing left. I beg you. Help me."

He was on his knees, sobbing so much that Tyrion could see the tears falling on the floor. He leaned towards Margaery.

"We both know he’s not the only one in this situation. There are already cases like his in times of peace. No wonder there are more during wars."

"I know," Margaery agreed, with no more pleasure than Tyrion. "I can send him to one of my poorhouses. In the very least, he would be fed and maybe receive some clothes. Or maybe you could give him a small land he could farm. Some are probably vacant with the victims of the war."

"Not enough are left unattended. Anyway, he’s no farmer and he has no family to take over the land after his death."

"Then we don’t have much choice."

He looked at the man who lost everything, all because of a war he never wanted, a war Tyrion’s nephew started. A war Tyrion helped him to wage, and that continued. Margaery had taken back her place in her seat. Before she could say anything, Tyrion raised the voice.

"Your son died in the service of House Lannister. I cannot bring him back, but since he sacrificed himself for my house, then we owe him, and a Lannister always pays his debts. Who is the merchant he owed money to?"

"His name is Tywin, my lord," the man in rags replied after a long hesitation. The people around in the court remained silent.
Tyrion called forward Vylarr. "Find this merchant and bring him here. I’ll take care of this man’s debt myself."

Tyrion already looked forward to this meeting. This might not be his father and only someone whose father named him after the Lord of Casterly Rock, but he felt it would give him great pleasure to squeeze some Tywin.

The rest of the time they held court went relatively smoothly. In the evening, Tyrion indeed took great pleasure in forcing the merchant named Tywin to give back his shop to Jorge. Since Jorge’s son was illiterate, he didn’t care to write a contract for the debt. Tyrion used this to declare that Jorge owed him no interest and only the amount he borrowed. Since Tywin also seized the shop and deprived Jorge from the only way he could eventually repay him back, Tyrion declared the merchant owed a compensation to the shop owner, reducing his debt further. Tyrion paid the balance, which in the end was almost nothing for a Lannister. The merchant named Tywin left furious, which made Tyrion even more content of what he did.

When the night arrived, Tyrion went to the chambers he shared with his wife for the first time since he came back to the Rock. She was already there, dressed for the night. Her back was turned on him. She was looking away in the darkness of the night.

All of a sudden, he felt that he somehow didn’t belong here.

"Margaery?" he asked, afraid of her reaction.

"I must confess that I don’t feel comfortable with all this."

The words hit hard. Trying to cope with them, he decided to take the best course of action he could, as much as it could pain him. "If you need more time, I can go back to my old rooms."

She turned to face him right away. "What are you talking about?" Before his uncertain gaze, her expression of misunderstanding changed. "Oh, sorry. No, you can stay. I was thinking about the Iron Islands."

Relief flooded his mind and heart. He went to the table to pour himself a glass of wine. "What’s troubling you?"

"We will not have any problem dealing with Robb Stark or Stannis." She seized his glass of wine and put it away before he could take a single sip. Maybe he should have used their time of estrangement to drink more finally. "Even if the Vale was to join the war, we could face their knights. But the Ironborn are something entirely different. They always strike when we expect them the least. I wasn’t there when they burned the fleet of Lannisport, but I heard more than enough stories to imagine what it was, and the cruelty of the Ironborn is well known in the Reach. I don’t want to take the risk to have Lannisport or Oldtown sacked by these men. We know what they’ve done to Winterfell. I don’t want to see what they could do to entire cities, and especially not the one at our feet."

Their gazes met. Tyrion knew what she meant. He saw the harbor of Lannisport in fire, and he smelt it too, entire buildings burned to the ground, hundreds of sailors devoured by fire, the stench of death that reached even those safe behind the walls of Casterly Rock. He didn’t want to live this again.

"We have more than enough ships to take the Iron Islands. With the united fleets of Lannisport, the Arbor, Oldtown and the Shield Islands, we have the necessary power to destroy the Iron Fleet," Margaery added.
"We have the ships required, I agree, but the moment we launch an invasion on the Iron Islands, all their men in the North will come back and Robb Stark will no longer be bothered by them. He might even call a new army if the Northerners are no longer busy fighting the Greyjoys," Tyrion said.

"What if Robb Stark was no longer our enemy?"

Tyrion frowned at this. "What do you mean?"

"Joffrey, Cersei and Jaime are dead. What reasons left does he have to fight us?"

"We are of the same family, whether we like it or not. Remember we promised them to save Ned Stark and we didn’t. Even if he doesn’t consider us guilty, he will keep fighting because two kingdoms put a crown on his head."

"But he has no kingdom. He’s cut from the North while the Ironborn ravage it, Winterfell was burned to the ground and now Stannis is doing the same with the Riverlands. You said it yourself, Robb Stark is heading for Riverrun. Soon his kingdom will be limited to a castle and a few acres around. Stannis defeated him on the battlefield, he’s lost half his men."

"My lady, I think you’ll find the Northerners are honorable and stubborn by nature, and their honor make them even more stubborn."

She displayed half a smile. "You really think I don’t know that. Remember I’ve got one of them as a handmaiden."

Tyrion chuckled slightly, but his wife resumed quickly. "What if we could convince Robb Stark to rally our side? The only thing he may have against Tommen is that he’s Joffrey’s brother. Aside from that, he would have all good reasons to side with us. We can help him defeat Stannis, take back the North, invade the Iron Islands to make them stop raiding his lands. We have his sister. Mira brought them back Arya. And unlike Stannis, he is not after the Iron Throne."

The idea was tempting, but Tyrion shook his head and looked to the ground. "We already tried to make peace with the Starks. You remember how it ended?"

He looked back to her just in time to see her close her eyes. She knew what he said was true. "Yes, but Joffrey and Cersei were still alive back then."

"And Robb Stark believed Joffrey was the bastard son of Cersei and Jaime. He won’t change his mind about Tommen. And even if he was ready to give up his crown, which is very unlikely, his bannermen might not want him to. Worse, if he was ready to give up his title of king, they might just turn on him. There are many lords in the North who would like to see the fall of House Stark. We both know it very well."

She said nothing. From the very beginning of the war, even before Ned Stark died, they had talked about ways to dispose of Robb Stark and weaken his army if it came to war. They had taken steps to turn some of his bannermen against him if need be.

"I would rather avoid unnecessary bloodshed if I could, Margaery, but I’m afraid it’s unavoidable. Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon will fight, one of them will be defeated and most certainly die, and we’ll destroy the one who’s left. That’s the path with the least risk."

"And then?" She asked this defiantly.

"And then?" He repeated the question, unsure of what she meant.
"Once both Stannis Baratheon and Robb Stark are dead, what will we do? Tommen will sit on the Iron Throne, all the other contenders will be dead, but how is he going to rule the Seven Kingdoms? We can take control of the Stormlands very easily, but what about the North? Do you see someone else than a Stark as Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North? Do you really think another house, be it from the North or the south, will be able to keep the North united?"

"No," Tyrion replied after a moment.

"We have all the good reasons in the world to have the Starks on our side. It could even reduce the probability for the Vale to resist. You know I am right."

He sighed. "I agree, but I do not see how we can convince Robb Stark to bend the knee to Tommen."

"We lose nothing by trying."

"Even if we tried, there is no one I know who could convince him. Even a Northerner could not."

"True, a Northerner would not succeed. But I’m not a Northerner."

For a moment, he didn’t understand. And then in an instant, he understood what she meant, and that from her expression of her face she was really serious.

"No, you can’t do this."

"If I leave tomorrow, I should reach Riverrun around the time Robb Stark will be there."

"I cannot let you go there. The last time you went on a diplomatic mission, you almost died."

"The Starks have too much honor to harm someone riding under a peace banner. And this time I will not be riding with one of Cersei’s lackey ready to stab me in the back on the first opportunity."

"The Starks, maybe, but not their bannermen, and not Stannis. What if he sends another one of these shadows?"

He couldn’t let her go again. He couldn’t let her put her life in danger another time. He couldn’t be separated from her. The last time almost caused their relationship to crumble. He almost lost her in all ways.

"Then send a strong escort with me if you’re so afraid. Or are you going to stop me from going?"

Again, she defied him. And like always, she succeeded. Tyrion couldn’t bring himself to refuse her. He could refuse to her family, to House Tyrell, but not to his wife, not on a personal demand.

"What makes you think you can reason Robb Stark?"

"I spent a lot of time at Winterfell while you were visiting the Wall. I know Robb Stark better than you do. I took care of his brother Bran and his mother when they were injured. He is more likely to trust me than you. And even if he doesn’t trust me, there’s Catelyn. I have good ties with her. It was my handmaiden who brought Arya back to them. Even Edmure Tully appreciated me when we spent time at Riverrun. And Jon Snow appreciated you as well. I think I can convince his family to influence me."

It was true. Margaery was very good at pleasing everyone, men and women. Everyone loved her, Tyrion the first.
"This is our best chance," she concluded.

She gazed at him. She wouldn’t change her mind.

"Do you really want to do this?"

"Yes." She crossed her arms. "Will you lock me up somewhere? Tell our guards to keep your wife in her rooms? Make her a prisoner in her own castle?"

Her lips showed a playing smile, but Tyrion couldn’t help but feel as if he was a horrible husband, even that hadn’t been her intent.

"I could never do that to you, especially not after what happened to your brother."

Her expression turned immediately sourer. Slowly, she approached him and placed a delicate hand on his shoulder. "It’s not your fault what happened. I cannot blame for loving your brother."

She seemed to be holding something back, but whatever it was, Tyrion didn’t care. "I’ll send five hundred men with you, and that you cannot refuse."

She chuckled shortly. Kneeling, she took his face between her two hands. "I wouldn’t dream of it." She kissed him. "Why don’t we just enjoy the rest of the night?"

Smiling wickedly, she led him in direction of the bed, until Tyrion jumped on her when they were close enough. They both laughed and kissed once more, their tongues battling. Tentatively, her hand crept up his chest to his collar where she proceeded to slowly untie his doublet. In the meantime, his hands caressed he surface of her pale skin right under her neck, barely brushing her breast and the zones her nightgown didn’t cover entirely. She removed his doublet and his shirt while he took out her nightgown, discovering her body from waist to head, his mouth traveling down in the process, gasps and sighs emanating from them both. What was left of their clothes was removed not long after. The room resonated with the sounds of their lovemaking for the best part of night, moments of passion alternating with periods of light sleep that were interrupted as soon as one decided to wake the other to start all over again, or when one began to please the other in his state of half sleep. When dawn came, Tyrion wanted to curse the gods, if they existed, for not making the night longer, even though he was exhausted and spent like he didn’t experience it in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked the reconciliation.

Please review

Next chapter : Sansa
Chapter Notes

You want to see how things are for Sansa at Casterly Rock? Well, this is a chapter for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa X

Pavement, paths, flagstones, grass, ponds, flowers, hedgerows, statues, trees. Sansa wandered in the maze, lost in an ocean of marvels made by both nature and men. Margaery showed her this place not long after she arrived.

There was a spot where no one ever came in this garden. Sansa visited it every day, trying to avoid the gazes thrown at her by the ladies of House Lannister and House Tyrell and their allies. Not all of them despised her. In fact, Sansa believed that, had they met under different circumstances, if there had been no war between their families, they would surely have become friends, especially those among the ladies-in-waiting of Margaery. They were the kindest with her. The Lannisters had a propension to be more hostile, though they were as many to avoid her than those who behaved decently, and even a few who tried to know her better. There was even this small girl, Joy, who looked at her with big eyes when they met, then spent hours asking her all kinds of questions. Sansa only learned later that she was a bastard, the natural daughter of Lord Tyrion’s favourite uncle. Strangely enough, it didn’t bother Sansa very much. Titles and origins didn’t matter to her like they used to.

Taking the paths where the fewer people walked, she arrived to this corner where she found Sera Durwell and Mira Forrester. As soon as they saw her, the two handmaidens stood up to welcome her.

"Lady Sansa," they echoed.

"Lady Sera. Lady Mira. I hope I’m not interrupting you."

"No, my lady. You’re not," Mira assured her.

Sansa had come to forgive her for the role she played in her kidnapping. She had admitted that it was certainly a blessing that the Lannisters brought her out of King’s Landing. Had she remained in the city, she would have become Stannis’ prisoner. Now that her brother was at war and lost a battle against him, she was afraid of what Robert’s brother might have done to her. They said he burned godswoods and septs all alike. Her fate in the hands of such a man might have been worse than with Joffrey. At least, she knew Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery. Even if she was a hostage, they treated her well. She wasn’t beaten, and she didn’t have to fear for her life day and night. To the opposite of King’s Landing, Casterly Rock felt like a place of freedom for her. Mira may have saved her life. Still, Sansa trusted her and Mira used this trust. She wouldn’t be able to trust her again like she did before. If she only told her about their escape plan…
There was something odd with Mira today though. She maintained the behavior of a lady, the civility and grace that was required from a handmaiden of the Lady of Casterly Rock, but there was something different about her. First, there was her face. Mira had a very pale face, just like Sansa and almost everyone from the North, but she couldn’t shake the feeling she was paler than usual, and this was only one of many small details. She had the beginning of dark circles around her eyes, a taint of red in them. And there was the way she looked at Sansa. The stoic calm complemented by a benevolent gaze was replaced by something else. There was a void that was difficult to discern. And there had also been the way she stood when Sansa approached. Mira’s movements were always very fluid, those of a true lady. This time they were stiff, as if she just repeated something she did a thousand times and wanted to be done with it. Even her voice was a little different. For a moment, Sansa thought she perceived… melancholy.

"Lady Lannister told me no one ever came here," Sansa said to resume the conversation.

"It is true, my lady, we don’t often come here," Sera replied. "Most of the time Lady Margaery prefers to keep this place for her personal use. We respect her wishes, but I thought we could make an exception this time."

"If you wish, Lady Sansa, we can go…” Mira started to say, only to be cut by her friend.

"No, Mira. That’s enough. Stop thinking only about the others."

"It’s not a problem, Sera. Please excuse me, Lady Sansa. We’ll leave you alone right away."

Sansa stared, quizzical, as the northern handmaiden left the corner and disappeared among the bushes. This wasn’t Mira’s usual behavior either. She would offer to leave if it was Sansa’s wishes, not go like this, as if she was fleeing. She turned toward Lady Sera.

"What’s going on with her?"

She met a face that had turned to stone. Sera Durwell never looked at her like this. "You know there was a battle at King’s Landing?"

"Yes, everyone is talking about it."

"Guess who just died because of your brother’s war." Sansa didn’t see what she meant. "You haven’t forgotten Mira’s father and brother are fighting with Robb Stark, I hope."

Sansa’s eyes widened in surprise. "Who?"

"Rodrik Forrester. Burned at the stake by Stannis because he refused to betray your brother and to acknowledge Stannis as his king."

Sansa said nothing. She was horrified. She wasn’t aware of that. Mira must have learned it very recently, maybe this very morning.

"I hope you’re happy," the handmaiden added, scornful.

"What do you mean? Why would I be happy?"

"I don’t know. Maybe because you’re angry with Mira after she got you out of King’s Landing alive."

"I’m not angry with her."
"Come on, everyone knows about it. You’re not very good at hiding what you feel, Lady Sansa."

Sera walked away, getting past Sansa. She didn’t follow her with her eyes, but she heard her say something else from behind her back.

"It’s because of your family that her brother died. I hope you realize that."

Sansa turned to look at her. "I never wanted him to die."

"Well, your brother started this war."

"My father was killed."

"After he tried to overthrow Joffrey."

"Joffrey promised he would spare him but he didn’t."

"Maybe he shouldn’t have tried to overthrow him in the first place."

"My father was a good man."

"Too bad your brother is not. Mira’s brother just died for him, and he was a good man."

She left Sansa there, with nothing else to say. Sansa didn’t sit. It was so unfair that she was accused to be responsible of Rodrik Forrester’s death. It was like when Joffrey had Lancel Lannister beat her. She recalled how Mira spoke fondly of her elder brother back in the capital. She should try to find her later and offer her condolences.

Sansa thought about the people who were left to die in King’s Landing. The Hound had perished, for sure. He didn’t deserve to die serving Joffrey, though it made Sansa worship him in some way. He protected his king until the end. There were times she missed him. He was a knight, and he wasn’t at the same time. Sansa could imagine him, fighting against a thousand men, standing on his two feet to fight until the end came, whether it be the strike of a coward in his back or in a fateful duel with one of Stannis’ best warriors. He was angry, rough, hateful, and yet there was also some good in him. She prayed for him after she heard about the battle. Maybe he survived and wandered somewhere through the Seven Kingdoms, like Ser Duncan the Tall.

"Sansa."

The call of her name took her mind away from the world of fantasy and dreams and brought her back to the real world. At least, it wasn’t an unpleasant voice who did it. Sansa looked at her and this time she remembered what not to do.

"Margaery."

She called her the right way and without curtsying, like she always used to remind her. The Lady of Casterly Rock most likely noticed for her smile widened.

"I’m glad I found you, Sansa. I wanted to see you before I left."

Sansa was taken by surprise. "My lady?"

Margaery scowled right away. Sansa already forgot not to call her this way. "I’m leaving in a few hours for Riverrun."

Sansa’s surprise increased. "Riverrun?"
"Yes. Please, sit. I need to talk with you, and I don’t have much time." Sansa did as she was told. "I’m going to see your brother. I want to negotiate a peace with him, to put an end to this war."

Sansa was surprised. " Didn’t you already try?"

"Yes, but this time I will speak with him myself. We’re leaving for Riverrun in a few hours."

"You’re really leaving?"

An old feeling of fear and distress filled her within an instant. Margaery was one of the very few people she trusted here, almost like an older sister who taught her how to survive, even though their families were at war. She was always kind with Sansa. Cersei had been kind with her as well, but there was something Margaery had that Cersei never showed: sincerity. Margaery didn’t hide things to Sansa, or at least she didn’t hide as much as Cersei did, and she didn’t do it for cruel reasons. She was always honest with Sansa. She even warned her about Joffrey back at Winterfell. There had been so many times Sansa wished she listened to her at the time.

The prospect to be left alone at Casterly Rock frightened her. And if Mira was gone as well… Who could she ever turn to? Who could she confide in?

"You’ll be safe here, I promise," Margaery tried to reassure her. "Joffrey is dead, remember."

It was as if a great weigh was removed from her body. It was true. The people who frightened her, who hurt her… were all gone. Even if Lord Tyrion was Lord of Casterly Rock and the one with the power here, he wouldn’t need to step in to protect her from Joffrey’s cruelty. He was dead.

"Yes, he’s dead." Saying it made it seem more real to her.

"I want this war to end, Sansa. I don’t want to fight your family. Do you believe me?"

"Yes." She did.

"I think I might succeed to persuade your brother to stop the fighting, but I need your help."

"Me?"

"Yes, I’m asking for your help, Sansa."

She looked sincere, like always. "How?"

"Do you think you could try to convince Robb to make peace with us?"

Memories of months ago came back to her mind. Cersei had asked her something similar and Sansa, like an idiot, had done everything the woman she considered like a queen and a model to follow.

"Maybe… if you brought me with you, I could talk to him, try to convince him."

She could see Robb again, and her mother, and Arya, and even Jon. Weren’t they almost all at Riverrun, where Lady Margaery said she was heading? And if she was to negotiate with Robb, then no matter where her brother was she would see him as well. Her body almost shook in expectation.

"I wish I could, but Tyrion will never let me do it. I don’t enjoy saying this, Sansa, but you’re too valuable as a hostage. Your brother holds several Lannisters as hostages, including my husband’s uncle Ser Kevan Lannister, and two of his sons Martyn and Willem. He will only let you leave if he can get them back."
Her hopes faded as quickly as they appeared. Margaery resumed. "Furthermore, it is possible that Stannis will be close when I meet your brother. If things go wrong, you could end up between his hands."

She stood up and looked Sansa straight in the eyes. "I won’t make things appear better than they are, Sansa. Robb lost at King’s Landing. Half his army was killed or made prisoner. Even Mira lost her brother there." The Lady of Casterly Rock looked extremely sad when she mentioned her handmaiden's loss. "If Stannis defeats him again, he won’t show any mercy. Robb declared himself King in the North and Stannis doesn’t tolerate usurpers. I saw him murder his brother with my own eyes. He won’t show any more mercy to Jon either, and as for your mother and sister… I don’t know anymore. Even they might not be allowed to live if Stannis wins. We can help your brother, and you could see your family again, but not if we continue to fight. I’m asking you a favor as a curtsy. I’m asking you because we need it. I would be more likely to talk Robb into it if you wrote to him."

Sansa thought about all this for a long time. When she gave her answer, it was with great regret. "I’m sorry, I can’t. I wrote a letter to Robb before, under Cersei’s request. I’m not sure he will believe me."

Margaery nodded. "I understand. I don’t blame you." She sat back at Sansa’s side. "There’s another favor I need to ask you. Mira is coming with me to Riverrun. And she just lost her brother. Rodrik Forrester died of Stannis’s hand at King’s Landing. She will never ask it, Sansa, but she needs your forgiveness. Please."

"I don’t hold her responsible anymore for what happened when we escaped, Margaery."

"I know, but she needs to hear it from you. You are the only Northerner here aside from her, Sansa. She needs you."

"Yes. I’ll do as you wish."

"It’s not an order, Sansa. It’s a request."

"I’ll do it."

"Thank you, Sansa. I must go now. I would suggest you talk to Mira quickly. We’re leaving very soon."

The Lady of Casterly Rock left. Sansa departed as well soon after. She went to her room to do something very quickly, then headed for the godswood where she knew Mira would be.

Her friend was kneeling in among the twisted branches, her face directed toward the floor. She wore black, just like everyone did. Even Sansa wore it. She had no desire to show mourning for Joffrey or Cersei or even Ser Jaime, but she was willing to mourn Ser Loras. In fact, she was truly saddened by his death. She may have married him one day. How life would have been beautiful at Highgarden. She and Margaery would truly have been sisters then. She wasn’t bothered much by the black. What bothered her was that most of the people here wore it to mourn people she despised, the murderers of her father.

Looking at Mira praying, she thought that wearing it for her brother Rodrik was worth it. They spoke lengthily about their respective families over the last months. Rodrik made her think of Robb the way Mira talked about him.

Slowly, Sansa approached and knelt next to Mira. She may be about to leave, but Sansa didn’t want to interrupt her prayer. And if she was praying, it was that she must have had time to pray. She didn’t
want to upset Mira. She knew what it was to lose a brother, twice, and she saw before with Margaery how others coped with such a loss. And she needed Mira.

She thought about her two brothers who were still fighting. About her lady mother and Arya, still at Riverrun. They could be in danger, if Margaery was to be trusted. She prayed to the Old Gods to protect her family. Strangely enough, Sansa realized at this moment that she was not in danger. Who would hurt her here? She tried to imagine someone at Casterly Rock doing it, and she couldn’t. Oddly enough, for the first time, she truly felt she was lucky to be there.

She thought about Jeyne, who remained at Winterfell. They said the whole castle was destroyed, the people living there all slaughtered. What had befallen her friend? What happened to all the people she knew? Ser Rodrik Cassel? Old Nan? Hodor?

"Thank you for being here."

Mira had broken the silence Sansa joined, severing the spiritual connection she established with the Old Gods. The other northern girl still kept her eyes closed though.

"I didn’t know about your brother. I’m sorry."

"I wonder where he is now. If there’s anything beyond death."

"I’m sure he’s fine now, no matter where he is," Sansa tried to reassure her.

"I just wish this war was over. Without it, he would still be alive, and many people as well." Nothing was said for a moment. "I don't know what Sera told you, but I'm sorry.

"I'm fine." She endured much worse. "What are you going to do now?"

Mira opened her eyes, but she kept them on the face of the weirwood tree. "I'll try to end this war before someone else loses people he loves."

Even if Mira wasn’t facing her, Sansa could tell she was determined. That wasn’t how her lady mother would have told Sansa to behave. A lady was supposed to be there to support her husband, to raise her children, help them the best she could. Still, her duty was to remain under the authority of her closest male relative. For Sansa, it was Robb now that her father was gone. It would have been Joffrey, had they ever married. She was glad it would never happen. For Margaery, it was her husband, Tyrion Lannister. For Mira, it should have been her father, but that wasn’t what she was doing. She supported Lady Margaery in most circumstances, though her actions also showed loyalty to the North and her family. Who did she serve? It was as if she was on everyone’s and no one’s side at the same time. As if she was… following her own interests. No, not her interests. Mira wasn’t looking for personal gain. Sansa tried to imagine it, but it just didn’t work. Why was she doing all this? Who was she working for?

The other northern girl stood up. "I have to go."

"Mira, wait. I have a service to ask you." Sansa took something she hid in the folds of her gown. "Can you give this to Robb? And please, don’t tell Lady Margaery."

Her friend hesitated. "I don’t know, Sansa. Lady Margaery and Lord Tyrion forgave me for bringing Arya to your brother, but I don’t think they will be so forgiving if I do something else behind their backs."

"I beg you, Mira. I need this to reach Robb. It cannot come from Lady Margaery."
She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If Lady Margaery gives him a letter from me, he won’t believe it true. It will look more sincere if you give it to him yourself."

Mira Forrester stood there, motionless, thinking about what Sansa just told her.

"I beg you, Mira. We want the same thing."

Mira looked to Sansa with an interested and pondering gaze all of a sudden. Her eyes shifted from the letter Sansa was handing to her face.

"Why hide it from Lady Margaery?" she asked.

"I don’t want her to know. Robb will more likely believe she had no influence on what I wrote if she’s not even aware that I sent it. You must know that. You hid things as well in the past for my own good."

She was talking about the kidnapping in the godswood of King’s Landing. Mira thought about it for another long moment, then slowly she seized Sansa’s letter and hid it in the folds of her own dress.

"If it doesn’t go well… I wish you good luck, Sansa. I hope we’ll see each other again."

She was deadly serious. As Mira walked away and Sansa remained behind in the Stone Garden, she thought that maybe she placed Mira in a very dangerous situation. And so did Sansa place herself in a similar predicament if the plot was discovered. Maybe she should just have given the message to Lady Margaery, or warn her that she wanted Robb to believe the Lannisters didn’t influence her into writing this. At the same time, what she wrote was personal. She didn’t want someone else peering into it. Mira wouldn’t do it, wouldn’t she? Sansa fell on her knees and resumed her prayers.

Robb. Arya. Jon. Her lady mother. Her uncle, Lord Edmure. Her grand-uncle ser Brynden, the Blackfish. Margaery. Mira. All people alive she cared about, mixed with the people who were dead in her thoughts. Her lord father. Bran. Rickon. Jeyne. Ser Rodrik Cassel. Ser Loras. Rodrik Forrester, Mira’s brother, even though she never met him. A series of words for them. First, she said them in the Stone Garden, but the place felt awkward. This was no ordinary godswood. She went to the sept where she continued her prayers. She lit candles to all the Seven, even the Stranger. She spent hours there, her eyes sometimes closed, open to stare at the altars at other times.

She was in the process to pray for a thousandth time for her deceased father when she felt a hand on her shoulder. The contact almost made her jump. She turned her head right away to look at the intruder. She was a woman, richly dressed and about the age of her own mother. Her gown was like those the Lannister ladies all wore, but she lacked the golden hair of the family.

"Please excuse me to bother you, child. Are you the lady Sansa?"

"Yes."

"My sister-in-law, Genna, is asking for you to dine with her. She would appreciate very much if you joined her right away."

The voice of the woman was trembling. Sansa realized all of a sudden that her eyes were red. She stood up.

"Pardon me, my lady, but I haven’t had the pleasure to meet you before."
It was a kind way of saying she didn’t know her name, but she didn’t get an answer to her question.

"Yes, I know. Forgive me if I wasn’t there when you arrived but… I lost one of my children recently…"

A wail escaped her throat. Sansa felt horrible. "Excuse me. I’m sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, my child." A single tear fell down her right cheek. "If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like us to head right now. Genna is waiting for you."

"Of course."

The whole journey to Lady Genna’s rooms was uneventful and silent, except from the barely perceptible sobs and cries that came from the woman escorting Sansa. She did her best to hide them, but she didn’t succeed. All she managed to do was to keep the sounds to the lower level possible.

They were followed by two guards. They followed Sansa from time to time, probably to make sure she wouldn’t try to escape. She was surprised they didn’t remain close all the time. Were they just hiding, testing her to see if she would attempt any escape? If so, they would be deceived. Sansa had no intention to leave. Anyway, she couldn’t.

They arrived to the apartments of Lady Genna Lannister in no time. Sansa only met her briefly at her arrival to the castle. They never exchanged words before. What did she want from her? The moment they walked in, the fat woman greeted her.

"Welcome, Lady Sansa. I hope my late invitation didn’t cause you any trouble."

"No, my lady," Sansa lied.

"Genna." It was now the woman who accompanied Sansa who spoke. "I’m sorry, but I cannot do it. I…"

"It’s fine, Dorna. You may go. Take some rest."

She left without any other word. Her name was Dorna. Sansa had the impression to have heard it before. Maybe she heard one of the handmaidens or another Lannister lady say it.

"Poor woman," Lady Genna. "She’s barricading herself into her rooms since the news of Lancel’s death. It is a chance she has Janei to take care of, or else I don’t know what she would do."

Dorna. Lancel Lannister’s death. Sansa froze as she realized who brought her here. Her eldest son beat her back in King’s Landing and he died when Stannis took the city. Her husband was a prisoner of Robb, and so were two of her children.

"You didn’t know Dorna was Kevan’s wife?" Genna asked her, obviously understanding what was going on in Sansa’s mind.

"Well…" Sansa stammered. "I knew he had a wife, he told me, but…"

"She didn’t tell you who she was. No wonder. Dorna has nothing against you, she is too good to resent you for your family’s doings, but that doesn’t make it easier for her to escort the sister of the man who imprisoned her husband and half their children."

Sansa said nothing for a while. In the meantime, Genna observed her. Was she waiting for a reaction? For the next words Sansa would tell? In the end, she could only hide behind courtesies.
"I will pray for their safe return."

Genna Lannister scoffed. "As if the gods listened to us. My brother believed in gods, but he didn’t like them. Especially after they took his wife and gave him a monster, according to his own choice of words. I suppose this is ironic that my nephew wanted to become High Septon for a time. Well, excuse me for all this. Are you hungry?"

The truth was Sansa didn’t want to eat at all, but she obliged all the same. The food of Casterly Rock wasn’t as refined as it was in King’s Landing, but still much more than at Winterfell. Lord Tyrion’s aunt first asked her about the North. She said she wanted to know more about her home. At the beginning, Sansa only gave short answers, but as Lady Genna insisted, she gave more details, and she ended up telling her about Winterfell and different visits she made through her father’s lands.

"What about the Riverlands? You must have visited them. What do you think of them?"

"I don’t know much. I never left the North before my father became Hand of the King."

She fought the sadness that crept as the memories of her lord father resurfaced. What little she saw about the Riverlands was when she journeyed on the Kingsroad to the capital, and she was too busy spending time with Cersei and Myrcella to notice anything.

"You travelled less than your mother Catelyn then."

Her mother’s name caught her attention. "Did you know her?"

"Know her? It depends of what you mean by knowing someone. If you’re wondering if we were ever friends, then no. We only met once. It was long before she married your father, even before she was engaged. She was only a little girl back then. She might have been only ten. You somehow remind me of her. I can’t say she made quite an impression while she stayed at the Rock."

Sansa dropped her fork. "My mother… she spent some time here?"

"Only a few days. Her father was quite dynamic. He spent his time wandering through his lands, visiting his bannermen, but he also visited fellow Lord Paramounts from time to time. Once Tywin invited him to Casterly Rock. My brother back then was hoping to strike an alliance with House Tully. He hoped to arrange a marriage between Jaime and your mother or her sister. Useless to tell you he failed. Though your mother spent a lot of time with Joanna."

"Joanna?"

Lady Genna looked offended. "The former Lady of Casterly Rock, my brother Tywin’s wife, and the mother of my nephew Tyrion." Of course. How could Sansa have forgotten it? "I remember seeing them talking all through the feast one evening. Your mother seemed like she didn’t want to miss or forget one word from my sister-in-law. She was captivated by what she was saying. Your mother probably didn’t know back then, but Joanna was already pregnant with Tyrion at the time. Catelyn Tully was lucky she came to the Westerlands at this time. A few months later and Joanna would have been dead. Ironic again, isn’t it? Your mother and Tyrion met without any of them being aware of it. There’s a lot of irony in my house."

Sansa listened carefully. Her mother never told her she had come to Casterly Rock. No one here ever told her either. Maybe she slept in the room where her mother used to. Maybe she wandered through corridors where Catelyn Tully left her footprints, steps she took long ago still echoing in the empty caverns of the castle. And she spent time with Joanna Lannister.

"How was she? The Lady Joanna?"
Genna interrupted her monologue to answer the question. Her behavior turned sourer.

"She was… very beautiful. You’ve met my niece Cersei before she died. Well, Joanna was much like her." The thought of her mother getting along with another Cersei Lannister sent shivers along her spine. "Physically, that is. Because psychologically, Cersei sadly never was her mother. Joanna was dutiful, patient, kind, devoted to her family, always ready to help those she loved… She was strong too, and brave. I regret to say this, but although Cersei wanted the others to believe it, she was never strong, nor brave. I took care of her the best I could after my sister-in-law died. I took care of all of them. Not only Cersei, but also Jaime and Tyrion, even though I could never replace their mother. Cersei was the one who had the hardest time to deal with her mother’s death. She never was the same afterwards, and she never became the lady Joanna was. Maybe the only trait they have in common was that they were ready to do everything to protect their children. Joanna sacrificed herself so that Tyrion could live, and Tyrion suffered from this."

She stopped to talk, as if she was lost in her thoughts. Sansa didn’t dare to break the silence.

"Who knows, maybe if she had lived…"

She never finished her sentence. Her eyes settled on Sansa, as if she remembered all of a sudden that someone was with her. She recomposed herself, getting back to her former behavior.

"Sorry to bother you with stories from an old woman. Only this is difficult not to get nostalgic with all these people who died recently."

Sansa found herself agreeing with the woman sitting in front of her as they began the main course, chicken with a spicy sauce and various vegetables, accompanied with wine from Fair Isle.

"How long do you think Lady Margaery will be away?" Sansa asked as she neared half her plate.

"Some time. Maybe another few months. She’s not the kind of woman to remain behind the walls of a castle. She probably travelled more during the last five years than me in my whole life. I envy her in some way. My own husband would never trust me like Tyrion is trusting her, though if I ever was to ask him to let me go, I doubt he would be able to stop me. Emmon is a Frey, and Freys are not good at taking action, or decisions for that matter. His family still has done nothing in this war, except fight the few scouting parties that happened to travel on their lands. Aside from that, the late Lord Walter Frey stays hidden in his castle, waiting to see who will win, and then to declare himself for the victor."

She took another sip of wine. She drank a lot since supper began.

"But I’m rambling. I hope Margaery won’t stay away for long. She is one of the few women I can get along with at Casterly Rock. Do you know why?"

"Lady Margaery is a very kind person, Lady Genna," Sansa replied carefully. The other woman laughed highly.

"Kind, yes, she is. But she also happens to be one of the few women here who have more balls than men."

Sansa spent the rest of the evening listening to Genna Lannister, feelings of awkwardness, sympathy, agreement, and uncertainty as to whether the words of Lord Tyrion’s aunt were sincere or meant to be ironic, coexisting and succeeding each other as the evening went on, until she could withdraw for the night.
Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this scene with Genna. I wanted to make it ironically sad and hilarious in the style of House Lannister.

Please review

Next chapter: Davos
"Any sign of fires starting again?"

"No, Ser Davos. The rain from the last days helped us. It's now been a week since we last saw something burning in the city. I would say this is over," said the new commander of the City Watch, ser Garibald Foote.

"Keep an eye open all the same. A single spark is enough to unleash hell upon us. What about the number of crimes in the streets? Tell me there are fewer."

"Ser, you ordered me to always tell you the truth. Do you want me to lie now?"

He could hope, but it seemed hoping was useless. Ignoring the condescending tone on which the commander spoke, Davos told him to follow orders.

"The number of thefts, brawls and murders keeps increasing. The price of bread tripled since we arrived. People are eating rats when they're not eating human flesh."

Ser Axell showed his disdain and revulsion both verbally and non verbally. The old Grand Maester did the same. Davos was the only man sitting at the table today who didn’t show disgust, because unlike the two noblemen here, he experienced this in another life, before Stannis knighted him. Lack of food was a constant threat for the people of King’s Landing, even in times of prosperity. Davos would rather not tell the others assembled here what he was reduced to eat sometimes in his childhood. That was another reason why he accepted so eagerly to be at Stannis’ service. He didn’t want Matthos to experience this.

However, the current situation was another deal. Lands were ravaged in the Crownlands and the Riverlands by the war, and both the Goldroad and the Roseroad were shut, cutting the supply lines the city needed so badly. Just when things started to get better with fire ending, now famine threatened the whole people of the city. Worse, although flames were gone, it left half the city in ruins, mostly the overly populated areas like Flea Bottom. This meant that dozens of thousand people had no shelter just when the temperature started to decrease and rains began to flood the low sectors. Everything was in place for the people to suffer a great deal. Something that would matter to no one here.

"There are also those fanatics," the commander resumed. "They preach everywhere that the king brought fire upon the city, that the king was bewitched by the Stranger showing himself under the image of false gods. The followers of the Lord of Light are preaching as well. Riots have happened quite a lot already between the two sides. Some have used the situation to ransack trading places and
"You’re the Commander of the City Watch. This is your job to deal with these heretics," Ser Axell declared.

"There are too many. We don’t have enough men. Some of the gold cloaks themselves took part to the ransacking. There were even brawls inside the City Watch."

"Then maybe you’re not the right man for the job."

Davos decided it was time to put an end to this.

"Ser Axell, that’s enough. The king named you Master of Coin. If he had wanted you to name the commander of the City Watch, he would have named you Master of Laws instead of your uncle."

"My lord uncle is not here, Onion Knight." Since he was appointed Hand of the King, Ser Axell made it his duty to call Davos by this nickname whenever it was possible. He refrained while Stannis was still in the city, but now that the king was gone, his tongue was set free.

"And since that’s the case," Davos added, "the Hand of the King is dealing with all matters relative to the City Watch that are under the responsibility of the Master of Laws. So unless you have financial matters concerning the Watch to bring to our attention, I invite your good ser to let this meeting proceed."

The Florent knight looked at the Mistress of Whisperers. The only woman in this room, she was the only other one aside Davos that hadn’t showed disgust or surprise that the common people were eating dead bodies. She did return the gaze the knight sent in her direction, but she said nothing. She seldom said anything at those meetings. Davos brought back his attention on the commander.

"Do you think a curfew and a decree forbidding public meetings would help?"

"If we had enough men to enforce it, then yes, it might work. But we must act quickly. For now, we only have to manage disorganized crowds. But there are already groups taking shape, with leaders. Most of the time the men who gather people around them are nothing more than guys with a big mouth and a foul tongue, only looking for an opportunity to impress the smallfolk, or men shouting out of despair. But lately more and more are identifying themselves to a group. They call themselves Sparrows, even claim to have a leader, a High Sparrow."

Around the table, it elicited laughs and scoffs of mockery. Davos himself couldn’t stop himself from allowing a small one to escape, but he was afraid the joke might turn short as ser Foote resumed his report.

"They claim to follow only the teachings of the Seven-Pointed Star. They don’t only preach against the Lord of Light, they also condemn the High Septon and his allies, claiming they betrayed the Seven by collaborating with the king. They say the king was corrupted by the Red Woman." He didn’t say the latter without hesitation. "And the followers of the Lord of Light don’t make things easier. They’re calling these Sparrows servants of the Great Other and traitors to the one true king."

"They are," Ser Axell pointed out.

"That’s not the matter. It is more difficult each day to control them. If we allow for the situation to get worse… I don’t want to imagine how it could end. We need more men, Ser Davos."

Again, Ser Axell took the liberty to speak. "I will lead the garrison of the Red Keep and deal with these Sparrows myself."
"You will do no such thing," Davos opposed. "Although I agree with you on one thing, ser. The garrison of the Red Keep could be put to better use. I'll assign half of them to the City Watch."

"Half of them?" This time the Grand Maester was speaking, and in his voice Davos heard no logic nor reason. It was only terror that spoke. "Ser Davos, I advised four kings up to now for over twenty years. The smallfolk is unpredictable when facing starvation, that is the least we can say. To… to prevent unforeseen events and riots that could threaten the Red Keep itself, I think it would be wise to keep a strong garrison inside these walls."

"I would rather prevent riots than wait for us to be surrounded by an angry mob. The garrison will be more useful in the streets than it is here, guarding rooms that are empty for the most of them. The king is away and half of the men we have is more than enough to hold Maegor’s Holfast and protect the queen and the princess if things get out of hand. But I would rather avoid any bloodshed if that’s possible."

"With all your respect, Ser Davos, the city is already starving," the commander told him. "When people are hungry, it is impossible to have no bloodshed."

"Maybe, but we could reduce it in the very least." He turned to the Red Woman. "My lady, do you think you could reason with the people who are preaching your god and convince them to stop making trouble?"

"I could, Ser Davos, but that will not stop the Sparrows and the others from persecuting them. Many people in King’s Landing are not welcoming the Lord of Light, and they do not welcome those who choose to embrace him any further. If I am to ask this from them, then the same must be expected from those who follow the false golds."

"They should embrace their true Lord instead of insulting their king and his true servants," Axell Florent spat. Davos ignored him.

"Maybe I could talk with this High Sparrow. Do you know where he lives?" he asked ser Garibald.

He shrugged. "We don’t even know who he is. Maybe he doesn’t even exist and he’s just one of these preachers created and the others followed up."

Davos turned to Melisandre again. "You are the Mistress of Whispers. Could you find him?"

"I can try."

She didn’t say that she would do it, or that she would inform Davos if she ever found him. He wanted to speak with the leader of the Sparrows personally. He didn’t want to bring him to the Red Keep. Escorting the leader of a fanatic group could stir an uprising. Even if it did not, it would give the impression to their enemies that the Hand of the King was listening to fanatics. And if the High Sparrow was to leave the Red Keep without problem, it would give the impression that Davos was weak and reinforce their movement. Davos had to see the High Sparrow himself, in the city, somewhere he wouldn’t be noticed as the king’s Hand. He could easily pose as a commoner. He was one for most of his life, and in his heart he still felt like one. The other lords and knights were not entirely wrong to treat him like one of the smallfolk. Davos himself saw himself like one of the poor lads in the streets, elevated by Stannis mostly out of pure luck. He would go to the High Sparrow in secret, see what kind of man he was, and try to talk some sense into him if it was possible. Davos still worshipped the Seven, so there was some chance this man might want to speak with him. That was, if such a High Sparrow existed. Even for Davos the name itself was too strange to believe it belonged to a living man.
"Well, the first who discovers where this High Sparrow is tells me right away. You’re dismissed, commander."

Ser Garibald Foote walked away on his command, leaving Davos with the Red Woman, a fanatic and an old man who slept with girls a quarter of his age.

"Now, Ser Axell, has the situation with the treasury improved in any way?"

"We seized the properties and gold of two more noblemen today. We’ve added all their coins and riches to the treasury and started to sell their goods along with those of all the other traitors."

"And what of the state of the treasury itself? Can we cover our expanses or not?"

"The Lannisters brought with them most of the coffers’ content when they flew away like cowards. For what it was worth though. According to the people working for Petyr Baelish, the coffers were almost empty. We managed to get enough money to cover the salaries of the gold cloaks and the other officials. The gold from Dragonstone and the other islands of the Narrow Sea pays for the fleet repairs, and the gold the king ordered to be brought from Storm’s End will arrive very soon and help us."

"Still no news from Littlefinger?"

"None." That was no surprise. Davos was more convinced everyday that this man was not to be trusted.

"Since we’re at it, any news from Lord Velaryon and the royal fleet?" Davos asked Pycelle.

The old man answered by the negative. "By now, they should be about to circle Dorne and head for the Arbor. I must also remind you that the army the… the king sent in the Reach was defeated, and that now the Tyrells are heading to Storm’s End, and there’s no one to defend it."

"Storm’s End held before Mace Tyrell twenty years ago. It can hold again." Though this time there would be no Onion Knight to save it if necessary. Davos thought about reaching to his old contacts among the smugglers to bring food to the fortress, but he already asked a lot from them to supply King’s Landing. "I’m worried about the fact they may attack the capital now, and with their Lannister allies who are stationed at Deep Den."

"The surest course of action would be to call back the king so he may defend the city," the old maester said.

*And let the Stark boy escape? The king would never allow this.*

"For now, the usurper Robb Stark is the problem king Stannis is dealing with. In his absence, we must deal with the problems of this city, which includes the threat that the Lannisters and the Tyrells are posing. We will organize the city’s defenses the best we can. The king will send us help as soon he’s dealt with the Starks and the Tullys."

"The Lord of Light will lead him to victory," Melisandre said with assurance.

"Maybe we should write again to Dorne. Prince Doran made an alliance with the Lannisters, but it was an alliance of convenience. He has no love for them after what happened to his sister and her children in the last war, and the Dornish have a long history of hatred with the Tyrells. If we could forge an alliance with him, we would have an ally that would devastate the lands of the Reach and occupy the Tyrells while we could deal with the king’s other enemies. And they have Princess Myrcella. If we were to put our hands on her, it would give us significant leverage," Pycelle argued.
'The king already wrote to the Martells and we received no reply. Maybe they didn’t have time to respond yet.'

'Sure, but if the Martells were encouraged in the right way by a few small gifts, they might…'

'The offer the king made was final, Grand Maester. And I will never offer the Martells something he never agreed on, and certainly not something he would never approve to offer. That would be treason.'

Davos knew very well Stannis’ proposition to the Martells would never be accepted. Overall, he demanded that they surrender the Princess Myrcella and that they swear fealty to him. He told them he rewarded people who served him and, despite their former alliance with the usurper Joffrey, he was ready to forgive them since they never fought him, but required their immediate support. Davos had proposed to leave them the castles and territories the Lannisters promised them, but for Stannis it was out of the question. He rewarded people after their services, not before.

Besides, Davos didn’t expect Doran Martell to be more willing to side with Stannis than he ever was to side with the Lannisters. Although the Lannisters murdered Aegon and Rhaenys Targaryen along with their mother, and even though the Tyrells and Martells had a long and bloody history, the Baratheons also played a significant role in the deaths of Princess Elia and her children. It was in Robert’s name that the Targaryens were slaughtered. The Tyrells were also the only other great house of Westeros to have fought alongside the Martells during the rebellion.

"Any word from the Iron Bank of Braavos?" Davos asked to the Master of Coin.

"None."

Were these good or bad news? Davos couldn’t tell.

"Well, I think we’ve gone through everything we could for today. Unless someone has something to say…" Only silence greeted the invitation to speak. "Very well, the meeting is over."

Davos left the room. He spent the rest of the day inspecting the battlements, making sure they were being repaired. They didn’t know of the movements of the enemy, but the Lannister army stationed at the Golden Tooth and the victorious Tyrell army in the Reach could attack them any time. They had to be ready and fill the holes in the walls as quickly as possible.

He went back to the Tower of the Hand where Shireen was waiting for him, like always. And like every evening, he sat down on the steps with her.

"You’re not too tired?" she asked, obviously worried.

"No more than usual, princess. You know that’s always what I’ll answer."

"Is it too much for you to read a chapter?"

"You’re the princess. I can’t really say no."

She smiled, and that made him return her smile. Together, they began the third chapter, *Three Heads Had the Dragon – Governance Under King Aegon I*. The relationships Aegon had with his two sisters were very different from those Robert Baratheon had with his brothers. Though if a comparison was to be made, Davos would say Stannis looked more like Visenya and Renly like Rhaenys. And just like Rhaenys died before Visenya, Renly died before Stannis. Davos thought that oddly enough, Aegon was an ancestor of his king. This meant that Stannis had some incestuous blood in his veins, and he made his claim to the Iron Throne on the basis that the queen’s children
Davos then went to work. Shireen insisted to stay with him, like she did more often lately. Maybe she saw that Davos felt alone. Still, Davos had to work. The days of Hand of the King were definitely very long and lonely and, despite the fact they didn’t talk much, Shireen’s presence was comforting. Matthes couldn’t be present, working as he was on the battlements.

Late, the door opened, and Melisandre walked in. She didn’t look to Davos. Instead, she went straight to the princess.

"Your mother, the queen, commands you to go back in your chambers."

Without a word to the Red Woman, Shireen came to kiss him on the cheek.

"I’ll see you tomorrow."

Then she left the room. Davos was now alone with Melisandre again. She often came to him when he was alone ever since Stannis rode away. She provided him with advice, which Davos didn’t know whether it was useful or not. Her most useful counsels were those he already knew: follow Stannis without bearing any doubt, believe in him and his claim, perform the task he gave to Davos as good as it was possible, to not take decisions he would never agree with, and take those he wasn’t willing to take. Aside from that, it was mostly religious rumbling that Davos didn’t care about. Still, somehow, her words found ways to make his task easier, as if they were some form of encouragement. In the absence of men of reason like Lord Velaryon and Lord Florent, Melisandre of Asshai strangely found herself to be a more reasonable voice than most people Davos had to deal with on a daily basis.

"What do you want, my lady?"

"I may have found your High Sparrow. He’s somewhere in Flea Bottom. You won’t find him preaching for the overthrow of the king. You’ll find him feeding the poor, comforting those who suffer, helping those in need. You will find him barefooted, unable to differentiate him from the beggars in the streets or from the common people. And you’ll find him to look like everything but a dangerous man."

"From what you’re saying, I’d say he looks more like a holy man than the leader of a religious group preparing a rebellion."

"Indeed, that’s how he looks. But appearances can mislead us, ser Davos."

"Never mind. Tell me where he is in Flea Bottom exactly."

"I would advise you against going to him now, in the night."

"For the night is dark and full of terrors, yes, I know." A smile crept on Melisandre’s lips as he said the words. From what Davos recalled, using holy words to laugh would have been considered a sin among the fanatics of his country, but the Red Woman seemed to find it funny. However, it wasn’t because it looked like it that it was true. Like she just said, appearances could mislead people. "I’ll go and see him tomorrow. Just tell me where he lives."

"He has no house, no roof. He lives in the streets like most of his followers."

"Very well, then tell me where he spends his time."
"It is unlikely he will be at the same place in the morning. Some men from the true faith are keeping an eye on him. They’ll warn me where he is, and then you can go see him if you think it wise."

"Well, in this case there was no need to disturb me," Davos told her as he seized one of the messages that piled up on his desk. Now that Stannis held King’s Landing, he received more ravens every day.

"You asked us to tell you right away if we found the High Sparrow."

True, but she was playing with his words and his nerves all the same.

"I see you are still reading all the messages we receive," she resumed.

"I do not trust Pycelle with them."

The Grand Maester served Joffrey and the Lannisters before, and Davos wasn’t about to leave complete control of the rookery to a potential traitor. He had a younger master, the son of one of Stannis’ bannermen, helping and watching him. Davos made it seem to the old man as an honor, a sign that Stannis had consideration for his old age just as it was a recognition of his ability to transmit his knowledge to young people. In truth, the young maester took a close look at everything Pycelle was doing, especially the ravens he wrote.

"You do well to not trust him," she commented as she seized one of the messages and broke its seal. "I do not think our king will have time to attend the wedding of one of his bannerman’s eldest son."

"Certainly not. The invitation is only for the form. It’s to obtain some small favor from the king, and it won’t work," he replied distractedly as he opened a message bearing the seal of House Florent. "You can burn it if you want."

Another call for help. The seat of House Florent was besieged by the forces of House Tyrell. They would have to hold for some more time.

"I didn’t know there were houses that used a black seal," Melisandre said out of nowhere as she took another scroll.

"I thought the Lord of Light would have told you. It must come from the Night’s Watch. Probably another request for men and supplies. They’ve been sending a lot of them lately."

He kept reading a raven from one of Stannis’ new allies in the Riverlands. On his way north, some of the bannermen of Lord Tully had sided with him, adding some men to his army. He also ordered them to send what supplies they could to the capital, to reduce the shortages. This Lord was announcing the amount of food he was sending to them right away. He expected it to be delivered within two weeks.

"Ser Davos." He lifted his eyes to see Melisandre staring at the parchment in her hands. Slowly, she looked at him. For the first time, Davos saw fear in the eyes of the Red Woman. She was very pale.

Davos deftly grabbed the small piece of paper from her hands. It took some time for him to read the words, and a lot of mumbling which Shireen always berated him for, but he understood quickly enough what was written.

To all noblemen and noblewomen of Westeros,

The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch traveled north with three hundred men from Castle Black and the Shadow Tower to face Mance Raider, the self-proclaimed King-Beyond-the-Wall. The black brothers settled camp at the Fist of the First Men, and there they faced a battle, but not against...
the wildlings. The White Walkers and dead men came for them, and many were killed. Their fate remains unknown for the ravens who reached Castle Black didn’t say anything about it.

The Night’s Watch needs your help more than ever. Dark times are ahead of us, dark times for all kingdoms and all kings. Help us, for winter is coming, and the dead come with it.

Maester Aemon of Castle Black

"Our king would be better not to come back," Melisandre said. "For the true war lies to the north. Death marches on the Wall, and only he can stop him."

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Catelyn
Catelyn VII

Chapter Notes

It's been some time since I uploaded new chapters. I got mixed in a lot of stuff lately, including a great move into a new house and work on my original stories. Know that as a compensation, there will be a new chapter every week for three weeks in a row, at least.

We are going to have a bunch of chapters that will take place at Riverrun. These chapters will be mostly negotiations. You'll see with who.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CATELYN VII

The gates of Riverrun slowly opened. For Catelyn, the delay was a torture. All these days since the news of the battle in King’s Landing had been an ordeal for her. Knowing that her son was in danger was unbearable. It wasn’t the first time that people she loved went to war, but even if she maintained a dignified exterior whenever it happened, it didn’t change how she felt inside. Most of the time, she managed to continue her life. Her worries remained there, but she got used to their presence and almost became numb to them. But this time, when she heard that Robb faced Stannis Baratheon in battle…

The first riders came in, slowly again. Where was her son? Couldn’t they ride faster so she could see him. And there he was, sitting straight on his horse, proud and strong like his father taught him. She closed her eyes and allowed some small relief to pour into her. Her son was alive. Right behind him was Jon Snow, but she barely noticed his presence. Robb came down his mount and walked to her.

On a closer look, it was obvious he was very tired, even more so than the last time she met him at Riverrun. Though back then, he had been the one to welcome her. This time their roles were reversed.

"Mother," he said once he stood before her.

"Son. How are you?"

"I’m fine, Mother."
"No, you’re not." Right next to Catelyn, Arya spoke the truth. "Neither are you, Jon. You both look terrible."

The bastard had approached with Robb. Slowly, Arya gave him a big hug, then she did the same for Robb.

"We were worried about you," Arya said after she broke the hug.

"As we were for you," Robb replied. He looked to her brother who stood at her side. "Uncle Edmure, we need to talk, and quickly. Ser Brynden is helping to set up our camp. He will join us soon."

The Lord of Riverrun nodded gravely.

Not long after, they were all together in her father’s solar, she, Arya, Robb, Jon Snow, Edmure and Ser Brynden the Blackfish. Only two days ago, her lord father Hoster Tully was still spending his days in there, laying on a bed. Catelyn had spent much of her time taking care of him. She had wanted to be there for Arya, to spend time with her, but her daughter would rather use her time training.

Her youngest daughter had always been the most undisciplined of the two. Catelyn believed that Arya’s turbulent nature would recede as she grew up, but no such thing was happening so far. She spent her days fighting with boys and squires, holding her ground against future knights and even actual soldiers who were twice or thrice her age. She held the sword, threw the lance, shot the arrow. After a few initial attempts, Catelyn had given up, leaving Arya to do as she wanted. With the current situation, she thought it might eventually prove to be a blessing that her daughter knew how to fight and survive. Anyway, someone else required her attention.

Catelyn spent most of the time after Robb and his army left attending to her father. Finally, the man who once ruled the Riverlands surrendered his last breath just before her son came back. The last moments of Lord Hoster Tully’s life were marked by the death of the king he helped to bring on the throne twenty years ago, the execution of his son-in-law, the beginning of a war that tore the Seven Kingdoms apart for the second time in his life, and the crowning of his grandson, proclaimed King in the North by the northern lords and half his own bannermen just outside of King’s Landing, right under the eyes of a king he swore to serve. Then his grandson was defeated and almost died in a great battle against the latter king. When Lord Hoster Tully died, more and more of his bannermen were switching their allegiances, thus rebelling against him, and two armies were closing on his castle, one seeking shelter and help, the other seeking battle and surrender. They placed his body in a small boat and sent it down the Red Fork. Edmure failed to fire it with an arrow, so men were sent
forward to make sure her father’s body would burn. It didn’t bode well for the beginning of Edmure’s rule.

"Stannis chased us through the Riverlands until we reached Harrenhal. There he changed his course to besiege the castle and sent parts of his army to seize some other castles along the way," Robb explained.

"You didn’t try to help them?" Edmure asked, outraged.

"Our men were all exhausted and many were injured," Catelyn’s uncle stepped in. "Stannis would have cut us into pieces. He made sure his detachments were close so he could gather them back into one big army anytime he wanted."

"And now that Harrenhal has fallen, there’s nothing standing between Stannis and Riverrun, and half my bannermen have turned on me," Edmure said resentfully. "And on The King in the North," he added.

Catelyn had a long and tumultuous discussion with her brother when they received news that Robb rebelled against Stannis and declared himself king. Edmure was furious. She was as well, but there were more important things than to be angry. They had to protect their family, and Catelyn knew they would never survive this war if they didn’t remain allies.

"Don’t hold anything against Ser Brynden, Lord Edmure," Robb said. "My bannermen chose to make me their king. Your bannermen who were present made this choice as well. Your uncle just followed them."

"And so did I. For family."

Edmure said the words, but without any joy or confidence. Catelyn wasn’t happier about this turn of events either. How could Robb put them in such danger? How would they ever be able to get Sansa back now? After all the battles and the losses they suffered, she thought it unlikely that they would ever have the necessary power to defeat the powerful Tyrell-Lannister alliance. The Imp must be laughing at them. Just like his father during the rebellion, he would watch his enemies consume each other, then step in at the end to collect the fruits of this war.

"So here we are, stuck between Stannis Baratheon one one side and the Lannisters on the other one," Catelyn’s uncle summarized. "What about the situation in the west?" He was talking about the
western part of the Riverlands, bordering the Westerlands.

"Not good," Edmure replied. "They’re holding some of our castles, and since the news of Stannis’ victory at King’s Landing and my continued alliance with House Stark reached them, many decided to side with the Lannisters and swore fealty to Tommen Baratheon. They slowly gained territory, and there’s been nothing I could do to stop them. My lands are being ripped from me and divided between our two enemies."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Arya’s voice thundered through the solar. "You’re all complaining that we’re surrounded, that everyone is attacking us. So strike back. Against the Lannisters or against Stannis, what’s the matter? We won’t defeat them if we sit on our asses here."

"Arya!" Catelyn rebuffed her.

"Look, Lady Arya…” began the Blackfish, but he could never finish.

"I’m not a lady."

Her uncle seldom looked surprised, but this time when he met the gaze of his grandniece, he did.

"I cannot abandon Riverrun," Edmure said. "It might soon be the last of my lands I have control over."

"So you want to wait for them to kill you?" retorted his niece. "Like my father did."

The mention of Ned almost brought tears to Catelyn. Not only the fact Arya talked about him, but the way she did. Her fierce expression, the defiance in her voice, the implication that she disapproved and condemned her father’s actions. Her daughter had turned harsh and hard because of the recent events. She always was more impulsive and stubborn than her siblings, but never like this. Catelyn barely recognized her in this instant.

"Arya, it’s not that simple," Jon Snow told her. "All our men are tired. They’ve been traveling without any rest for months now, and they faced two battles in King’s Landing. By the time they’ve gathered enough force to head for battle, Stannis will be on us. He won’t stop until we’re all dead."
"Then let’s attack him as soon as we can. Just take a day or two to rest, then march against him."

"That will allow the Lannisters to march on Riverrun right away. They’re very close and could attack us any time," Robb said.

"And with my own men, nonetheless," Edmure added. "But you shouldn’t even be here, Arya. This is not a conversation for you."

Edmure was right, but Arya had insisted so much that her brother finally gave in and let her come. Her daughter was about to protest.

"Lord Edmure is right. Arya’s place is not here." To the general surprise, it was the bastard who spoke. Arya was again about to protest but again Jon Snow cut her. "The Lannisters and Stannis will be here soon. When they come, we must be ready. So we better prepare ourselves. I can help you to train, sister."

Catelyn’s daughter found herself speechless. She always regretted that of all her siblings, the one Arya was the closest to was Jon Snow. However, right now, she should have thanked him. Although reluctantly, Arya accepted to leave with him. Catelyn was now alone with her son, her brother and her uncle. Someone who looked at their features would believe they only represented House Tully, although House Stark was equally represented.

"We will stay here," Robb declared. "Our men need rest. With our combined forces and our defensive positions, we may have a chance to defeat whoever will attack us, let it be Stannis or the Lannisters. With some luck, maybe they will even meet before our walls and fight each other." He turned to his uncle. "You should command all your troops to come back to Riverrun right away, or else they will be destroyed by the Lannisters like at the beginning of the war. You don’t have enough men to face them."

"Alright," Edmure replied after a moment.

"We must fortify Riverrun," Ser Brynden Tully said. "Make sure our men are rested, armed, well fed and ready for battle, with the best defenses we can find. Edmure, you better accompany me."

"Yes, probably."
Edmure shot one last glance at Catelyn's son, then he left the room. She was now alone with Robb.

"He’s not happy with me," he told her. "Neither is Ser Brynden."

"Why would they? With the situation you put all of us in… Robb, what happened? King in the North? How did it happen? Why did you do this?"

"It wasn’t me, Mother. Stannis refused to let me send half my men back home to fight the Ironmen. My bannermen were angry. So they proclaimed me their king. What could I do? Refuse? Tell them to follow a king most of them didn’t know? To abandon their homes for a war that didn’t concern us anymore?"

"It does concern us still. They still have Sansa."

"And you see me demanding from my bannermen to stay in the south maybe one or two more years only so I can save my sister? They would ask themselves what kind of lord I am, who refuses a crown but beg them to sacrifice their sons for my sister." He let himself drop in a chair. "I tried to explain it to Stannis after they named me their king. I proposed him my help against the Lannisters and the Iron Islands, but he refused. He wanted my submission, not my help. So we fought, and I lost."

"You should have come back right away."

"And let Stannis burn the Riverlands on his way north? No, I couldn’t."

"Then why didn’t you just hide it from him? Why come forward and give him all the reasons in the world to kill you and your men?"

"It was the only honorable thing to do."

"No, it was a foolish thing to do, Robb! Don’t you realize what this means for all of us?"

"Yes, I do realize it. I’m living it, seeing it. I’ve lost ten thousand men in King’s Landing. I know
what the consequences are. You don’t need to remind me of them, Mother. I’m the Lord of Winterfell now."

"For how long?" she whispered. "And for how long are we going to live now?"

She sat as well. This wasn’t how she hoped her reunion with Robb would happen, but she suspected it would go that way.

"I’m sorry, Mother. There’s nothing else I can tell you. All I can do now is my best to protect our family."

He stood and proceeded to the door, but she caught his hand. "Bran and Rickon are gone. Your father is gone. Our home is gone. Sansa is in enemy hands. You and Arya are all that’s left, and I can’t… I can’t lose you."

He placed his hand on hers. "You won’t lose us, Mother. I promise."

Slowly, he removed his hand. She let him go. Her son left her alone again.

Later, she went to the sept to pray. On her way, she saw Arya sparring with Jon Snow. For the first time in forever, she saw her youngest daughter smile. Her childish smile came back as she practiced with her half-brother. It was still difficult for Catelyn to accept it after all this time, but Jon Snow was the half-brother of all her children, and in the eyes of most of them, he was their brother just as much as Bran or Rickon had been. She never stopped her children to spend time with him. Even if she had tried, she wouldn’t have succeeded. She would have faced a rebellion from her own children, joined by their father. She didn’t encourage their friendship with the bastard though, even made attempts to distance them from him at times, but now she didn’t want to do that. How could she deprive Arya and Robb from their brother with everything that happened lately? Anyway, like when they were younger, they would refuse if she tried.

She lit candles to the Mother for herself, to the Warrior for her son and even for Jon Snow, to the Maid for Sansa and Arya, and to the Crone for all of them. She also lit a candle before the altar of the Father for her deceased husband. His bones were still here at Riverrun, while Winterfell was still in ashes. They would need to wait for the castle to be retaken to bring her husband to his final rest in the crypts. She went to see the coffin that contained them every day to make sure they were still there.
As time went on, Arya came to join her. Without much surprise, she lit a candle for the Warrior. She was still wearing her ragged clothes, covered from head to toe by sand, dust, earth, mud and grass. Catelyn used to think every time she saw her daughter in this state that the time to stop behaving like a child would come too soon for her. How right she was, but Catelyn hadn’t realized to what point her thoughts were prophetic. Arya was becoming a woman at an accelerating pace. One day she would marry and bear children. That day was getting closer. But that day wasn’t today, not yet.

"You never liked septs," Catelyn said.

"No. I always preferred the godswood," she replied.

"Because there you could train?"

Arya looked only a little surprised. Catelyn smiled at her, and she was rewarded by Arya’s childish smile. The child wasn’t entirely gone.

"For how long have you known?"

"Long enough."

"You never stopped me?"

"No. Sometimes I wanted, but I thought better." A small laugh rewarded her comment. "When you were taking too long, though, I would send one of your brothers."

She said one of your brothers because she got the habit to mention the name of Jon Snow as rarely as she could.

"You sent Robb more often. You only sent Jon when you had no other choice." It was as if Arya could read her mind. "Why?" her daughter asked.

Catelyn sighed. "Why, Mother?" she repeated.
She had hoped the matter would disappear by itself when Arya would see she would rather not answer, but before her insistence, she had no other choice.

"He isn’t my son."

"But he is my brother. And Robb’s as well, and Sansa’s, and he was Bran’s and Rickon’s brother as well. We all had our mother, but Jon never had his own. You never tried to treat him like your son, if only so he could have a mother?"

There had been a time when she actually wanted to be his mother. It had been when he was still a baby, after he got the pox. For an entire night, she had wanted to be his mother. She promised to the gods that she would be a mother to him, that she would convince her husband to call him a Stark like all her other children. She had prayed for his life, and he lived. But she could never hold her promise. All those terrible things that happened to her family ever since was because she couldn’t love a motherless boy.

"I wish you tried."

Arya spoke without an ounce of anger in her voice. She just sounded sad. Catelyn was as well. Arya came to sit by her side, and together they prayed. Catelyn’s prayer found itself to turn around Jon Snow. She swore to try, to make amends for her past mistakes, for her broken promises. Maybe it was too late for being Jon Snow’s mother. Maybe the time for that was long gone. But she could try to be better with him. She could try to make him a Stark, since she couldn’t make him her son.

Arya went back to the courtyard in a very short time. Catelyn went back to the Great Hall and looked at the Trident whose currents her father’s ashes flowed through. Her uncle came to join her not long before supper. He stood behind her as she looked to the river.

"A person could almost be forgiven for forgetting we are at war," she said. A moment passed before her uncle said something.

"Sometimes, it gives me comfort to think that even in war’s darkest days, in most places of the world absolutely nothing is happening."

She turned her head to look at him. "I missed you, Uncle. All these years in the North. I missed you. Father missed you too. During his last days… He wasn’t very coherent, but he talked about you, and
he missed you. He probably never told you before how you were dear to him…"

He chuckled. "Never. Your father was a stubborn old ox. I was surprised when I learned he died, even with all this war going on. I didn't think death had the patience."

"I wish you were with him. I wish to the gods you had been."

"Me too." He looked down to the floor.

"Did you make peace before he left?"

"After thirty years of fighting, I don't think he remembered what started it. One of the last things he asked of me was to stop calling myself Blackfish. He said it was an old joke and it was never funny to begin with. I told him people had been calling me the Blackfish for so long they don't remember my real name."

That brought a smile on both their lips. Catelyn knew he was lying. Every boy who dreamed of becoming a knight someday knew the name of Ser Brynden Tully, and knew that he was the Blackfish. She also was certain this wasn't the last thing her father asked of his brother… though it was probably among the last he asked before he began to ramble.

"Every time he would leave for the capital or fight in a campaign, I'd see him off. Wait for me, little Cat, he'd say. Wait for me. And I would wait for him at this window. How many times did Bran and Rickon looked through the windows or over the battlements, waiting for me."

She looked outside to hide her tears just as a knock came to her door. Catelyn wiped the tears from her eyes as Ser Brynden headed to open it. Catelyn didn’t hear what they said, but her uncle didn’t close the door behind him when he walked back to her.

"The scouts have found a group of a dozen riders bearing a white flag and the banner of House Arryn."

The name of the house brought Catelyn’s attention. Was Lysa finally consenting to help them? After all this time and all the ravens that were sent.
"They’re approaching the gates as we speak," her uncle added.

Quickly, Catelyn found back her composure and headed with the Blackfish to the courtyard. He placed a hand on her shoulder to comfort her before they headed out. The Knights of the Vale had already passed through the gates. One of them, however, wore no armor. He was no knight. As soon as he looked at her, his smirk appeared. It had been an eternity since he set foot in this castle and, when he left, it was with a scar from Catelyn’s betrothed at the time.

"I see that I arrived just in time."

Petyr Baelish was back at Riverrun, and Catelyn wanted to strangle him.

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Jon
Chapter Notes

Let's see what Baelish is hiding under his sleeves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JON XIV


Arya made another attack. Jon drew back for the third consecutive time. She lowered her weapon.

"Is everyone exhausted like you are?" she asked.

"I’m afraid we all are."

He had decided to spar with his sister to keep her busy, and also because he wanted to spend time with her. And also because, yes, in the back of his mind, he believed Arya may need to fight soon. However, without the fever of battle, his body couldn’t keep up. Arya was rested and well fed. Jon was not, and hadn't been for quite a while. He and Robb didn’t eat much better than their own men. It was another lesson their father taught them. At war, do not show your men you are better fed and treated than they are.

"Let’s take a break."

Jon didn’t oppose Arya’s suggestion. They sat next to a tree. They were in the godswood. It was always a good place to train in secret, though Jon could have sparred with Arya in the training yards since no one stopped her from training at Riverrun. But old habits were hard to kill, and for Jon it was a way to remember the time they spent together at Winterfell. Now that the castle was gone, he cherished these memories more than ever.

"Is everyone really exhausted?"

"Aye. Some more than others. I rode on a horse. Many walked all the way long." Some wore boots so damaged by the journey that they didn’t deserve the name of boots anymore.

"So, we just sit there and wait." She appeared more disappointed than angry this time.

"Aye, for now. Maybe if Stannis is being slowed enough, then we can march again and meet him in the field, but not yet. Our men need to recover their forces, and we must protect Riverrun from two enemies rather than one."

Arya looked straight in front of her. Jon thought it was the direction where the weirwood tree was, even though they couldn’t see it for now.

"The battle in King’s Landing… How was it?"
The images lined up in Jon’s mind. The mud mixed with blood clouded his sight. The armors displaying the burning hearts rode and slashed at him. They withdrew, then they attacked again. Arrows rained upon them. Rodrik was burning. Lord Gregor was saving his life. Jon took him on his horse. Fire everywhere. They flew away, leaving thousands of men behind them. One of them was Mira’s brother.

"I would rather not talk about it."

"Is it true that Stannis showed you Joffrey’s head in a box?"

"How do you know about it?"

"Soldiers talk, and their squires too."

Jon shook his head. "Aye, I saw it." Along with the heads of Jaime and Cersei Lannister.

"Are you sure it was him?"

"Aye, it was Joffrey." Along with his parents.

"Did Stannis tell you how he died? Who killed him?"

"We don’t know. Some claim it was Stannis, others believe it was Lord Tyrion and Lady Margaery before they left. There are even some who claim it was Cersei who murdered her own son."

"Perhaps it was Jaqen."

"We don’t know. Perhaps we will never know."

The thought had crossed his mind back in King’s Landing, when he heard about the boy king’s suspicious death. With the rumors that the Red Woman accompanying Stannis might have had a hand in Joffrey’s murder and after hearing Lady Stark’s tale, Jon wasn’t so skeptical about the conversation he had with Mira when she brought Arya back to them. Arya had given three names to this man, and the three were dead. Joffrey was the last one on the list. Knowing that such people could potentially exist gave him chills.

Mira seemed very distressed when she told him about those assassins who could change their appearance to kill their targets. To see direwolves south of the Wall for the first time in thousands of years was one thing, but when Lady Stark was claiming that she saw a shadow murder Renly Baratheon right in front of her, and when Mira was talking about assassins with changing faces… Mira never stroked Jon for a superstitious girl. Quite the opposite. There was one time when Jon happened to discuss with people at Casterly Rock who claimed to have seen mermaids in the sea. Lady Margaery had happened to pass by at this moment. She made a pleasure to ask Mira to explain how reflections of the sunlight on the water created the illusion of mermaids and their shining fins.

She must have heard about her brother’s death by now. Lord Gregor had sent a raven to Casterly Rock back at Harrenhal. Unless the Lannisters didn’t bring her the message, but he didn’t see why they would do this. Mira was still one of Lady Lannister’s handmaiden, or so he hoped.

A boy who had to be about thirteen arrived. "My lord, my lady."

He bowed awkwardly. Jon thought that not long ago he might have been this boy, forced to perform the lowliest tasks in the army, had the war started sooner. He even wrongfully called Jon a lord, a mistake he wasn’t the only one to make. Especially among the common soldiers, people called him that way more often as time went on, caring less about the fact he was a bastard than about the fact
he spent most of his time with the King in the North and Lord of Winterfell, and sat among his advisors and military commanders.

"My lord, the king summons you. He wants you in the Great Hall immediately."

Jon bid farewell to Arya and headed to the Great Hall of Riverrun. He was awaited in the large room where audiences and feasts were organized. In Winterfell, most of the audiences were open to everyone who wanted to present a request or simply to watch his father rule. There were some circumstances however, when the matter was of great importance or delicate, that his father would have the court cleared, or invite the petitioner in his office, especially when he was a powerful lord.

Such seemed to be the case today at Riverrun too. Very few people were present, and the heavy doors closed as soon as Jon walked in. Robb and Lord Edmure sat next to each other on the dais. Lady Stark and Ser Brynden were not far away. Jon was the fifth and last person in the room except for the petitioner. When he entered, everyone looked at him, including him.

"Jon, come. We have a guest and I think you should be there to hear what he has to say," his brother told him.

Jon did as Robb asked and walked to the dais. The petitioner looked at him closely as he progressed. He wasn’t a tall man, and very slim aside from that, though richly dressed, a short and clean haircut, a little moustache and a smile that would look sly even to those who lost their sight.

"You look very much like your father." The words stopped Jon as he was about to climb. The wicked expression was still on the man’s face as his eyes wandered from to the top of the dais. "Am I not right? I suppose everyone guesses every time this is the bastard of Winterfell."

The gaze remained on the dais. No one there seemed to find this funny like the man seemed to think.

"Jon, sit," Robb repeated.

Jon took a seat. He was now towering the thin man by a large margin thanks to the steps he climbed.

"Choose your words well, Lord Baelish, because I’m not going to show you much patience after what you did," Robb declared.

Jon’s breath was cut short for an instant. This was the man who claimed Tyrion Lannister was behind the attempt of murder on Bran. This man was also supposed to help his father, and yet when Lord Eddard Stark was thrown in a cell, he did nothing. And he did nothing more while his head was cut by Ser Ilyn Payne.

Arya has told them about his lord father’s death. She said that Littlefinger was present at his execution and that he made no attempt to save him. Jon’s muscles tensed. This man worked for Joffrey, the king who murdered his father.

"I’m not very surprised of this welcome, but I hope you will have better dispositions towards me after I tell you why I’m here," Joffrey’s Master of Coin said.

"Why should we? You let Ned die. Don’t you remember when we met in King’s Landing? You promised to protect him." Lady Stark said.

"And I did. Truly, Cat, I tried. I’m sorry I failed."

"Don’t pretend you tried," Robb said. "We know you were present when my father got killed. You stood next to Joffrey when he gave the sentence."
Petyr Baelish was silent. Jon wanted nothing but to kill him for his betrayal.

"Yes, I was there. And I was there when he was arrested too. In both cases, I didn’t try to intervene. I’m sorry."

Robb stood up and drew his sword. Littlefinger looked around, looking for a way to escape, but there was none. Jon’s brother seized him by the neck and placed the sword on it.

"Give me one good reason not to kill you right away."

"Robb, you are in my castle, Lord Edmure burst. You have no right…"

"He has every right. He is your king." The Blackfish had cut short his nephew and lord. "And with all this man has done, no matter that he's been a ward in this castle, your king is well in his right to execute him on the spot."

"I… I tried to save him while he was imprisoned," Baelish answered while the Tullys argued.

For a short moment that seemed to last an eternity, Robb’s sword dug in the skin of the man, but he didn’t plunge it.

"Explain yourself." The time for Petyr Baelish to die had not come yet.

"Your father had found proofs that Joffrey and his brother and sister were born from incest. He told me about that after he warned Cersei that he knew the truth. I urged him to leave because I knew Cersei would never abandon her crown, but he wouldn’t listen. When the Lannisters turned on him, it was too late. There was nothing I could do. If I had tried anything, I would have gotten killed."

"So you betrayed my father and decided to serve Joffrey!"

"No, I didn’t. I made Joffrey and Cersei believe that I was on their side. In the meantime, I tried to persuade them to spare your father so he could join the Night’s Watch. That way he would be sent back in the North and rally his men. I managed to convince the Lannisters, and even convinced them they should send Sansa away. I was planning to have some of my men kidnap her so they could bring her back to you, or to hide her somewhere safe. But Joffrey changed his mind on the moment he was supposed to send Ned to the Night’s Watch. Instead he decided to execute him. Everyone was surprised, even his parents. We had no time to react. And he decided to keep Sansa by his side to torture her."

"And you decided to serve him!"

"To keep an eye on Sansa. By staying at Joffrey’s side, I could help you more than if I was dead trying to save your father. And I was afraid of what might happen to Sansa if no one was there to protect her."

"How do I know you’re telling the truth? You’ve done nothing to help us since this war started!"

"Really? How do you think Stannis took the city so easily?"

"You’re working for Stannis?"

"I was. Not anymore. Back then, he was your ally. I gave him a way to get his men inside the city and to open the gates."

Robb threw Baelish away. The Master of Coin breathed heavily and massaged his neck. Robb was
"Did you kill Joffrey?"

"I wish I did. No, I didn’t. I wanted Stannis to take him alive, maybe to get your chance to kill him yourself. I know it’s important for you, that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. However, someone killed him before you." He sighed. "That night was a nightmare. Tyron Lannister and his wife abandoned the city. They left the Kingslayer, the queen and Joffrey to die. They took Sansa with them before I could realize what was going on. Then on the morning I learned Joffrey was dead. I left the Red Keep at this moment. I knew my days were counted from this moment."

"And you went to Stannis?"

"No, I didn’t. I went to…"

"You’re lying."

"I’m not. Everything I told you is the truth."

"No. You lied to us in the past. You told my mother that the dagger that almost took Bran’s life belonged to Tyrion Lannister, but we know that Tyrion Lannister himself offered it to Joffrey for his name day."

"Well, the prince bet it in the joust and lost it to its previous owner. I didn’t know the dagger was a gift from Tyrion Lannister, but what I can tell you is that he won it back."

Lady Stark spoke at this moment. "Lady Margaery assured us that her husband would never bet against his own brother."

"Just like he would never abandon him to Stannis, I guess." Lady Stark was speechless. "I’m afraid Lady Lannister doesn’t know her husband as well as she believes, or she manipulated you, Cat. Either way, she didn’t tell you the truth. The facts speak for themselves."

Before any of them could speak again, he resumed. "But I have something that might persuade you of my goodwill. The Knights of the Vale are coming."

The Blackfish stood up. "What are you talking about?"

"You’ve seen the men who escorted me here. After I left the Red Keep, I headed for the Vale. I knew that Lady Arryn didn’t support you in this war, so I went to the Eyrie. It took me some time, but I managed to persuade her to send her troops to help. An army is heading in your direction, led by Yohn Royce. They will be here before Stannis reaches you."

Jon had met Lord Royce. He came to Winterfell not long before the king’s visit with his son Waymar. He sparred with his lord father and Ser Rodrik and they hunted in the Wolfswood. Then he headed north to Castle Black, accompanying his son who would join the Night’s Watch. When Jon went to Castle Black, he learned that Waymar died in a ranging north of the Wall. Only one of his companions from the ranging came back. He deserted and was later executed by Lord Eddard Stark. That was the first time Bran was brought to an execution, the day they found the direwolves.

"Lysa did it? Her men are really coming?" Lord Tully asked.

"Wait. How come Lysa didn’t write about this? Why didn’t she warn us of your arrival?" Ser Brynden asked.
Lord Baelish seemed bothered. He folded and unfolded his fingers a few times. "Lysa is not in a very... stable state, to say the least. She took refuge in the Eyrie and refuses to leave it, or to let her son leave it, even for a day. You have no idea of all the efforts I had to make to convince her to send her knights to help you. But she didn’t want to reply to your ravens. I tried to convince her to do the opposite, but she didn’t want to hear any of it. She was afraid that Varys’s little birds or anyone at the service of the Lannisters or Stannis might intercept her messages and that her son would be in trouble then."

"That makes no sense. By sending her army, she puts him into danger. A raven to Riverrun is nothing compared to this," the Blackfish declared.

"I agree but, as I told you, Lysa is not in a very good state since her husband’s death."

"She has nothing to fear. We don’t have spies within our walls," Lord Edmure said.

"I wouldn’t think so, my lord. After all, Varys knew what was going on in Riverrun the whole time I was in King’s Landing, before and after Robert’s death."

The Lord of Riverrun got pale all of a sudden. Jon had to concede he had all the rights to be afraid. After all, half his bannermen turned on him already, either to join Stannis or Tommen.

"If you do not believe me, then believe Lysa."

He produced a large scroll from under his coat. Robb roughly grabbed it and read it. For some time, the Great Hall was silent, everyone waiting the verdict as Robb read the letter. After a while, he handed it to his mother.

"Is that Aunt Lysa’s writing?"

Catelyn took a look at it. "Yes."

Robb turned to Littlefinger once again. "Leave us. Lord Tully, I suppose Lord Baelish can benefit your hospitality."

"Yes," Robb’s uncle said, almost sounding as if he complained. Littlefinger left. Jon was now the only man in this room who was neither a Stark nor a Tully. Lady Stark, in the meantime, had given the letter to the Lord of Riverrun.

Robb looked at his mother. "What do you think of it?"

"I don’t know," she replied after a moment.

"This is Lysa’s hand, I confirm," Lord Tully declared.

"Then it was about time that she sent us her men, though I wish she didn’t send that worm ahead of them," Ser Brynden said. He took the letter from his nephew’s hand to read it.

"Can we trust his word?" Jon asked. "Arya was there when our father died, Robb. And she saw Lord Baelish standing next to Joffrey. He served him for several months now. I’m not ready to believe him."

"Me neither, your Grace," the Blackfish intervened. "But Lysa is very clear in her letter, and she’s telling us that we can trust Littlefinger. And I can testify me too that this is her writing."

"Forgive me, my lords, and my lady too, but despite all the respect due to Lady Arryn, while I was at
Casterly Rock, word ran everywhere that she was crazy."

"These are only rumors, Jon," Robb countered. "And coming from the Lannisters, I’m not sure we should believe them."

"Lord Forrester’s daughter herself met her in the capital, and she confirmed to me that Lady Arryn wasn’t behaving correctly. Anyway, I find it strange that Lady Arryn chooses to help us after months of silence, and at the request of Joffrey’s former Master of Coin."

They all remained silent for a time.

"I don’t trust Baelish me neither," Lord Edmure said. "But Lysa is finally helping us, and if he played a role in her decision, it would dangerous to harm him."

"I agree." Robb said on a begrudging tone. He didn’t agree with his uncle with pleasure. "We need the Knights of the Vale. They can help us shift the balance in this war. With their help we can hope again to defeat not only Stannis, but also the Ironmen and the Lannisters and their Tyrell allies."

"I don’t like this, Robb. I don’t trust this man," Jon said.

"No one here trusts him," the Blackfish agreed. "We should keep him at Riverrun as a guest while the Knights of the Vale are coming."

"Yes, let’s keep him here," Lord Tully approved.

"We must know where the army of the Vale is. Depending on their position, we might have to leave Riverrun as soon as possible if we don’t want their forces to be cut from ours," Robb declared.

"I’ll go and ask Petyr myself," Lady Stark offered.

"With all my respect, Catelyn, why you?" her uncle asked.

"Because I know Petyr, better than any of you. And first I need a good discussion with him."

For a moment, his brother and Lady Stark looked at each other. Robb nodded and she left. Jon approached him.

"Whatever you decide, Robb, be careful."

"I know, Jon. It makes me sick to deal with this man, but Lady Arryn made him her personal representative. Her letter specifically states that outside the Vale of Arryn, when Petyr Baelish is speaking, it is as if she was the one speaking. She even declares that whoever lays hand on him will suffer the hatred of the Vale forever. So, if we want the help of the Vale, we need Littlefinger’s help."

Jon was more certain than ever that Lady Margaery Lannister was right when she described Lady Arryn as crazy.

Chapter End Notes

Please review
Next chapter: Catelyn
His behavior was much better now. Catelyn had joined Petyr in the room where he was settled. She brought two guards with her. The soldiers of the Vale who accompanied and protected him didn’t want to let them in, but Petyr told them it was okay. Now he stood in front of her. The two guards were not far.

« I wish I had been able to explain it all to you in private, before this audience. »

Waves of rage and sadness crashed into her inner walls, and she could barely hide them in her voice. « You promised to protect Ned. »

He lowered his head and looked at his feet. « I’m sorry. I really tried to protect him, Cat. Believe me, I did. But… it is very hard to hold a promise in King’s Landing, even when we want. »

She considered him for a moment. Even as a child, Petyr had always been hard to decipher. However, his regrets seemed genuine.

« Tell me what happened. Explain yourself to me, only to me. Don’t dare to lie. » She produced a knife she hid under her dress. « I swear on my honor as a Stark and a Tully that I will not hesitate. Tell me the whole truth or this dagger will end in your heart. »

She had nothing left to lose. She lost Ned, Bran and Rickon. Sansa was taken away from her, Robb risked his life every day, and who knew what could happen to Arya if they lost this war. Petyr looked contrite.

« I suspected the queen and the Kingslayer to have a special relationship for a long time, Cat. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I had no proof, only suspicions. If I had been wrong, not only my head but yours could have ended on the executioner block for bearing false accusations against the queen. It was the same thing for Jon Arryn. I had doubts and nothing more. When Eddard Stark began to inquire, I helped him the best I could. I warned him about the people who spied on him. He finally discovered the truth about Cersei and Jaime Lannister. And he had proof. »

« Why didn’t you help him? »

« I tried. I wanted him to leave the city, to get himself and your daughters to safety… But he wanted to be honorable, and that cost him his head. We didn’t have enough men to overthrow Cersei, especially not after Robert’s death. I knew I could try to bribe the gold cloaks, but had I offered gold to Slynt, the Lannisters would offer him more gold with titles, and a seat on the small council. So…”
yes, I did nothing when Ser Jaime and his men took care of the Northerners. But I did everything to not have your husband executed. I convinced Cersei to send him to the Wall, to let him live. I even tried to convince them to send Sansa outside the city, so I could smuggle her to the North in secret. On the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor, Joffrey was supposed to send your husband to the Night’s Watch after he confessed false crimes, but to everyone’s surprise he ordered him to be beheaded. Even Varys and Cersei didn’t expect this and tried to stop him. They failed. I was afraid that if I showed too much will to save Ned Stark, they might point me as a traitor and I would die. So yes, I stood aside as your husband died.

He inhaled deeply. « I’m so sorry, Cat. I had no love for your husband, I won’t deny it. But he was your husband, you cared for him, it was obvious to me that he was very dear to you. You had five children with him. I never wanted his death, and I did everything I could to save him, and to save your daughters. I might have been willing to sacrifice my life for them if that meant they could be free, but that would have been useless if I died failing to save them. At least, if I was alive, I could watch over Sansa. I tried to make up a plan to make her escape the city, but there was no way for me to approach her. I thought of exchanging information with her in the godwood. There are no walls there, so Varys’s little birds could not have overheard us. But a handmaiden of Lady Lannister began to follow her everywhere, even going as far as to pray with her each time Sansa went to the godwood. Sansa trusted this girl. Finally, she betrayed your daughter and helped the Lannisters kidnap her when they abandoned the city. There was nothing left to do in the capital. So I left for the Eyrie.

She said nothing as he paused. He was waiting for her reaction, but she granted him none.

« Listen, Cat. I failed your husband, it’s true, but I never failed you. I never stopped trying to protect you. I’m sorry if you think it wasn’t enough. »

Slowly, she lowered the blade. But she kept it in her hand.

« Lysa’s troops? Where are they? » she asked him.

« Close. They should be by the Crossroads now. I wanted them to hurry so we would arrive in time. »

« Why now? Why didn’t Lysa help us before? »

He seemed to hesitate. « I’m afraid your sister is no longer… sane. You don’t imagine what treasures of persuasion I had to use to convince her to help you. She fears everyone ever since her husband’s death. »

« Lady Margaery told me she was mad, » Catelyn whispered.

« On this, she might have been honest with you. Although, she wasn’t in this state back in King’s Landing. »

« On the rest, was she lying as well? »

« If she’s not, then I’m lying without being conscious of it. » He opened his hands. « Listen, Cat. Margaery Lannister was born in House Tyrell. Using other people’s feelings, manipulating them, making everyone love her, those are her specialties. The women in House Tyrell are very good at it, and the Lady of Casterly Rock is no exception. She wanted Robert to repudiate Cersei in order to marry him in the first place. Then she convinced her own husband to abandon his brother, his sister and his nephew to their death. She may look kind and trustful, but she is not. Not at all. »
Catelyn sighed. Who was she to believe? She thought that she understood the frustration Ned told her he felt whenever he had to deal with southern lords.

« How am I supposed to believe you? You worked for Joffrey and the Lannisters. You stood by their side as Ned was… You saw that monster Joffrey beat my daughter. How can I ever trust you again? »

« Because I love you, Cat. »

The declaration struck her as if a knight just punched her in the stomach with his fist of steel. She looked closely to Petyr. He was not joking. She sighed.

« Petyr… »

« I love you, Cat. I have always loved you, Cat, and I will always love you. »

He made a few steps towards her. She raised he dagger.

« Don’t approach! »

How dared he? He stopped and for a moment, a short moment, she saw the boy she grew up with, the boy who challenged Brandon in duel for her. It was the same gaze he had when she tied her ribbon around her betrothed’s arm. Petyr had asked her to give it to him, but Catelyn had declined as gently as she could. She also begged her betrothed at the time to spare him. He was only a boy. And for a moment, he was that again, a boy still in love with her.

He stepped back, an apologizing look plain now, a man once again, and placed a hand on his heart.

« I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. »

She didn’t lower her weapon. She didn’t allow his feelings for her, whatever they were, to affect her thinking. The two guards were still ready to intervene behind. Petyr sat on a nearby chair.

« I’m sorry, Cat. I was hoping, coming here, that you would feel at least a little grateful for the efforts I made. Perhaps I was wrong. I’m sorry this wasn’t enough for you, or for your family. But you can still count on my assistance, and you will need it against your enemies. »

« We have Lysa’s help. You said it yourself, the Knights of the Vale are coming. I think this will be enough for help. »

« Lysa ordered me to lead her army here, and she gave specific orders to the officers to protect me and to only obey my orders. »

Catelyn’s eyes opened wide. « Why would she do such a thing? »

To believe that her sister granted such power upon him. She had high doubts.

« Lysa is paranoid since her husband’s death. She trusts very few people. I was lucky to have known her for so long, or else she would never have listened to me. You don’t know what treasures of persuasion I had to put in to convince her to send you help. »

« How did you convince her? »

« With the only argument that could work with her. Her son. I told her he was strong and growing stronger by the day, but he would never approve of her actual decisions. A strong lord would never abandon his own family. Even so she needed days of thinking before she finally accepted to move. »
« I once thought I found back a friend when we met again, in King’s Landing. »

« And I was, and still am. I apologize that the friend I am couldn’t save your husband, but I can still help you save your family. »

She considered him and his words. « It will be to my son to decide. » She turned her heels.

« Do you ever want to see Sansa again? »

She stopped and turned to look at him. « You cannot bring her back. »

« No, not right now. But I have people in Lannisport, even inside Casterly Rock. She is there as we speak. I can try to take her out of the castle if you want. There are secret passages that my agents can use. I won’t lie to you, it’s possible she might not make it out, but we both know she is too valuable for the Lannisters to try to kill her, even if she tries to escape. She is the heir to the North after all. My men might give their lives in the attempt, but it is worth the try. Just say it and I’ll have her out. »

She thought about Sansa. It had been so long since the last time she saw her. How could she be in this place she didn’t know? Catelyn had no doubt her daughter was behaving like a true lady, but what might befall her, a prisoner of the Lannisters?

« I’ll need to talk to my son. »

« Robb is not her mother. I’m asking you. »

« It is my son to decide. »

And on that she left. As she travelled the corridors of Riverrun, still escorted by the two guards who came with her, conflicting thoughts and feelings ran through her mind. In some way, she felt responsible for what happened to Petyr. Her own feelings for him never went beyond friendship, but maybe she had given him the wrong impression, even though it had never been her intentions. She recalled their kissing games in the godwood. It was only a game, but maybe Baelish thought there was more to it. She should have known something was wrong when his tongue attempted to slip into her mouth, and taken precautions from this moment. Perhaps the tragedy of the duel would never have happened.

However, these were not the main feelings that inhabited her. She still felt betrayed by someone she considered a good friend. No matter what he said, he would need to earn her trust and friendship again. There might be one way he could, and for that she needed to convince her son.

She found herself again in her father’s solar, now her brother’s, with her uncle, her brother, her son, and Jon Snow. Although she couldn’t deny the fact he followed Robb and fought side by side with him, she would have liked it if he wasn’t here.

« What he says is in line with what I got from the knights following him, » her uncle declared after she briefly related her conversation. « Lysa made him commander of her troops, and he must leave as soon as he informs us of the approaching army. I still think it odd that she wouldn’t warn us by raven. The chances of being intercepted are much greater for a few riders on the road than for a raven in the sky. »

« Though Littlefinger’s words are don’t contradict what we heard from both Jon Snow and Catelyn. And it is in line with what we haven’t heard from Lysa, » Edmure said.

« Still, I’m not ready to trust that man, » Robb declared.
« Me neither, » Jon Snow agreed.

« Me neither, » the Blackfish replied. « I would be much reassured if he could prove us his sincerity. »

« There might be a way. He says he can take Sansa out of the Lannister’s custody. »

She hadn’t told them yet. She explained to them what Baelish told her.

« Words. They’re only words, and words are wind, » the Blackfish declared.

« Even so, I think we should take the risk, » she argued. « Sansa is in danger. Who knows what she’s going through right now? We have to get her out of here. »

« I don’t think she’s in danger, » Jon said. « The people at Casterly Rock were decent. I don’t see them harming her. »

« Like Joffrey did? » she harshly retorted.

« There was no one like Joffrey there. And even Littlefinger agrees that Sansa is too valuable for the Lannisters to hurt her. »

« We don’t know what the Lannisters could be doing to her right now. »

« I am no longer sure about anything concerning the Lannisters, not since my father died. » She felt the mention that Ned was his father like a slap on her face. « About anything but one. Tyrion Lannister is no fool. He would never sacrifice a piece of bargain like Sansa, nor waste an opportunity to control the North. »

« And what if the Lannisters marry her to one of their own? We cannot wait and hope the Imp will treat her better than Joffrey. »

Robb seemed to think about it for a while. « Too risky. If the escape attempt fails, who knows what could happen to Sansa then. And we don’t know yet if we can trust Baelish. »

« This might be an opportunity to verify that he is trustful, » she pushed forward.

« How long will it take for Sansa to escape? For the time Baelish will need to inform his men, then to organize a plan, then to bring Sansa back here, how long will it take? »

« Not to mention that I don’t see how Sansa could escape Casterly Rock, » Jon said. « I lived there. It’s like a city carved inside the mountains. I don’t see how Sansa could escape without being noticed. And she will still have to travel miles of road before she reaches our lands, in Lannister territory or that of their allies. »

« As I said, too risky. For now. First, Baelish will bring us the Knights of the Vale here. Then we can wait for Stannis or the Lannisters, defeat them and take back the advantage in this war. Riverrun cannot fall like Winterfell did, » Robb declared.

From the look on his face, Catelyn knew there was no way she could convince him to change his mind. Sansa would remain a prisoner of the Lannisters, and them prisoners of Riverrun as three armies closed on them.

« We will hold a feast tonight for our friends of the Vale. That will lift men’s mind to know that we have friends coming to our rescue. Though I wish we could keep Baelish as a guest while his army is
joining us, » her brother said.

« If only we could, but Lysa herself states it clearly in her letter. It is Littlefinger who must lead her army and no one else. It’s probably the craziest thing she’s ever done, naming Littlefinger at the head of an army, » her sister commented.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the feast tonight. The news that the Knights of the Vale were coming travelled faster through the castle and the camps outside than anyone could have imagined. Men now drank cheerily. Her uncle reported her that some wanted to march against Stannis right away. Courage had risen again in the hearts of men. Catelyn, again, had conflicted feelings that made her feel elated then afraid.

The feast in the evening was not as grand as the one they held in Winterfell when King Robert visited, but it was big enough to honor their guests, even though Catelyn didn’t know yet if Petyr deserved such honor. She wanted to believe him, especially for Sansa. If he succeeded, if he could get her out of the lion’s den… The former ward to Riverrun sat on the dais with them, at the main table. Edmure insisted it was necessary for the morale of the men and to not infuriate Petyr uselessly. Catelyn had to concede that it was true, and Robb as well, even though it pleased no one at the table. Arya had refused to be there, no matter the insistence her mother put. Catelyn got more worried about her every day. It may have been a mistake to delay the arrangement of a marriage for her.

Maybe she could marry her into House Manderly. Lord Wyman Manderly was a good man, and so were his sons, despite their overweight. Arya had liked it when Ned brought her along to White Harbor. If she liked adventure and discovery, the city was probably the best place to go for her little daughter. She could even travel on ships if she wanted. The women at the court of Lord Manderly were given more latitude, while the city was a mix of the north and the south, the joining between the two worlds.

On the other side, Lord Manderly’s eldest son was already married, and he had no son. She would have to look at different options in the Riverlands and the North. Maybe she could strike a betrothal with the Karstarks. This could help to make the relations between their two families better after the deaths of two of Lord Karstark’s sons.

Everyone there played his part. Robb, Edmure and her uncle, just like her, showed a happy and reconnaissant demeanour to the Knights of the Vale who had come to their help. Decent supper was served for everyone, wine and ale flowed without interruption. The lords of the North and the Riverlands were in good mood for the most part. Even Jon Snow, who supped on the floor with the other lords, participated. Petyr showed himself amiable, civil and courteous with everyone and in all his conversations. Just as they were nearing the end of the main service, Robb stood up.

« My lords, my ladies, times have been hard on us recently. We have fought battles. Some of them we won, the others we didn’t. Some of us survived, and others didn’t have the same chance. This war is not over, far from it I’m afraid. We’ve defeated some of our enemies, to see people we saw as allies take their place and turn on us. But in the coming days, everything will change. The Knights of the Vale are with us now. »

This was followed by cheers all over the hall. Robb waited for them to dissolve.

« My father once was a ward in the Eyrie. To him, Jon Arryn was like a father. I’m glad to see today that the Vale has not forgotten us. No one should ever doubt them, and we shall never doubt them. So, to the Vale, and its Lord and Warden of the East, Robin Arryn. »

He raised his cup and was followed by everyone else, including their guests from the said Vale. Catelyn understood and shared her son’s resentment towards Lysa, which explained why he didn’t
mention her. One of the Knights who was present said a few words for Robb, declared he was the true son of Eddard Stark, the only man in the Seven Kingdoms who actually deserved to be king, and that he would be proud to stand on the battlefield along his northern and river friends. Again, everyone cheered and drank to seal this alliance. Baelish remained silent the whole time. He was always discreet, and he remained so.

A few bards came to entertain them. One of them came with an assistant who carried a huge bell that hung from a stake. The bard began with a few notes. Then his companion struck the bell twice, then again twice.

*High in the crimson towers*

*Hate between a mother's eyes*

*Certain of a costly price*

*To pay when fire survives*

*When all she loved has left the keep*

*The rains above us gently weep*

*And wash away the blood as it goes cold*

*And so she spoke*

*And so she spoke*

*The lion of Castamere*

*When none remain*

*To mourn her reign*

*So proud yet founded upon fear*

*Gates swung open wide to wretches*

*Lowborn pay the price in blood*

*Placed upon the precipice*

*Of near rising flood*

*Terror in the hearts of children*

*Worried that the war's come home*

*As the sound of wildfire burning*

*Nears the lion's throne*
Let it be fear he told them
Let it be fear they know
Let them become ashes now unless they all bow

Blind with the power and fury
Numb behind the dregs of wrath
Set to pay the costly price
And tread a mad king's path
When thousands battled in his name
He stormed the gates and showered flame
To break tyranny but then would forge his own

And so she spoke
And so she spoke
The lion of Castamere
When none remain
To mourn her reign
So proud yet founded upon fear

"Let it be fear" he told them
"Let it be fear" they know
Let them become ashes now unless they all bow
Burn them all down to embers
Servants and lords the same
Show them all fire and blood to win a mad king's game

And with the swords lain down
They screamed 'til the bells cried out
In search of some mercy their hope became fear

Their hope became fear

And it fed his rage

His lust for the lion's cage

He'll stand down for nothing

Until they all cheer, with no one left here

Castamere

Let it be, let it be fear

Castamere

Let it be, let it be fear

The bard received great approval as his song condemned both Cersei and Stannis, the first for her relationship with her brother, the second for becoming the kingdoms’ plague after having been their hope. Catelyn thought, not without irony, how Stannis ended burning people with fire just like his very distant relative, Aerys the Second, the Mad King, after he fought against him in his brother’s rebellion.

By then, Catelyn had moved from the dais to the side of the hall. Lady Maege Mormont stood by her side.

« An appropriate song, » Catelyn commented.

« Songs commemorate wars and battles. They don’t win them. »

« You would be surprised, Lady Mormont. The Rains of Castamere have almost won battles on their own in the past. »

« Too bad the Lannisters didn’t bring a bard with them on the Kingsroad. »

« They don’t need one to remind me that they hold my daughter. »

« We will free the Lady Sansa, Lady Stark. She may not be my daughter, but I’ll fight her captors as if she was my own. And you know what I’d be ready to do to save my own daughter? Everything. »

Everything. Catelyn continued to look at the guests who were feasting, some of them behaving as if victory was already theirs. They behaved the same way before Ned died, for what good it did.

She didn’t realize Maege Mormont was gone and that someone else had slipped next to her.

« You behave as if the fate of the whole world rested on your shoulders. »

She closed her eyes. « What do you want, Petyr? » Her voice showed her exasperation in a very plain way.
« Nothing. Just to make sure that you’re not alone. »

« I’m perfectly well. »

« That’s the only thing I hope. » He made a pause. For some time, none of them said anything. « I’m not here to talk with you, Cat. I understand that I will need to earn the right to speak to you again. But if there’s anything you want to tell me, don’t hesitate. Tomorrow, I’ll be gone. This might be your last chance, no matter what you want to say. »

She closed her eyes again. Contradicting thoughts fought in her mind. There were so many things she wanted to tell him. Finally, the fateful words came out.

« Do what you can. Save my daughter. »

Chapter End Notes

Please review

Next chapter : Margaery

Song in the chapter : "The Bells", by Aviators. This original song, inspired by the soundtrack of the show and the Rains of Castamere, depicts Cersei and Daenerys in the two last episodes of the show. It can be found on Youtube here : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsHTLM8TuM0

For the purpose of this chapter, I modified the lyrics of the song so that it was about Cersei and Stannis. With Melisandre burning people alive and the city that burned when Stannis took it, a bard with indirect knowledge of the event and the will to make a popular song could come up with something similar.

As you can imagine, the Starks are quite desperate, to the point where they are willing to accept Baelish’s help.

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